

Running head: THE EFFECT OF CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES

The Effect of Classroom Experiences on Future Success

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A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Fall 2008

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the impact that classroom experiences have upon students' academic and future success. It begins by discussing Charles Dickens' criticism of education in his works, specifically in the novel Hard Times. Next, the thesis examines a number of studies that have sought to identify the factors that determine students' academic success. Finally, the careers of Erin Gruwell and Rafe Esquith are described as 'real life' examples of the way that teachers can impact students' success.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....5

Charles Dickens and Hard Times.....6

Research and Academic Success.....13

Utilitarianism Today.....21

Erin Gruwell and Rafe Esquith.....22

Conclusion.....29

The Effect of Classroom Experiences on Future Success

The scene can be found in nearly every school in America. Two students sit side by side in class. One of them, a bright student who excels academically, sits up straight, listening intently to all that the teacher has to say. The other, a boy who struggles to even pass his classes, slouches low in his seat, obviously longing to be anywhere else but the classroom. What causes such a disparity in attitude? Numerous factors may play a role, including home life and inherent ability. However, research shows that students' classroom experiences can also greatly impact their academic, social, and even moral success.

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) understood the influence that educational experiences can have on students. Many of his novels contain criticism of the problems that he believed existed in the educational system of his day. In the novel Hard Times (1854), Dickens paints a vivid picture of how a group of students' experiences in a classroom run by utilitarian education methods dramatically affects the type of people they become later in life. In the book, three of the students grow up to make terrible choices in important decisions, resulting in broken lives and tragedy. While many of the problems with the educational system discussed in Dickens' novels no longer exist today, the message of Hard Times remains relevant. As an examination of the life and writings of Charles Dickens, research, and the impact that teachers such as Erin Gruwell and Rafe Esquith have had upon their students will reveal, students' experiences in the classroom often have a dramatic influence upon the course that their lives will take even after the final class has been dismissed.

Charles Dickens and Hard Times

When Charles Dickens was a child, educational institutions were not the easily accessible systems of modern times. “Location, gender, and class” played a large role in determining the availability of schools to individuals. Many schools only educated males, while others only allowed females to attend. Financially stable families were able to choose the type of school they wished to use, though they often did not have much of a choice in quality (Litvack, 1999). Despite the questionable quality of the available schools, the middle class was much more fortunate than the poor, who were significantly limited in their access to education. Before the Factory Act of 1833 mandated that every child attend school for a minimum of two hours each day, many children had never been inside a schoolroom, but instead spent their entire day working in factories or mines. While this act did provide some learning opportunities for such children, the vast majority of the population remained uneducated. Many times the only education the students received was from fellow workers who did not even know how to read (Bradley, 1999).

Dickens’ first encounter with the educational system occurred at Chatham, a private school with a terrible headmaster. At the age of nine he began attending Reverend William Giles’ School, where he enjoyed one happy year before moving to London (Litvack, 1999). Then, in 1824, his father was placed in the Marshalsea debtor’s prison. While the rest of his family soon moved into the prison with him, twelve-year-old Charles remained outside, working and living alone (Hibbert, 1967). Fortunately, his father’s imprisonment did not last long, and in 1825 Dickens was able to take up his schooling again in Wellington House Classical and Commercial Academy. However, his

experience at this school would not be as enjoyable as the one he had at Reverend William's school (Litvack, 1999). This school was a dirty, smelly place (Hibbert, 1967). Dickens would later model David Copperfield's Mr. Creakle after William Jones, the abusive head of the school (Litvack, 1999). In 1857, he said of Mr. Jones and the school:

I don't like the sort of school to which I once went myself...the respected proprietor of which was by far the most ignorant man I have ever had the pleasure to know, who was one of the worst-tempered men perhaps that ever lived, whose business it was to make as much out of us and to put as little into us as possible...I do not like that sort of school, because I have never yet lost my ancient suspicion touching that curious coincidence that the boy with four brothers always got the prizes. In fact, and in short, I do not like that sort of school, which is a pernicious and abominable humbug altogether. (Hibbert, 1967, p. 86)

Dickens' experiences as a child in England's educational system were probably the primary source of his interest in such matters later in life. As an adult, he took a strong interest in the separation of religion from schools as well as the education of the poor. His interest in such matters resulted in an acquaintanceship with James Kay-Shuttleworth. Kay-Shuttleworth was "the first secretary of the Committee of the Privy Council on Education" and the founder of the earliest college for teachers (Litvack, 1999). He also created an inspection system for schools funded by the government, and played a big role in the establishment of a national education system (1999).

