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GREATER EXPECTATIONS?

Sheila Fitzgerald

An article in the newspaper caught my eye the other day. It seemed—in a strange way—to be analogous to the theme of this conference "Greater Expectations: English for All." It described a University of Iowa experiment to eliminate junk food from the diet of 80 children:

To most third graders, it would be just too cruel for words.

Think of it: Cut off from cheeseburgers and french fries, chocolate malts, greasy pepperoni pizza, and all kinds of other gooey good stuff. It would be the end of the world as most 8-year-olds know it.

Just the same, 80 or so brave Iowa boys and girls are going to take that giant step over the next few years, showing their moms and dads and grandpas and grandmas that even a child can cut down on cholesterol.

This \$1 million study will screen eight to ten year old children to determine which children have high cholesterol levels. The researchers will see if the children and their families can reduce fat consumption from the average 40% in American diets to 20%.

Dr. Julia Lee, a University of Iowa pediatric cardiologist who is part of the research team, says:

"That will mean fewer candy bars and ice cream cones and more apples and granola treats for the children who participate." Instead of cooking with whole milk, families will have to start using skim milk and yogurt in snack recipes. Instead of hamburgers and french fries for lunch, more lean cuts of meat, such as sliced turkey or pressed ham, will be suggested.

"I think the children will respond pretty well to such a diet. It sounds pretty harsh but when they get down to it, I don't think the kids will think it's too drastic.'" (Carlson 84)

Certainly these researchers are setting "greater expectations" for kids, and they seem assured of remarkable improvements in the health of these children as a result of the experiment. Think what might happen if a similar experiment were conducted lowering the intake of the "junk curriculum" in school programs of children for an extended period of time: the basal readers, grammar texts, drill sheets, workbooks, standardized tests, etc. that clog arteries to the heads and hearts of students, making them listless and disinterested or rebellious. Ninety to ninety-five percent of all curriculum in American schools seems to be determined by textbooks and workbooks.

John Goodland's recent study *A Place Called School* showed that children in elementary schools are really reading only 6% of the school day. By junior high his figure for real reading drops to 3%, and by high school reading is only 2% of the student's day in school (106-7). If children aren't reading in school, where are they reading? For many, the answer is no place. If children aren't doing much reading in school, when time is devoted to "reading instruction," what are they doing in school? They are doing drill sheets on phonics skills, filling in blanks in workbooks, or writing brief answers to simple questions.

In spite of the growing interest in writing, the "junk curriculum" still predominates for writing instruction as well: spelling practice, handwriting drills, usage and grammar rule memorization. Many more teachers these

days are enlightened about the need for real writing but they seem to be fighting a losing battle against the forces of tradition, often represented by an unenlightened principal.

An eighth grade teacher I know in Michigan has been bucking her principal on this very issue for the last few years. He recently observed her classes and complained that her students were writing too much, neglecting the mandated textbook. He strongly emphasized that her students would not be well prepared for the expectations facing them in high school next year. Linda, the teacher, made an appointment to see the principal and came armed with summaries of the latest research on writing, as well as with the students' writing folders to show their growth in writing ability and writing attitudes. The principal heard little of what she said, as the letter he put in her mailbox the following morning demonstrates:

Dear Linda:

This letter will summarize our conversation on April 10, 1987, in regard to our English curriculum in Middle School. Our language arts program is actually made up of two courses, reading and English. Many schools at our level do not have two courses to cover language arts. Basically, our reading course teaches literature and vocabulary as well as reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Our English course teaches grammar and spelling as well as reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. All of our courses incorporate reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills into their content areas but English is the only course which teaches grammar.

Keeping this in mind, we decided that grammar should be the major focus of the English course. It should be incorporated into the students' writing as well as in exercises, drills, etc. Writing, however, is not the main focus

and should not be overemphasized. In summary, generally every day the English course will have some type of grammar objective. That is not to say special projects such as a research paper, a writing journal, or other related projects can't be incorporated into the [50 minute] lessons. However, basic grammar skills, word usage skills, English mechanics, sentence structure and construction, sentence diagramming, etc. are the focus of this course and should be emphasized as such.

In the 1987-88 school year, the Middle School will be using the *Heath Grammar and Composition* series. We are very excited about the quality of this text. Our English course will follow this text very closely until we can determine how well it is suited to our needs. At that time, probably after the year, we will decide how closely we will follow the text and if any changes in order are necessary or extra materials need to be incorporated, etc.

If I can be of any further assistance to you in this matter, please let me know.

