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In Praise of the F Word

Mary Sherry

Preview

Many adults with a high-school education find that they lack basic skills needed to function in the working world. As a result, they enroll in "educational-repair shops," such as the adult-literacy program in which essayist Mary Sherry teaches. But, Sherry asks, how did these students manage to graduate from high school in the first place? Her answer to that question, and her suggestions for reform, were first published as a "My Turn" column in *Newsweek* magazine.

Words to Watch

trump card (4): a tactic that gives one an advantage (like a trump suit in card games)

flustered (6): nervously confused

composure (6): calmness and self-control

radical (6): extreme

conspiracy (11): a secret plan

Tens of thousands of eighteen-year-olds will graduate this year and be handed meaningless diplomas. These diplomas won't look any different from those awarded their luckier classmates. Their validity will be questioned only when their employers discover that these graduates are semiliterate.

Eventually a fortunate few will find their way into educational-repair shops—adult-literacy programs, such as the one where I teach basic grammar and writing. There, high-school graduates and high-school dropouts pursuing graduate-equivalency certificates will learn the skills they should have learned in school. They will also discover they have been cheated by our educational system.

As I teach, I learn a lot about our schools. Early in each session I ask my students to write about an unpleasant experience they had in school. No writers' block here! "I wish someone had made me stop doing drugs and made me study." "I liked to party and no one seemed to care." "I was a good kid and didn't cause any trouble, so they just passed me along even though I didn't read well and couldn't write." And so on.

I am your basic do-gooder, and prior to teaching this class I blamed the poor academic skills our kids have today on drugs, divorce, and other impediments to the concentration necessary for doing well in school. But, as I rediscover each time I walk into the classroom, before a teacher can expect students to concentrate, he has to get their attention, no matter what distractions may be at hand. There are many ways to do this, and they have much to do with teaching style. However, if style alone won't do it, there is another way to show who holds the winning hand in the classroom. That is to reveal the trump card^o of failure.

I will never forget a teacher who played that card to get the attention of one of my children. Our youngest, a world-class charmer, did little to develop his intellectual talents but always got by. Until Mrs. Stifter.

Our son was a high-school senior when he had her for English. "He sits in the back of the room talking to his friends," she told me. "Why don't you move him to the front row?" I urged, believing the embarrassment would get him to settle down. Mrs. Stifter looked at me steely-eyed over her glasses. "I don't move seniors," she said. "I flunk them." I was flustered.^o Our son's academic life flashed before my eyes. No teacher had ever threatened him with that before. I regained my composure^o and managed to say that I thought she was right. By the time I got home I was feeling pretty good about this. It was a radical^o approach for these times, but, well, why not? "She's going to flunk you," I told my son. I did not discuss it any further. Suddenly English became a priority in his life. He finished out the semester with an A.

I know one example doesn't make a case, but at night I see a parade of students who are angry and resentful for having been passed along until they could no longer even pretend to keep up. Of average intelligence or better; they eventually quit school, concluding they were too dumb to finish. "I should have been held back," is a comment I hear frequently. Even sadder are those students who are high-school graduates

who say to me after a few weeks of class, "I don't know how I ever got a high-school diploma."

Passing students who have not mastered the work cheats them and the employers who expect graduates to have basic skills. We excuse this dishonest behavior by saying kids can't learn if they come from terrible environments. No one seems to stop to think that—no matter what environments they come from—most kids don't put school first on their list unless they perceive something is at stake. They'd rather be sailing.

Many students I see at night could give expert testimony on unemployment, chemical dependency, abusive relationships. In spite of these difficulties, they have decided to make education a priority. They are motivated by the desire for a better job or the need to hang on to the one they've got. They have a healthy fear of failure.

People of all ages can rise above their problems, but they need to have a reason to do so. Young people generally don't have the maturity to value education in the same way my adult students value it. But fear of failure, whether economic or academic, can motivate both.

Flunking as a regular policy has just as much merit today as it did two generations ago. We must review the threat of flunking and see it as it really is—a positive teaching tool. It is an expression of confidence by both teachers and parents that the students have the ability to learn the material presented to them. However, making it work again would take a dedicated, caring conspiracy⁹ between teachers and parents. It would mean facing the tough reality that passing kids who haven't learned the material—while it might save them grief for the short term—dooms them to long-term illiteracy. It would mean that teachers would have to follow through on their threats, and parents would have to stand behind them, knowing their children's best interests are indeed at stake. This means no more doing Scott's assignments for him because he might fail. No more passing Jodi because she's such a nice kid.