Kay-Shuttleworth and Dickens were both attracted to the Ragged Schools (Litvack, 1999). These schools educated children who lived on the streets and would be otherwise unable to obtain an education (Jeffreys, 2001). After regularly visiting them

for a while, Dickens became a strong advocate for the institutions and eventually suggested that Kay-Shuttleworth join him in starting such a school. However, although the two men shared an interest in the school, Dickens did not agree with all of Kay-Shuttleworth's methods. In fact, some of them would eventually become a target of the social criticism in Hard Times (Litvack, 1999).

Charles Dickens' interest in the educational system is demonstrated in many other novels besides Hard Times. Many of his books involve schools, and most of these schools are patterned after schools that Dickens attended or observed during his life. Some of the fictional schools are easily recognizable as portrayals of Dickens' own experiences, such as the school described in David Copperfield (1849). Salem House is clearly a depiction of Wellington House Classical and Commercial Academy, and the disagreeable Mr. Creakle obviously represents William Jones (Litvack, 1999). Salem House's schoolmaster Mr. Mell was a recreation of Mr. Taylor, the kind English teacher of Wellington House (Hibbert, 1967). Nicholas Nickleby's Dotheboys Hall provides a glimpse of the abusive conditions often found in the low cost Yorkshire boarding schools that existed for unwanted students (Litvack, 1999). The children in the school were treated more like servants than pupils (Hibbert, 1967). Dickens called the schools he was describing in Nicholas Nickleby (1838) "the monstrous neglect of education in England" (Litvack, 1999, p. 212).

Academic life was not always depressing and horrendous in Dickens' novels. In Great Expectations (1861) Biddy attends a country school that proves highly beneficial to her development. Dickens' portrayal of schools for girls was often peppered with humor. Minerva House in Sketches by Boz (1836) is described as a place where the students

“acquired a smattering of everything and a knowledge of nothing” (Litvack, 1999, p. 212). In The Old Curiosity Shop (1841), Miss Monflathers’s Boarding and Day Establishment leaves one with the impression of a fortress impenetrable to most of the male race. According to The Mystery of Edwin Drood (1870), Miss Twinkleton was terribly unjust to the women who attended her Seminary for Young Ladies; she removed all romantic passages and inserted encouragement of singleness into the reading material (1999).

While many of his novels dealt in some way with educational practices, one of Dickens’ most compelling educational criticisms occurs in his portrayal of utilitarian education in Hard Times. His novel’s treatment of utilitarianism, which was practiced by William Ellis’s Birbeck Schools at that time, contains an interesting distinction from his other books (Hobsbaum, 1973). While many of his novels contain detailed descriptions of academic life, few others portray the *consequences* of a faulty education as strikingly as Hard Times.

Before one can understand the teaching method that Charles Dickens so vehemently attacks in Hard Times, one must first understand the utilitarian philosophy. Jeremy Bentham, creator of utilitarianism, believed “that human institutions should serve all elements of society ... by providing for the ‘greatest happiness of the greatest number’” (Bradley, 1999, p. 69). He created a ‘moral arithmetic’ in which one could judge whether or not an action was good by calculating if it produced more pleasure than pain. According to Bentham, pleasure is subjective; each person decided what constituted pleasure for him- or herself. Bentham’s ideas soon became distorted as people began to reshape his philosophy to fit their own desires. Some used it to support

their pursuit of monetary and “social” advancement while neglecting development in every other aspect of life (1999).

While Bentham’s utilitarian philosophy was eventually used to wreak havoc upon the educational system of the time, his original beliefs may have actually contained valid ideas. He believed that schools should be places that allowed students to gain the necessary skills for having a successful career. Bentham encouraged the study of various branches of mathematics and “technology” (Bradley, 1999). While Bentham did not encourage teaching fine arts in school, he did view them as a beneficial part of life outside the classroom. Unfortunately, many educators took the idea of “useful learning” and used it to serve their own purposes. They did not need to produce “well-rounded” citizens- only people with the ability to work in factories and do other menial jobs. Therefore, they molded the educational curriculum to contain only what was necessary for productive workers instead of what was necessary for living a happy, well balanced life (1999). This distorted, incomplete education is Dickens’ object of criticism in Hard Times.

