

Education: The Desperate Need for New Perspectives

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On July 12th, 2013, a remarkable, teenage girl from Pakistan, Malala Yousafzai, spoke at the United Nations. She called for the education of all children. Malala, who was shot and almost killed last year by the Taliban, marked her sixteenth birthday with courageous words, reminding us that education is capable of transforming the entire world. Her appeal to the U.N. emphasized that change is catalyzed by education and constitutes a basic, human right for all. Malala stated, "Education will help us to improve lives." She asked world leaders to promise global, primary education for all children by the end of the year 2015. The U.N. honored her resilience, passion and courage by declaring July 12th as "Malala Day."

As an educator, mother and peace activist, I was moved by her words. We have much to learn from our young students, such as Malala. They offer us a different perspective on what truly matters. Children in places around the world, especially girls, still have limited opportunities to learn. In this country, we face our own educational challenges. Our students are not likely to be killed by extremists opposed to education, but they face an increasingly dehumanizing and, to them, meaningless system where they feel their voices are not heard. Schools are paralyzed by attempts at educational reform, bashing teachers, worshiping core standards, data analysis, and accountability measures. As teachers, we have less time to instruct, and curricula can be so tightly regulated that opportunities for discussion and quality learning become more and more limited. Testing and retesting have clearly become more important than the individual student, and this is not without a heavy price. We produce students good at regurgitating answers, but with limited abilities for critical thinking, generalization and global awareness. It is my opinion that the time is ripe for innovative thinking that takes us outside of the proverbial box.

If we persist in ignoring the expertise and wisdom of our teachers, and as important, the voice of the students, we will miss the point.

Merely giving lip-service to the concept of student-centered instruction is not enough. It should be fully and rigorously implemented. Also, it is time to fully embrace social collaborative learning. Students in Europe are fluent in several languages and take advantage of convergent technologies, connecting with students from around the world. Abroad, these skills are encouraged and reinforced. They are valued over a score on a standardized test. Maybe the time has come to build passionate, creative learning communities where our students are not only consuming knowledge, but are co-creators of knowledge. Good teachers do not simply "teach," but explore learning with their students. Maybe we are asking the wrong questions. Instead of asking if our students can learn, we might ask how they can learn in a way that is meaningful to them. Asking what is wrong with our teachers may not be as helpful or productive as asking what is right and what is working well.

Recently I talked with a German student who had graduated from a collaborative school called "Freie Comenius Schule," in Darmstadt, Germany. When I asked him to describe his school experience he responded, "It was great and I am going to miss my teachers. For the first six years I explored and played. For the next three years, I learned how to learn, and this last year, I was just eager to show everyone and myself what I knew and what I could do." His graduation project was a review on Voltaire's impact on Frederick the Great. He graduated with superior grades, is fluent in English and French, and has travelled extensively. His educational internships included working on an organic farm, serving with an attorney at juvenile court, and training with a professional photographer. He found his education fun, challenging, fascinating, and practical. When I shared this experience with several American educators, the consensus, sadly, seemed to be that "It could never happen in an American

school.” I posit that not only can it happen here, but that it should.

I hope that you had the opportunity and privilege to hear Malala’s presentation to the U.N. It is my hope that her speech will resonate with you as well. We need to listen to all of the young Malalas of the world, their aspirations and recommendations. It is through the students that we can obtain a much needed, new perspective on education. Sometimes our students are the best teachers.

About the author

Bettina Staudt is an EdD student in the Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership program, focusing on K-12 Education.

References

United Nations (July 12, 2013). Malala Yousafzai addresses United Nations Youth Assembly. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rNhZu3ttIU>