Sincerely,

_____, Principal

In a recent interview for *English Journal* (Durbin 72), John Dixon was asked, "How important is grammar instruction?" Dixon responded:

Never in the experience of myself or my friends has any evidence surfaced that reveals traditional grammar instruction to be productive. There is something sad about the fact that what was in the time of Aristotle an exciting and immensely intelligent enterprise has been reduced to a dull and tedious task that school children have failed to master from the Middle Ages onward. Knowing grammar *does not* change your ability to think, and understanding syntax *does not* improve your ability to generate sentences. It does not help a person to imagine or to learn in the new and important ways that language activity should.

The interviewer then asked, "What then should be the core of the language arts curriculum?" Dixon replied:

I believe the focus should change depending on the individual situation. Perhaps at one time a community investigation would be in order, with all the attendant interviewing, researching, reporting, and compiling. Perhaps at another time the production of a play might be more appropriate, or the exploitation of a theme such as authority and freedom, war and peace, or today and tomorrow—anything that would allow the class to explore a wide variety of resources and exhibit their talents.

Linda, the eighth grade teacher who is doing battle with her principal, is tied to a "junk curriculum." She told me last week that she is resigning from her position; she cannot in good conscience teach the way the school district expects her to teach. She is resigning even though she does not have another position available! Teaching positions in English are still relatively scarce in Michigan, particularly for teachers with years of experience, but she says she would rather take her chances as a substitute teacher at lower pay than to continue in an intolerable, full time teaching assignment. There are other teachers who face the problems Linda faces, although many others would not have the courage to quit over the issue. Linda is strong, informed, articulate, and effective with children. How many other teachers meekly accept the "junk curriculum" that is handed to them—even when they know better?

I had a letter from another teacher, Jeri, this week. She also is trying to cope with the "junk curriculum." This woman taught overseas in a private school for a few years, and now she is teaching in an inner city first grade classroom in Michigan. She wrote to me:

Dear Sheila:

This has been one tough year. I sure have learned a lot, but the lessons have not been easy ones. Thank God, I'm a pretty tough cookie. Somehow, I've managed to find my way through the maze of curriculum guides, padded worksheets,

teachers' editions, and unfamiliar routines. I think I've covered what they wanted me to cover and helped the kids learn what they needed to learn: I'm particularly pleased with their progress in writing. If I think of it, I'll send you a few samples to show how much they've improved. Some of these kids were virtually non-readers. And, they are some of the people with the least going for them that I have ever met.

We just finished inflicting the Iowa Test of Basic Skills on the kids of the district. Was it awful! It fried my kids' brains. Oh, 5 or 6 of them did fine; they had a good time. I bet they like playing Trivial Pursuit Junior. The rest of them may have enjoyed filling in the circles on the answer sheet and making pretty designs out of them. Oh, what a waste. The worst part—even worse than wasting instructional time, money, energy—the worst part is that people think that the information gained by these tests is indicative of something crucial. In the case of the majority of my class, it's just going to tell that they're pretty dumb—and I could have told you that at no charge....

The standardized test certainly is another aspect of the "junk curriculum." The testing industry is a huge money making enterprise that is sucking funds from the education pot under the guise of promoting excellence. What it succeeds at best is warping the school experience for children and teachers by limiting the curriculum to what is testable. Can you believe that the new panel of political experts in the U.S. is urging a 550% increase in the National Assessment testing budget, from the current \$4 million to \$26 million so that 13,500 children in each state, ages 9, 13, and 17, can be tested in nine subject areas each year? The politicians want data they can use to make state by state comparisons of schools—even community by community and neighborhood by neighborhood! The pressure of the testing industry to increase sales and service income combined with politicians' manipulation of schooling for their own ends helps to entrench the "junk curriculum": the facts that are testable on standardized tests are most readily taught by textbooks. Teachers who are

fearful of the test scores their children will receive are reluctant to eliminate the textbooks, drill sheets, and workbooks to get on to a more wholesome diet of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Yet many educators, like Ralph Tyler, Director Emeritus of the Center for the Advanced Study of the Behavioral Sciences, continue to warn us of the futility of trying to stuff pieces of information into the minds of students. Tyler said recently:

We have learned that a course that focuses on memorizing facts without providing continuing practice in using them is very ineffective. Within a year the average student forgets 75 percent and after five years recalls only a few items.

In American society, young people, in school or out, engage in activities that they believe help them attain their particular purposes. They internalize, that is make part of their repertoire of behavior, when they find something that will help them understand more fully what they are doing, or will help them get greater satisfaction from their activities, or will help them develop skills useful in carrying on their activities. (3)

Teachers are often expected to keep students in curriculum that is irrelevant to the purposes of students. In spite of those pressures, however, more teachers are finding courage to combat the "junk curriculum." Conference sessions and college courses provide teachers with the information they need to restructure their own belief system if need be, or reinforce the ideals they desperately try to cling to. Conference attendance also helps to create a network of compatriots, enthusiastic educators who support each other. Few of us can cope with the problems we face in our individual schools unless we know that there is a battalion fighting the same battle on different fronts—and achieving some success.