The first two chapters in Hard Times are devoted to describing the classroom and teaching methods of Thomas Gradgrind’s school. According to John Harrison, the school is “utilitarian, aggressive, dictatorial, and destructive” (2000). Its utilitarian approach to education is best described in the novel’s first paragraph:

Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts ... Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing less will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I

bring up these children. Stick to Facts, Sir! (Dickens, 1999, p. 1)

In this classroom, there is clearly no room for imagination, fun, or anything else that helps make education an enjoyable and meaningful experience.

Gradgrind's school is similar to a factory impersonally pumping out students crammed full of facts, void of imagination or laughter to add personality or life to the learning process (Foster, 2003). The teacher himself is a factory product (Harrison, 2000). Mr. M'Choakumchild had recently come from James Kay-Shuttleworth's teaching school, a place whose teaching methods have been called "mechanical and arid" (Schlicke, 1999). He, along with over one hundred other teachers, "had been lately turned at the same time, in the same factory, on the same principles, like so many pianoforte legs" (Dickens, 1999, p. 10). M'Choakumchild sees his pupils as small containers ready to be filled with facts (1999). Interestingly, this description has much in common with "Bentham's proposal to fill the 'mental vacuity' of the children attending his school" (Bradley, 1999, p. 79).

Had Charles Dickens ended his discussion of Thomas Gradgrind's school with the description of its operation, Hard Times would not have been much different from the other novels he wrote that portrayed negative aspects of the educational system. However, the novel does not end with the description, but instead goes on to describe the impact that the classroom setting has upon the lives of the main characters of the novel. By portraying the turmoil of Louisa's life, the heartlessness of Bitzer and Tom, and the love of Sissy, Dickens paints for the reader a vivid picture of the power an educational experience can have upon the lives of the students under its influence.

Louisa Gradgrind suffers the most from her ‘facts only’ education. From early in the novel, when she and her brother Tom are caught peeking into a circus tent, one can see that she is discontented with her life. She describes herself as being “tired” of something that she is unable to express. Later, Louisa laments that she is unable to amuse Tom the way others could, for she doesn’t “know what other girls know.” Due to her lack of familiarity with emotions and her inability to approach her facts-oriented father, Louisa eventually feels forced to marry Mr. Bounderby. Although she suppresses the desire of her heart in her marriage to Bounderby, she is unable to maintain control when another man tries to steal her affections. She is forced to fly to her father’s house for refuge, and she implores of him, “All that I know is, your philosophy and your teaching will not save me. Now, father, you have brought me to this. Save me by some other means!” (Dickens, 1999, p. 291). After her speech, she falls in a faint, broken and nearly ruined due to the ignorance of her heart that her facts-oriented education never remedied.

While Tom Gradgrind and Bitzer do not feel the emotional starvation that Louisa experiences, they are harmed in other ways by their education. Both become selfish individuals, believing that material gain is the only important goal in life. This attitude causes Tom to convince Louisa to marry Bounderby simply to help him secure a good job. The same attitude causes him to frame Stephen Blackpool in a bank robbery (Dickens, 1999). He has no regard for the harm that his actions will cause to others; all that matters to him is his own success.

Bitzer’s heart becomes hardened in a similar manner. At the end of the novel, Mr. Gradgrind decides to send Tom away to avoid disgracing the family name. However,

Bitzer intervenes and threatens to take Tom back to jail. Mr. Gradgrind's pleas have no effect upon him. He ironically answers each plea with one of the attitudes he has been taught in Gradgrind's school. When Gradgrind asks him if his heart is "accessible ... to any compassionate influence," he answers, "It is accessible to Reason, Sir ... and to nothing else" (Dickens, 1999, p. 382). The school void of emotional and social education had created a man lacking compassion and love.

Sissy is the only pupil from Gradgrind's school that is unharmed by her education. She grows up to be a compassionate, comforting, loving woman. However, her positive qualities are not a result of her educational experience at Gradgrind's school. Her father and fellow circus members provide an emotional education before she moves to Coketown. Despite Gradgrind's best attempts, Sissy is unable to learn enough facts to satisfy him (Dickens, 1999). However, Sissy provides the emotional aspect of life that is missing in everyone else in the Gradgrind household. In the end, "he fails to educate her head, but she succeeds in educating his heart" (Butt & Tillotson, 1958, p. 209).

