

attention!!

The real problem with our schools

The fourth-grader had been in trouble since the first day he transferred to our school. He was overweight, defensive and prone to swearing. His reputation spread quickly throughout the 1,000 elementary students. Some of the girls made fun of him; some of the boys picked fights.

The day he threw a book at a teacher during class, the children, as well as the as well as the teachers, told and retold the story.

I was the full-time art teacher, having taken the job in February. Being a first-year teacher, I did not have time for gossip in the teachers' lounge. I wasn't even sure of the book-thrower's name. So, when his class made its six-week rotation into art, I was blissfully ignorant.

The project I had them do was to create animals in papier-mché. A lot of the kids made dogs, dragons, and birds; but one boy wanted to make a fish tank with fish in it. We discussed how he could build a frame with straws, and imitate the glass with acetate. The papier-mché fish would hang from a transparent thread across the top of the tank.

A few days later, when everyone had made their fames out of boxes, balloons and other materials, we were ready to apply the papier-mché. Very few of the students had ever experienced papier-mché, as the preceding teacher (under the instruction of the principal) had utilized only pencils and crayons for the three years she was there.

I took several volunteers to help mix the paste. One of these was the fish tank boy.

As we began, the assistant principal (who had been watching through the windowed wall) came into the room, and stood by the door. As the water was poured into the bowls, and the powder measured in, several small hands began the task of mixing. Since the paste has a disgusting consistency, the fish tank boy let out a rather loud, "Oooooooooooooh!"

The assistant principal rushed across the room, stopped in front of the boy, and said, "This is NOT the kind of sound you make in school." He ordered the boy to put the bowl down and follow him to his office, much to the delight of the rest of the class. I was horrified. From the looks on the faces of my students, I knew that this was the book-thrower.

The boy was taken to the assistant principal's office, where he was put into "solitary confinement" for one week. He went in every morning, and was given his books. At noon, the door was opened, and a tray of food was put into the room.

Infuriated by the assistant principle lying in wait, and then snatching my student away from me, I tried to think of some way to complain I questioned, to myself, the legality of this "solitary confinement."

Supposedly, they had the permission of the parent. The decision had been made by the principal, the school psychologist and the mother (who had moved, along with the boy, quite frequently from one live-in boyfriend to another).

After a week, the boy was allowed to come back to art class, where he promptly rolled his fish tank into a large ball and threw it away. After then it was continuous fighting, until one day he didn't show up, and I learned that he had been moved to a "special school."

I will always regret not calling the child welfare office the week the boy was confined. I felt totally helpless because of the powerful authority held by the principal. The teachers there did not question her. I had recently been severely reprimanded for attempting "messy" projects, such as paint and clay.

I know that I could have worked with the book-thrower. The first weeks in my class he had been a model student. I didn't know he was the book-thrower, and he was interested

in the projects.

In the short time I was there, I saw remarkable changes in quite a few "problem students." They liked art! They wanted to stay after school and work on their projects. They volunteered to clean up after class. They were so proud of their creations.

So many schools seem to think that the best way to solve behavior problems is to punish and/or isolate. I believe the only way to help the students is to find out what interests them, and at least give them a chance. I am not condoning book-throwing; but a challenged, interested student with any amount of self-esteem will not have time to misbehave. This is true for all students, not just those with severe disciplinary problems.

In my particular case, the principal had one face for the parents, and quite a different one for the students and staff. To the outside world, ours was the perfect school. We were given specific instructions on how the children and teachers were to act on days that the parents would be in the building. Why should it be any different than any other day?

A large part of the problem might be how the principals get their jobs. Several years of teaching and a master's degree in administration doesn't necessarily qualify a person to be anywhere near a child, if they don't have a genuine love for humanity. While there are good administrators who simply become burned-out, I believe that many go into



This week's attention!! photograph was taken by Lisa Dieterle, a senior journalism major.

teaching because they like the feeling of power, and being able to boss someone "lesser" than themselves.

Another problem, if you get someone who doesn't have a lot of feeling for the children they might hire someone people like themselves. I don't believe that personnel directors should have as much power as they do, no matter how much input they have from other sources.

Should there even be principals? Perhaps there could be an elected board of "head teachers." These applicants could come before the group and speak; their records would be public. Since most principals seem to come from within the system, parents and teachers would be (or should be) familiar with them.

Whatever the solution, all people need to be challenged, to have a sense of self-esteem and self-worth, and it needs to be cultivated as early as possible in life.

I have heard many people say things like, "I made a pot once in fifth grade, and the teacher put it in the display case," still with great pride in their voices. That single event may have given them the confidence to try a little harder in math, or to be nice to their little brother at home. To deprive a child of such an experience is counterproductive.

It was these types of counter-productive acts that made me leave my job. I have never been so torn in my life. The children needed someone

like me desperately; but the principal had made it clear to me that either I conform in the coming year, or I was out. I did not want to be fired. So I gave my all to the kids, and introduced them to as many kinds of art as I could, much to the dismay of the principal. At the last Parent-Teacher Organization meeting, many parents commented on how much their child enjoyed art. It broke my heart to leave, but I had no choice.

I may try another school, but I don't wish to spend my whole life looking for that (mythical?) school where I will fit in. I discuss frequently with some of my disillusioned peers the idea of working with groups such as Boys' Clubs and Big Sisters. There are other ways of effectively working with kids.

Until there is a popular feeling among administrators that students should be challenged rather than simply kept in line, we will not see an end to the rampant drugs, suicides, teenage pregnancies and discipline problems in the near future.

This week's attention column was written by Carol A. Wells, a graduate student and a graphic artist for The Battalion.

Editor's Note: This attention!! page will be used each week as a forum for you, our readers. We encourage you to submit any original work that would be suitable for publication in At Ease.

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