This is a policy that worked in the past and can work today. A wise teacher, with the support of his parents, gave our son the opportunity to succeed—or fail. It's time we return this choice to all students.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Freewrite for ten minutes on one of the following.

1. Did you enjoy reading this selection? Why or why not?
2. Which would you prefer, an easy-going teacher or a demanding one? Why?

3. Were you ever threatened with failure in a school situation? What factors were responsible for your predicament? What finally happened?

VOCABULARY CHECK

A. Circle the letter of the word or phrase that best completes each of the following four items.

1. In the sentence below, the word *validity* means

- a. worth.
- b. signatures.
- c. curiosity.
- d. supply.

"[The diplomas'] validity will be questioned only when their employers discover that these graduates are semiliterate." (Paragraph 1)

2. In the sentence below, the word *impediments* means

- a. questions.
- b. skills.
- c. obstacles.
- d. paths.

"I blamed the poor academic skills our kids have today on drugs, divorce, and other impediments to the concentration necessary for doing well in school." (Paragraph 4)

3. In the sentences below, the word *priority* means

- a. failure.
- b. something extremely important.
- c. waste of time.
- d. source of amusement.

"Suddenly English became a priority in his life. He finished out the semester with an A." (Paragraph 6)

4. In the sentences below, the word *merit* means

- a. value.
- b. cruelty.
- c. hard work.
- d. failure.

"Flunking as a regular policy has just as much merit today as it did two generations ago. We must review the threat of flunking and see it as it really is—a positive teaching tool." (Paragraph 11)

- B. Circle the letter of the answer that best completes each of the following four items. Each item uses a word (or form of a word) from "Words to Watch."
- The instructor seemed *flustered* when she entered the room; she
 - glared angrily at all of us.
 - dropped her papers and couldn't find her grade book.
 - was humming a tune and smiling to herself.
 - Under pressure, Evan always exhibits *composure*. He
 - stays cool, calm, and collected.
 - loses his temper very easily.
 - begins giggling nervously.
 - My brother made a *radical* change in his appearance when he
 - lost five pounds.
 - shaved off his waist-length hair and his beard.
 - began parting his hair on the left side of his head instead of the right.
 - The movies that almost always involve some sort of *conspiracy* are
 - romance movies.
 - comedy movies.
 - spy movies.

READING CHECK

Central Point and Main Ideas

- Which sentence best expresses the central point of the entire selection?
 - Before students will concentrate, the teacher must get their attention.
 - Many adults cannot read or write well.
 - English skills can be learned through adult literacy programs.
 - The threat of a failing grade should be returned to our classrooms.
- Which sentence best expresses the main idea of paragraph 6?
 - According to his teacher, Sherry's son sat at the back of the room, talking to his friends.
 - Mrs. Stifter said that she didn't move seniors; she flunked them.
 - The fear of failure motivated Sherry's son to do well in English.
 - Sherry was at first nervous and confused to learn that her son might fail English.

Key Supporting Details

- After she told her son Mrs. Stifter's plan to flunk him, Sherry
 - started helping him with his homework.
 - had a long talk with him about why he was doing poorly.
 - didn't say anything further.
 - suggested that he change his seat in her class.
- Many of the students in Sherry's night course
 - are single parents.
 - went to the same high school as her son.
 - have dealt with substance abuse or unemployment.
 - want to be teachers themselves.
- According to the author, students who are "passed along" in school
 - are lucky.
 - eventually feel angry and resentful.
 - don't get into trouble.
 - will never learn basic writing skills.
- According to the author, a fear of failure
 - is healthy.
 - does not motivate people.
 - hurts more than it helps.
 - affects young students, but not her adult students.

Inferences

- The author implies that our present educational system is
 - doing the best that it can.
 - the best in the world.
 - not demanding enough of students.
 - very short of teachers.
- The author implies that Mrs. Stifter
 - disliked her son.
 - expected more from seniors than from younger students.
 - had only recently started teaching at her son's school.
 - had never actually failed anyone.
- _____ TRUE OR FALSE? Sherry has realized that students cannot be expected to do well in school when they are dealing with unpleasant home environments.