Charles Dickens certainly had much to say in his novels about the educational system of his time. However, the messages of Hard Times are perhaps some of the most important he ever brought to light. By showing the difficulties that were produced by a utilitarian education, Dickens showed that one cannot educate children only in academics and expect to produce well rounded individuals; students also need to be encouraged to grow socially, emotionally, and spiritually. While Dickens' main message was about the dangers of utilitarianism, he also portrayed a truth that has been shown through scientific studies and the testimony of students: a classroom's teacher and environment can play a large role in shaping students' futures.

Research and Academic Success

For many years, scientists have tried to discover what determines students' academic success. Researchers have discovered that a number of factors may have an impact, including perceived ability (Anderman, Anderman, & Griesinger, 1999), family background (Parental Conflict Can Affect School Performance, 2005), and genetics (Berk, 2004). Studies have also begun to show that many aspects of the classroom setting, such as class size (Finn, Gerber, & Boyd-Zaharias, 2005), peer relationships (Flook, Repetti, & Ullman, 2005), and teaching methods (Berk, 2004) can have an impact upon students.

While few experiments have been performed to measure the impact of genetics upon academic success in a school setting, researchers have performed studies that indicate that genetics may play a role in determining intellect, which in turn can impact academic success. Laura Berk (2004) describes one such study in Development through a Lifespan: "In one investigation, children of two extreme groups of biological mothers--those with IQs below 95 and those with IQs above 120--were adopted at birth by parents well above average in income and education" (p. 297). When the children were tested a few years later, those who had biological mothers with lower IQs exhibited an above-average IQ themselves, but they did not score as highly as those whose birth-mothers had high IQs (Berk, 2004). These results support the claims made by other researchers that both genetics and environment play an important role in shaping intelligence (Nielson, 2006).

In addition to impacting their children's academic success genetically, parents influence their offspring's success through the home environment that they provide.

Students who live in homes where parents constantly argue are more likely to do poorly in school than students living in positive home environments (Parental Conflict Can Affect School Performance, 2005). According to L. Berk, research by Vandell, Posner, and Steinberg indicates that that some children who come home to an empty house after school due to working parents do poorly in school, while others are not at all negatively affected. The impact that being 'latchkey kids' has upon children largely depends on their age and maturity level. It also depends on the amount of supervision they receive while home alone. Students who have chores to do after school and parents who check on them by phone tend to adjust much better than students who receive no supervision or structure. Children who are unsupervised tend to be more susceptible to "peer pressure" and other unsociable characteristics (Berk, 2004).

Studies have shown that a student's perception of himself or herself can play a role in his or her academic success. Students who usually perform well in school are likely to have a high level of academic self-esteem. Therefore, such students are likely to believe that their accomplishments are due to their ability, and that failure is due to a controllable factor such as effort or difficulty. This belief helps them accomplish new challenging tasks. However, students who do not do well in school may develop learned helplessness, an attitude that causes them to believe that their failure is due to their lack of ability, and that success is due to luck. These students do not believe that they can increase their ability level, and therefore usually perform short of their full potential (Berk, 2004).

Interestingly, some scientists believe that students' self perceptions may accurately predict their future academic success. In one study, a group of seventh-grade

students were interviewed about their academic self-concept, then interviewed again a year or two later. Students who had demonstrated a positive academic self-concept and confidence in their future academic success generally did experience a positive change in their GPAs over the course of the study. Students who had a positive self-concept but did not have high confidence in their future academic success experienced a negative change in their GPAs over the course of the study (Anderman, Anderman, & Griesinger, 1999). In another study, researchers measured the actual assessments of students. They tested students at the age of seven, eleven, and finally at sixteen. The study showed that the younger students tended to have a higher assessment of themselves than the older children. The students' assessment ratings decreased with age. However, this did not necessarily mean that the students were doing worse academically as they got older. It more likely meant that the students' self-assessments at age seven were higher than their actual ability, and that with age came increased accuracy in their assessment (Blatchford, 1997).

Internal and familial factors are not the only influences upon students' success. Studies show that school environmental factors also play an important role. One factor that is believed to affect academic achievement is class size. In an experiment entitled Project Star, conducted by the Tennessee State Department of Education in 1985, approximately 12,000 students were placed in various sized classrooms for four consecutive years (K5 through 3rd grade). Some were placed in classrooms with 13 to 17 students, others in classrooms with 22 to 26 students, and some in a classroom with 22 to 26 students and a teacher assistant. The study found that placement in a smaller class had a positive effect on academic success in later grades. Those who were placed in a large

class with a teacher assistant performed about the same as children placed in a large class without an assistant (Finn, Gerber, & Boyd-Zaharias, 2005).

