

Education's Gains and Losses

by Dr. Dorothy Rich

So much seems so different for our children's education these days. To get a grip on what's happening, it helps to remember where we have been. It gives us perspective, a better sense of what we had as kids and what we want for our own children.

I have been working in education for almost fifty years. A question I can ask with some sense of history, is this: "What have been our education gains and losses over the years?" With no space to list them all, I will try to focus on what I consider the major gains and losses and what has stayed the same.

GAINS: We are doing so much more in education, and we know so much more.

- Many more of us today are going to school and we have higher expectations (and needs) for education. Where high school used to suffice, now we go to college, and more of us are continuing education lifelong.
- We know a lot more about how children learn (and don't learn). We know that children learn in different ways and at different paces. We know that children learn long before they come to school. And we know that learning doesn't stop when the last school bell rings.
- The education umbrella has opened to provide services for many who had not been covered before: the learning disabled, the handicapped, the non-English speaker.
- We know more about the role of the family in education and the role of the media. We have technology never dreamed of in earlier years.
- Yet, with all this extra understanding and knowledge has come a level of complexity that is more demanding than ever. Schooling used to be thought of as relatively simple: Put a teacher, a textbook, a child in the classroom and voila:

education. Now, we know better and it's harder because it's not simple. Teaching and learning, we've come to understand, are very mysterious.

LOSSES: Just as there have been real gains, there have been real losses.

- The biggest loss is our sense of security, our sense of community. Fear is an ever present concern for families and teachers. As a little girl where I grew up, I rode my bike alone to the edges of the town and explored open fields and deep quarries. My grandchildren, like children rich and poor across the nation, are watched over and kept indoors. They are leading, because of this, narrower lives.

- Family life is more stressed. There seems to be less time for doing anything. Children, through the years, need parents. Many are not getting what parents have to provide: time together. Parents want to do right by their kids, but often this gets translated into over-scheduling and under-real involvement.

- Over testing and increased pressure for grades have taken over the education agenda. Some many think that this is a gain. Yet, there is only so much time in a school year. Tests and teaching to the test takes time. These often push out arts, music, extra curriculums, sometimes even recess. I mourn this loss. For many children, the arts have been the stepping stones to school success.

About the Same: Some things really don't change... or change enough.

- Education is an expensive enterprise and yet we still hear those famous words: "Education costs too much."

- Time is critical for education, and yet there is still the reluctance to have children spend more time in school. Most of our schools continue on the agricultural schedule when kids were needed in the fields.

- And in general, many classes continue to be boring and children, even when the classes are exciting, say that they are bored. It's what children have done through the ages.

•Figuring out how to make schooling successful for more and more students is a national mission of the highest order. We recognize that medicine and law and engineering are challenging professions. In my view, education with all of its gains and losses and its assignment for “changing” people takes the prize as the most complex of them all.

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