

Schools Aren't Winning Hearts and Minds

Robert W. Fuller

Poll after poll shows that education is one of the nation's top priorities. Both political parties have ambitious plans for school reform. The good news of is the growing consensus that something must be done; the bad news is lack of agreement about what.

There are good reasons for this uncertainty. Educational reforms rarely live up to their promise. Deep down we sense that none of the current proposals, be they progressive or conservative, reaches to the nub of the matter. Before we embark on another round of reform we should figure out why so many students withhold their hearts and minds from what it arguably the most important activity of their young lives—learning.

There is a reason that prior reforms have disappointed, but like the proverbial fish in the bowl, we're too close to see it. The reason that so many students who begin school with hope and enthusiasm wind up turning off or dropping out is that there's poison in the "bowl." Not enough to kill all the fish, but enough to keep a great many of them from realizing their potential.

The poison sapping their strength needs a name. Because it bears a family resemblance to racism and sexism, I call it *rankism*. Rankism is abuse or discrimination based on differences of rank. It pervades our all educational institutions from kindergarten through graduate school. Since rank is a measure of authority or power, rankism is discrimination based on a difference of power. A teacher denigrating a student, an "in-group" of students dissing or shunning other students, a professor exploiting a teaching assistant—these are instances of rankism. Rankism is typically visited upon "nobodies" by "somebodies." The

“somebody mystique” that underpins America’s celebrity culture blinds us to rankism much as the “feminine mystique” blinded people to sexism.

Once you have a name for it, you see rankism in any institution with gradations of rank: in the workplace, in civic institutions, in health care, even in families. Finding and holding one’s position in a hierarchy takes priority over all else. Protecting one’s dignity from insult and injury siphons attention and energy away from learning.

Before students can focus on their texts, they must master the subtext that governs their rank within the school. Whether we give ourselves to the educational enterprise or withhold ourselves from it, depends on where we stand in the school hierarchy.

There is nothing inherently wrong with rank if it’s precisely defined and the power it signifies is not misused. But, in practice, once rank order is established in a hierarchy, it’s hard to change. The “stickiness” of rank is due to the fact that high rank confers immediate future advantages on those who acquire it and these advantages compound. Low rank carries a stigma—you’re seen as a nobody—and you become vulnerable to indignities by teachers and fellow students. It’s rankism that creates the spurious divide between winners from losers at an early age and extinguishes ambition in many kids before they reach third grade.

The situation encountered by the low-ranking is *functionally* equivalent to that faced by blacks under Jim Crow. It is not a coincidence that the same labels have been used to denigrate both students and African-Americans: “lazy,” “stupid,” “trouble-maker.” Today it is not so much race prejudice as the misuse of rank that functions to keep students—white or black—from committing themselves to education.

So long as any form of discrimination is sanctioned, America is a meritocracy in name only. But in disallowing rank-based discrimination we must be careful to distinguish it from rank itself. After all, it is a legitimate function of education to help us determine a vocation commensurate with our abilities. Seeing how we measure up against traditional standards of excellence is a useful tool for guiding us toward specialization. It can't be said clearly enough that there is nothing inherently abusive or discriminatory about rank, or a fair ranking process. While doing away with rank makes no more sense than doing away with race or gender, it is equally true, and not yet widely recognized, that rank-based discrimination is no more legitimate than race or gender-based discrimination.

The problem is that most ranking processes, instead of serving a neutral diagnostic function, have pernicious side-effects: they stigmatize those who rank low and lionize those who rank high, and these rankings become self-fulfilling prophecies. Thus, although rank is not inherently illegitimate, it is often used in discriminatory ways.

Individuals' talents, abilities, and skills vary markedly. In a true meritocracy, rank would be precisely defined, and rewards would reflect current role and rank within a large and growing number of narrowly defined niches. Composite, overall rankings that ignore variations from specialty to specialty make for spurious, debilitating rankings. We don't declare the winner of the mile race the "best runner" because that would be unfair to sprinters and marathoners who, in their events, can outrun the fastest miler. Merit has no significance beyond the precise realm wherein it is assessed. From this perspective, IQ measures not some general attribute called "intelligence," but rather performance on a particular test. Similarly, ranking schools by their students' average test scores is a measure of how students average on those tests, not school merit.

No child, no human being is expendable. Everyone has something to contribute. Helping individuals find that something and contribute it is the proper business of education. It is rankism that creates the mindset that the first grader who gets a bad grade will not succeed, or the overweight kid who's teased on the playground is a born loser.

Discrimination occurs whenever race, or gender, or rank serves as an excuse for indignity or prejudice. We have become alert to the negative consequences of racism and sexism, but we are still largely oblivious to the costs exacted by rankism. The reason that schools fail to fully enlist students in learning can be traced to the prevalence of this undiagnosed malady. Both students and teachers are suffering the ill effects. Students find themselves resisting and rebelling, not learning; teachers find themselves hectoring and disciplining, not mentoring.

Hearts steeled against the indignities and inequities of rankism shut minds to learning. As foundation executive Vartan Gregorian says, "Dignity is not negotiable." So long as the dignity of either students or teachers is liable to insult, educational reforms, whether progressive or conservative, will fail to engage hearts and minds.

[Dr. Robert Fuller taught physics at Columbia University, created a program for high-school dropouts in Seattle, and was president of Oberlin College.]