Another study based upon Project Star found that the longer a child was in a small class, the greater impact the class size had upon his or her later academic success (Hedges, Konstantopoulos, & Nye, 2001). The higher performance of children placed in small classes was probably due to the greater amount of personal attention they were able to receive from their teacher compared to students in large classes, for teachers in small classes are able to devote more time and energy on interactions with each student instead of on classroom discipline. Studies have also found that small classes promote better class interaction, “concentration,” and positive mind-sets among students (Berk, 2004).

Peer acceptance has also been found to influence students’ academic success. According to one study, peer acceptance affects students’ self concept. Students who do not interact well with classmates may develop a negative self concept, which may in turn cause them to develop a negative view of school. It may also cause them to lack motivation to do well in school (Flook, Repetti, & Ullman, 2005). Since much of the learning experience is through classroom experiences, students who lack motivation do not learn as much as motivated students (Kids Who Don't Get Along With Others Also Less Likely To Learn, 1998).

Teaching methods certainly have an effect upon students. Those who encourage students to think critically maintain students’ attention much more easily than those who simply feed students facts. Teachers may also affect students’ self concept. When they stress competitiveness and comparison among students, the students may develop self-fulfilling prophecies, which may cause them to begin to perform according to their

teachers' beliefs in their abilities. Students who perceive that their teacher believes that they are poor students may begin performing poorly, even if the teacher's perception is not accurate (Berk, 2004).

Even a teacher's body language can impact students. One study showed that many students analyze their teacher's body language for clues to what the teacher is really saying. It also stated that students may analyze how often they are called upon during class compared to other students, and the amount of attention they receive from the teacher when they are speaking. The students' interpretation of the teacher's actions may strongly influence their self-concept, which, as already discussed, in turn influences their academic success (Harmel, 1999).

Educators employ many different teaching styles in their classrooms. Some teachers tend to encourage passive learning; they teach, and the students listen and take notes. The teacher controls the content of discussions and who is allowed to participate. Students are assessed by their ability to reach standards considered acceptable for their age. Students in other classrooms, however, are encouraged to have an active role in the learning process. They are encouraged to make decisions *with* the teacher. These classrooms normally have multiple activity centers and many small group activities. Success is not measured by a predetermined standard, but according to students' prior achievement. Each classroom style has unique benefits. Students under teacher-centered instruction often excel a little more academically, while students in more interactive classroom settings tend to be stronger critical thinkers and have a better opinion of school in general (Berk, 2004).

In 1996, P. Shwartz, C. Littman, and M. Watson began observing Laura Ecken, a second and third grade teacher who was participating in the Child Development Project, to examine the impact that the project would have upon her students. According to Marilyn Watson (2006), the Child Development Project “seeks to help elementary schools create caring communities within and across classrooms” (p. 2). The program stresses the importance of establishing trust within the classroom, learning to empathize with others, and academic growth. According to Watson (2006), successful use of the program resulted in students who possessed:

...greater commitment to democratic values, conflict resolution skills, concern for others, trust in and respect for teachers . . . positive interpersonal behavior, intrinsic pro-social and academic motivation, and [a] liking for school. (p. 2)

The researchers concluded that Ecken’s students grew significantly academically, morally, and socially while participating in the program. About four years ago, Watson conducted another study to determine whether the positive effects of the Child Development Project would still be apparent seven years after the students participated in it (Watson, 2006).

Researchers interviewed nine of the students seven years after their experience in Ecken’s class. Four of those students had been well-behaved, “academically successful” students, and the other five had been considered “challenging” students during elementary school (Watson, 2006, p. 4). Seven of the students were “doing well academically in high school, had a positive attitude toward school...a view of themselves as ethical and successful, and positive expectations for their future,” while two of the

students who had been considered to be “challenging” seven years before were not doing well in school (2006, p. 5)

All of the students interviewed showed signs that Mrs. Ecken had “positively” influenced their lives (Watson, 2006). Many of them were able to give specific examples of how Mrs. Ecken continued to impact their lives. One of the students claimed that Laura Ecken had helped him change his bad attitude, and another claimed that Ecken taught her to not judge others (2006). One student “who had struggled in elementary school with self-control and academic tasks, attributes to Laura’s class his caring and respectful attitude and his creative, positive approach to school” (p. 209). Numerous students believed that their present academic accomplishments were due to their time in Mrs. Ecken’s class (2006).