Susan is one of those teachers who is successfully moving away from the "junk curriculum." She teaches fifth grade on a U.S. military base in Germany, and all this year she has been working to implement a writing curriculum in her classroom. In the past she taught writing skills in the traditional way, and she was very fearful of trying new methods. Yet based on a course she took and additional reading she did, she wanted to incorporate new methods into her classroom, keeping a journal of her successes and problems along the way. Last fall, Susan admitted her fearfulness about moving away from drills and worksheets when she sent me a Norman Rockwell print of a youngster on his hands and knees peering over the edge of a high diving board. Indeed Susan was very apprehensive about taking the plunge into quality writing instruction. By December, however, she wrote:

This workshop is a learning experience for all of us. If I can expose my children to elements of good writing, with the aid of experienced teachers of writing (authors of books on instruction in writing), and authors of award and classic books, and later see these elements in the children's work, then I will feel I have a good start in becoming a teacher of writing. Most importantly, I hope to continue to see my children actively involved and enjoying their own peers' writing experiences.

In the following months Susan's journal went on to report many such instances when she observed children's growth in writing and their obvious enjoyment. On March 24 she wrote:

In our meeting today, I used Tara's story "Snake" as an example of a well-written piece that could be improved with a bit more description of certain scenes.

I asked Tara to read her story from the overhead, and asked the class to pick out a couple of places that would be improved by a sensory image of the scene. Not surprisingly, they chose the same two spots in the story I had, when I had

read it initially. (They really are becoming quite knowledgeable of good writing techniques.)

I asked for suggestions as to what kind of senses could be stimulated in the two scenes. For instance, in the scene where Tara is in a fishing boat on Chesapeake Bay with her dad, next to an island, they suggested words that would appeal to hearing, "like a fish splashing in the water," "or birds singing on the island." Sight: "What about what Tara saw on the island?" Smell: "If there was grass on the island, I'll bet it smelled good."

Then I showed them a final draft where Tara had gone back and enriched that particular scene.

I helped a few (today) with stapling and taping the binding of their books; (and I held) a couple of post-editing conferences. Had to "pull" two girls out from under the publishing, book-making table for having a "hen session" instead of peer-conferencing.

Brian O. shared a first draft on a story concerning the time his parents had looked all over the neighborhood for him. He has a "knack" for including his thoughts in his stories—lots of potential there.

Susan is using her successes to bring her principal into an appreciation of the values of her methods of teaching. She wrote in her journal:

I've asked Ms. K____, the principal, to visit our Workshop...Between the upper elementary school, she's pretty busy. But Missy wrote a card, which the children signed, requesting that she visit us on Thursday...

and then after Thursday's class she wrote:

I believe Ms. K____ enjoyed her visit today and was impressed with the children's independent activities and accomplishments.

We began with a mini-lesson on sensory words—taking a passage from Virginia Hamilton's *House of Dies Drear* and using the overhead. We picked out words which appealed to our senses and identified the sense affected. I also used a

couple sentences from one of Eric A.'s stories which also appealed to our senses.

Afterwards, Ms. K_____ walked around the room, asking the children and me questions about our work. She was able to see every phase of the writing process including book production.

She was able to observe how the class interacts when one child shares her story at the end of the workshop.

The children were well-behaved and pleased to share their writing experiences with their principal. Ms. K_____ asked to be invited again!

At the end of her journal Susan said it all—the value of creative teaching for the children and for her:

It's a joy to see my boys and girls writing because they want to create and share their experiences with others. You know, sharing really covers every aspect of the Writing Workshop, doesn't it?... The Writing Workshop will continue humming along next year, not to worry! My children's pride in their authorship is the only incentive I need.

Susan has eliminated some of the "junk curriculum" in her program to make room for creative learning and teaching opportunities. The results of a healthier school diet show dramatically in the work and attitudes of the children and in Susan, the teacher— her willingness to study, to plan and to implement ideas, her enthusiasm for teaching, her joy in working with kids.

Contrast Susan with Linda, the eighth grade teacher who is required to spend her days on grammar drills. Linda has lost heart; she is willing to give teaching another try but only in another school district. Or contrast Susan with Jeri, the first grade teacher who can't wait for summer vacation after a tough year of "junk curriculum." Jeri found some professional satisfactions by squeezing creative teaching in the cracks between

curriculum mandates, and she hopes that next year in the same school will be better.

Greater Expectations? Yes, we all need to hope, expect, and insist that the circumstances in teaching improve, that conditions in schools encourage all of us to put into practice the refreshing, rewarding, enlightened teaching that good language arts education advocates.

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