Building Strong Cultures

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The explosions of violence that occur in schools, with students and teachers beginning to feel as intimidated within their school walls as they are in the world outside, make it urgent for us to address issues of student alienation and anger. A request from a secondary school principal to talk to his staff about the importance of school culture started me thinking about the role school culture can play in exacerbating or minimising student alienation. At about that same time, a friend from primary school days sat reminiscing with me about our old school. "You remember Mr. X?" he asked, laughing. "Girl, up to now my bottom does still flinch whenever I study that man! It was licks like peas whenever I try a slackness!"

My friend wasn't angry. Actually, he is very much a traditionalist, and he swears that his success today is largely the result of the floggings he received back then. He credits them with keeping him on the straight and narrow path to career advancement and civic mindedness. I don't necessarily agree. And I don't think that my old primary school was especially "progressive," as progressivism is now conceptualised by many theorists. I remember, for instance, heavy desks arranged row on tidy row, instead of in the more communication-friendly configurations recommended today. I remember learning to do mental arithmetic, with little attempt to contextualise the task, except as an activity that would provide an opportunity to show off how fast we could work those sums out in our heads.

Nevertheless, we remember our old school with fondness and gratitude. Many of us greet our teachers with affection and delight wherever we meet them. Some of us returned and made careers as teachers in that school. By and large, we were not angry. We were not alienated. We were not scarred by the experience of school, as studies suggest that so many students are today. Nor were most of us cushioned from hardship in privileged homes. Moreover, the school was not extremely well endowed, financially. And, I should add, I do not think our good memories were brainwashed into us by multiple floggings. In fact, with all due respect to my friend, I don't remember that "licks" featured quite as heavily on the school menu as his memory suggests.

What I do remember, however, makes me think that perhaps there are features of my old school that the principal who asked me to talk about school culture might well wish to consider. I believe that, forty years ago, my old school was demonstrating what we value today as a "strong school culture."

In the first place, we students knew, unequivocally, that we were expected to do well. I noted with interest that my friend's memories of licks came with a condition attached—"whenever I try a slackness." I knew exactly what he meant. Under the heading "slackness' came all those behaviours that suggested that you were squandering your potential. You were literally slacking off in maintaining a top-class performance—morally, in your social relationships, or academically. It was expected that we would behave like decent human beings. It was expected that we would work hard and do well

in our lessons. It was expected that we would maintain our schoolbooks, grounds, and classrooms like people who took pride in their environments. Our teachers gave no quarter to mediocrity.

We knew, too, that we couldn't get away with flimsy excuses to account for mediocre performance. That school took us personally, both while we were there, and years after we had left. Our teachers knew us individually, by name, and could tell us convincingly, whenever we started slipping, "I'll have to talk to your mother." They were convincing because we understood that they had taken the trouble to get to know us, and our parents, and at least some of the important circumstances that shaped our lives.

Even after we moved on to secondary school, whenever we came back we could walk onto the school compound and find a teacher who had vivid recollections of things we did and said. If we went through a rocky time, emotionally, academically, or otherwise, there would usually be someone to intervene before things went too far downhill. "What's happening?" someone would be sure to ask. "This isn't like you!"

For those of us whose family situations were less than happy, our teachers often served as surrogate parents. Not that they could ever replace our parents; they did, however, give us the supports and boundaries we needed to survive their absences. "In loco parentis" ("In the place of the parent") one principal used to intone—and the school took that responsibility seriously.

In my old school, we felt known and cared for, too, because our successes—academic or otherwise—were celebrated by people who responded like our greatest fans. When we passed for the secondary schools of our choice; when we took part in school competitions and won; when we left school and had good careers or happy (or large) families; we knew we could return and be greeted like family. The school made a ritual of celebrating the successes of all those who were, or had been, part of the school community. In those ritual celebrations, we students came to understand some of our history, as well as the valued traditions of our school.

In the end, we learned to respect the people who taught us. I have heard teachers say that children long ago respected teachers, unlike those of today. Perhaps in those days we did enjoy less complicated lives. I do not think, however, that we gave our teachers respect just because they happened to be teachers, or that we took pride in our school simply because it was "our school." I think, instead, that we were glad to have that school, and those teachers, because through their care, and their determination to give us a sense of who we were, and to help us become the best we could be, they had earned our respect.

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