While every student interviewed had liked Ecken and had enjoyed their time in her class, neither of the two students who were now struggling academically had thought of her as being entirely trustworthy. Both seemed to think that her care for them relied on their good behavior. All seven of the excelling students, however, had developed a deep trust in Ecken during their time in her classroom (Watson, 2006). Trust seems to have been the key factor in determining the level of influence Ecken had on students after they left her classroom. According to Watson (2006), the importance of trust was not limited to Ecken’s classroom:

Trust is the hallmark of a positive, supportive teacher-child relationship, and the quality of the teacher-child relationship in the early elementary grades has been found to be a significant predictor of later academic success and behavioral adjustment in school. (pp. 7-8)

Ecken's long lasting impact on the students who trusted her is a testimony to the truth of Watson's statement.

Clearly Watson's study (2006) had limitations. The students may not have had an accurate view of themselves or the role that Laura Ecken's teaching played in their success. They also may have focused only on the positive aspects of Ecken's class to avoid hurting her feelings, although the manner in which they made the positive comments implied that they were genuine, and the students often praised the same specific attribute. However, despite the limitations, Watson's research certainly reveals the long-term impact that a teacher may have upon a student's social and academic success.

Utilitarianism Today

Although research shows the importance of a healthy classroom environment for academic success, many schools still use methods that are potentially highly harmful to students. The utilitarian attitude toward education is not entirely absent from modern schools. In England, the government has begun demanding that schools focus on filling their students with "basic" facts that will make them effective workers. Fine arts have been deemed an unimportant part of the curriculum. Educators are pressured to make sure that their students do well on standardized tests, and schools are "compared one with another" on "league tables" (Jackson, 2007, p. 17). Some schools do not even want to enroll special education students anymore because they fear that their presence will negatively impact their school's performance rating (2007). The focus of many English schools is clearly shifting from learning to performing. R. Jackson said of the focus shift, "England's Labour Government...want(s) to produce a technically skilled

workforce...Standards and tests are simply quality-control measures...The development of the whole child, unless proven otherwise, is a waste of time” (2007, p. 19). Like Gradgrind’s school in Hard Times, the government is turning England’s school system into a group of factories attempting to mass-produce productive citizens.

Despite the government’s attempts to use this utilitarian style of education to create efficient workers, employers are complaining that students of this system are entering the workforce unprepared for their jobs. While they were crammed full of facts each year in order to score well on a test, they were never taught to think creatively or to take risks. If England’s government does not change its education strategy soon, the country will soon be populated by young men and women full of facts, but unable to do anything with them.

Fortunately, the United States’ educational system has not succumbed completely to the utilitarianism philosophy. American schools today are working to find a way to produce well rounded individuals. Students who display talent in the arts are encouraged to develop their abilities. Character education programs are springing up across the country in an attempt to help students become better citizens. However, despite the country’s good intentions, some of its programs designed to hold schools to high standards are pressuring teachers into using more utilitarian styles of teaching. Recent governmental mandates requiring high scores on standardized tests are leaving teachers with little time to do anything except teach students exactly what will be on those tests. Pressure to cover all the material by a certain deadline prevents many teachers from planning in-depth lessons that would capture students’ interest in a way that simpler lessons cannot. Sometimes classrooms begin to have a rather rushed atmosphere, as

teachers try to 'stay on schedule' each day so that they will be able to impart all the necessary information to their students before the dreaded testing week.

Teachers with good intentions strive to positively impact their students, but many find themselves devoting most of their time and energy toward ensuring that their students score well on the tests instead of toward creating an atmosphere that will help their students learn to succeed long after the tests are over.

Erin Gruwell and Rafe Esquith

Although many teachers resign themselves to simply "teaching the test" to their students, a few have learned how to harness the power that their position provides to not only impact those in their classroom academically, but to also change their lives forever. Two such teachers are Erin Gruwell and Rafe Esquith. By taking risks, working hard, and refusing to resign themselves to simply helping their students pass their class, these two have accomplished more than many would have ever dreamed possible.

Erin Gruwell began her teaching career with a class full of students who came from lives full of "poverty and violence" (Freeman, 2006, p. 23). They were the type of students who most expected would drop out of school or just barely survive until graduation day. However, Gruwell did not allow them to settle for the standards of their stereotype, but instead inspired them to dream large dreams and to do everything in their power to impact the world. Her methods worked: "All 150 of her at-risk freshmen" graduated from high school and went on to college (Haglund, 1998, p. 300). In addition to succeeding academically, the students rose to Gruwell's challenge to make a difference in the world. They eventually wrote a book that shares some of their life experiences and attempts to inspire an attitude of "tolerance" among those who read it (1998). In

reference to the decision to write the book, one student said, “I feel like I finally have a purpose in this class and in life. That purpose is to make a difference and stand up for a cause” (The Freedom Writers, 1999, p. 154). The class of students expected to drop out of high school instead found purpose and motivation for living and positively inspired thousands across the country.

According to Elaine Haglund’s article “What’s right with education? Erin Gruwell’s connecting the disconnected” (1998), numerous aspects of Gruwell’s teaching style contributed to the positive impact she had on her students. The students themselves shared what they believed made her unique. They said that Gruwell was “like [their] mom, and [their] room [was] like a safe home to [them] ...” (1998, p. 301). ‘Miss G,’ as the students called her, would often stay at the school with them far into the evening or even during the weekend. She also showed respect for her students by keeping her promises, requiring their very best work, and listening to them. Her actions gained her students’ love, trust, and respect, which enabled her to impact them even more deeply. One student said that “Miss G . . . [gave] him his second chance in life” (1998, p. 301). Clearly Gruwell’s actions in her classroom impacted her students in a rare, powerful way.

In addition to the students’ testimonies about what made Erin Gruwell a great teacher, Haglund’s article includes a summary of her own views of Gruwell’s methods. One method that Haglund regards as highly valuable to Gruwell’s success is the way she regarded every student as academically equal to the other students in the school at the beginning of the year, paying no attention to their past academic records, but instead setting high standards for all of her students. Gruwell also treated assessment as an activity in which the students should take part. In doing so, students were able to gain a

better understanding of their progress and areas in which they still needed to improve. By setting high standards and allowing the students to be involved in assessing their progress toward reaching those standards, Gruwell motivated and inspired her students to achieve more than they had ever thought possible.

One of the most important strategies 'Miss G' used was helping her students connect what they learned in the classroom to what they experienced outside of it. According to Freeman, when she discovered that her students desperately needed to learn tolerance for other races: "Gruwell was inspired to show them the results of unchecked ethnic hatred by teaching about the Holocaust" (Freeman, 2006, p. 23). She organized and personally funded a trip to the Museum of Tolerance to help make her lesson even more meaningful (Haglund, 1998).

Erin Gruwell consistently chose books that would teach her students life lessons as well as benefit them academically. She used The diary of Anne Frank and Zlata's diary: A child's life in Sarajevo to help them identify with other people their age who had suffered due to violence and racism. The students were touched by the books, and "began keeping their own diaries." Their attitude toward one another began to change, and Gruwell's classroom became a place in which the students could trust one another regardless of race (Freeman, 2006). In The Freedom Writers diary (1999) one student wrote of the class' study of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "I am amazed at how much his philosophy applies to me" (p.115). Another student wrote after reading The Catcher in the Rye, "I never thought about the consequences or the effect that suicide would have on anyone else before" (p. 120). The writer had been struggling with suicidal feelings for years (1999). The new perspective she gained from reading may have helped keep her

from attempting suicide again later in life. Gruwell's love and sacrifice clearly did not only inspire them, but very likely also saved some lives.

In an article entitled "The Freedom Writers" (2004), Erin Gruwell shared what she believed help make her classroom a success. "Tolerance was a driving theme" in her classroom. She taught her students to use writing instead of violence to make a difference in the world. Gruwell also said that learning from her students and shaping curriculum to resonate with their experiences was key to her success (2004). Whatever the 'key' was-whether shaping curriculum or building trust or having high expectations-Gruwell certainly proved that students' classroom experiences can alter their lives forever.

Another teacher who has impacted many students by his outstanding teaching methods is Rafe Esquith, a teacher at Hobart Boulevard Elementary School in Los Angeles, California. The school is located in an area known for violence and gangs (Esquith, 2007). Esquith's 5th grade classes are composed of primarily students of Hispanic or Korean descent (Cooke, 2007). The students are only first or second generation Americans, and most of them only speak English as a second language (Esquith, 2007). According to the article "Build trust, banish fear" (2007), Esquith's Room 56 is a unique place where "children living in poverty play Vivaldi concerts, perform unabridged plays by Shakespeare, and go on to attend top universities" (p. 47). They also often score in the 99th percentile on standardized tests (Cooke, 2007). Esquith's class is proof that students can often achieve much more than society believes.

Rafe Esquith's classroom is certainly unusual; his students participate and thrive in activities that many would consider to be well beyond their ability level. Their success

is not due to extraordinary talent they possess. Instead, it is their response to Esquith's high standards and healthy relationship with his students. Rafe begins the year by fostering a sense of trust in his classroom and ensuring that he becomes someone on whom the students can depend (Esquith, 2007). Once he has developed such strong credibility with his students, he is able to impact them morally, socially, and academically.

One of Esquith's goals is to help his students improve morally. He encourages them to use "Level VI thinking." According to the educational philosopher Laurence Kohlberg, there are "six levels of moral development." The lowest, Level I, involves behaviors motivated by an aversion to punishment. Level II is based on the desire for a reward, and Level III on the desire to meet others' expectations. Level IV thinkers are motivated to do right out of respect for established rules, and Level V thinkers act out of respect for those around them. Those who think on Level VI act based on their own "personal code of behavior" that they have established (Esquith, 2007, pp. 14-20). Esquith tries to teach all of his students to pursue the higher level thinking, for when their motivation comes from one of those levels, they are much more likely to make wise moral decisions throughout life.

Once Esquith has established his positive environment in the classroom, he begins teaching his students using unique methods that help them grow academically while simultaneously learning life skills. He makes learning enjoyable by often incorporating fun activities into the process. Students improve their writing skills through an elaborate book writing project. They learn mathematical skills and 'real life' skills through Esquith's classroom economy. They pay rent for their desk space, and earn a 'paycheck'

each month by doing various jobs around the classroom. They also learn math skills by watching the World Series together and recording the statistics during the game. Esquith even gives the students the opportunity to read and play music during recess throughout the year (Esquith, 2007). He often works from before dawn until after dusk and during weekends in order to help his students learn all that they possibly can from him (Cooke, 2007). If all teachers put as much thought and energy into helping students learn as Rafe Esquith does, the tide of apathy toward education that is sweeping over students today would surely begin to recede.

One of the most well known aspects of Esquith's Room 56 is the Hobart Shakespearean team. Each year students perform one of Shakespeare's plays (Esquith, 2007). Not only do the students perform the play in the original Shakespearean English, but they also understand what each line means. Their talent impresses all who watch them. The students learn much through the process of preparing for the performance. Esquith (2007) says of the process, "We are here to learn about the power of language and to have fun working together as a team. The children will spend their year overcoming challenges, solving problems, and taking risks" (p. 209). The students also gain dramatic and musical experience, and discover how to apply the message of the play to real life (2007). By the time they actually perform the play, the students have learned valuable lessons that textbooks could not have taught them.

Erin Gruwell and Rafe Esquith have proven that even teachers who are part of an educational system with utilitarian tendencies can provide for their students much more than a 'facts only' education. By viewing their job as more than helping students make high scores on tests, Gruwell and Esquith have been able to have an impact on their

students that extended far beyond the classroom. Instead of allowing the pressure of needing to cover a certain amount of material each day to stifle their creativity, both teachers learned how to make their lessons relevant and meaningful. They pushed their students to strive for excellence not only academically, but also morally and socially. By seeing potential in even the weakest student and making sacrifices to help them learn, Gruwell and Esquith have led students to accomplish more than most would have ever dreamed possible. They have changed lives forever.

Conclusion

When people think of powerful jobs, most think of politicians, business gurus, or maybe celebrities. Few would think of a teacher as a power figure. However, after examining the results of the many studies that have been performed to try to determine the factors that affect a student's success, one can see that the choices that teachers make in the classroom may have huge consequences. Those consequences may guide students toward accomplishing great things, as shown by the impact that Erin Gruwell and Rafe Esquith had upon their students, or they may set students up for failure, as portrayed in Charles Dickens' novel Hard Times. Teaching certainly should be viewed as a powerful position, for teachers do not simply impart knowledge. They may also change the world.

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