

FROM THE TRENCHES

Hurt, Harm, and School Safety

by Edward G. Rozycki

A growing body of data suggests that environmental contaminants may not always be poisonous—they may actually be good for you at low levels.

—R. Renner, *Scientific American*¹

That which does not kill me, makes me stronger.

—Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

Nietzsche overlooks some possibilities. Something may not kill us, yet leave us sickly or crippled. But he is right, too. It may make us stronger. It is ancient wisdom that we grow through facing adversity: *ad astra per aspera*—to the stars through adversity.

We know, too, that too much of something good may do us harm. One can overstudy, or overexercise. Cleanliness, long held to be next to godliness, can, if excessive, cause disease.² Teachers who praise every trivial accomplishment of their students end up with their praise being disregarded or devalued. Again, ancient wisdom tells us *metron ariston*—moderation is best.

What is harmful? Must it hurt? If it hurts, does it do harm? Do children learn independence through indulgence? Or courage through comfort? Confusion on these issues makes an already confusing chorus of demands on educators even more convoluted.

Hurt vs. Harm: A Distinction Often Confused

An inoculation may hurt but, normally, doesn't harm. Radiation, very often unfelt by those exposed, harms but may not hurt. The problem is that, motivationally, hurt is what grabs our attention and moves us to action. Harm, on the other hand, may not even be recognized, or, if so, ignored. The hurts visited on us by dentistry or medicine are sufficient to scare many away from treatment. This is why anesthesia is widely used.

In education, interest and relevance are great anesthetics. Study, especially when it precludes more pleasurable alternatives, can be felt as hurtful. Like vigorous exercise, practice of any kind can leave one feeling bored, sore, or drained. Arriving at school early and on time, day in and day out, is a pain; so is being held to standards of appropriate behavior or intellectual rigor. I doubt, however, that many of us consider study, practice, punctuality, and propriety harmful. And by engaging student interest we can engage their eager participation in their education, despite the many personally hurtful aspects of the process.

If educators confuse the distinction between *hurt* and *harm*, we substantially undermine the rationale for our enterprise. If, on the one hand, we imagine that everything that hurts is something that harms, we make every unpleasant sensation generated by our demands a matter of cruelty, if not tort. And we stultify the development of our students' personal courage and self-direction.

On the other hand, if we entirely dismiss as unimportant the personal discomforts of our students in pursuing even educational goals, we substantiate the suspicion that we serve our convenience more than our children's education. And so, we often do, abetted by parents, legislators, and professional therapists of all stripes who collude with us in this confusion of hurt with harm.

Common Treatment, Common Abuse

There are many hurts that life in schools bestows, bumps and bruises of the body as well as of the psyche: boredom, anxiety, disappointment, mortification, insult, fright. And people may, we say, "overreact." Our newspapers tell stories of insult responded to with mayhem and murder. Parents threaten educators with lawsuits or worse in response to low student grades. Trivial lawsuits claiming harm because of perceived hurt clog our courts.

The problem is that different people respond differently to different perceptions of affront. A physical impact taken in stride by one child may be felt as excruciatingly painful by another. A well-intentioned criticism readily accepted by one student may be received by another as a crushing psychic blow. You can recall from your own experience, no doubt, a situation in which a child falls down and, believing himself unobserved, picks himself up without much ado to continue his activity. But should that child think a parent is watching, crying and woe aplenty ensue. (Among adults, the potential for publicity causes similar reaction to misfortune.)

Educators should not lose too much sleep over such complaints. Extreme reactions should become a concern only if they arise too frequently. As a rule, we teach to the middle; we treat to the norm. Barring

advance information or an abundance of resources, it is the only rational way to act, blather about “individualizing the curriculum” to the contrary notwithstanding.³ If we must deal with people in groups and are provided only resources sufficient for group treatment—uniform, relatively meager ones—then normality is our target and we should not be surprised when individuals occasionally react “abnormally.”

In our pluralistic society of many cultures and lesser affluence, we allow students to live at home and yet invite their parents into the school building to project—impose, even—their personal cultural demands, so they can assure themselves that the fruits of their loins are given what they think they are entitled to, quite irrespective of what other people want for their brats.

As a parent I know that no teacher can possibly appreciate that unique charm, that special light that my children bring to the world. As a teacher I know that no parents have ever gotten it right about their children. Privileged social groups in various cultures throughout history have provided special kinds of education to wean children from the indulgence of the family. Private boarding schools, for example, separate children from the home and have them confront and accommodate abuses at the hands of their peers as well the “discipline” of teachers little constrained in their methods of enforcing conformity to the school culture.

Cookson and Persell describe America’s elite boarding schools in this manner: “Student culture is more likely to be competitive than cooperative, and power tends to flow to those . . . who are strong and aggressive.”⁴ That is exactly what happens in most American public schools as well. Bullying is not abnormal and it is hurtful. But is it harmful, or just the *aspera* we go through as we proceed *ad astra*?

What Is a Safe Environment?

In some of my university classes each year, I tell my students, many practicing teachers, and administrators the following:

Your child is a member of a championship band that is leaving from the United States on a European tour. You receive an advertisement in the mail that says: “Scholars Travel Insurance. Protect your children as they travel. \$20 buys them \$200,000 in life and accident protection. Have peace of mind.”

You send in the \$20 and receive confirmation of the policy from the company. Will your child now have a safer trip?

Many students answer, “Yes.” Others deny it. Others are confused. What they seem to agree on is that buying the policy may make the pur-

chaser *feel* that the trip is safer. Upon reflection few imagine that the insurance alters the objective circumstances upon which a safe trip depends.

Yet it is difficult to get consensus on what the objective conditions for safety are, because they depend upon an estimation of risk. Objective risk estimation, being both technically difficult and disillusioning, is generally forgone in education.⁵ A Columbine shooting occurs, and the national media whip up the populace to worrying that every high school is threatened by massacre. Risk assessment is largely a matter of perception, and perceptions in our culture are manipulated for promotional purposes of all kinds. Those in whom we come to place our trust as assessors of risk are those who come to control our dependencies.

People's perception of risk in a situation is heightened to the extent they have a stake in it.⁶ You may think riding a motorcycle around your neighborhood only slightly riskier than riding in your car. But imagining your eight-year-old riding on that same motorcycle, even as a passenger with an adult driver, tends to enhance your estimation of the risk involved.

Another complicating factor is the generally benighted, magical thinking involved in allaying risk. Is a trip dangerous? Buy insurance! Have parents sued when their darlings were accused of plagiarism? Get rid of high school research projects! Has there been a shooting in a school? Metal detectors will make it safer in the future! Has a child skinned his knee in the schoolyard? Shortening recess will reduce risk! Does bullying occur? Down with dodge ball! Are kids obstreperous or inattentive? Haul out the Ritalin!

The Problematics of American Pluralism

Public educators struggle within a political entity that professes unlimited expression of pluralism. Practically, that is the height of unwisdom, since every prospective choice provokes floods of misgiving and every *fait accompli* is up for second-guessing. Pluralism in American public education exists as differences in perception about what constitutes hurt versus harm, what constitutes risk, and what attitude should be taken to any given estimation of risk.

Among educators, much solemn expatiation invokes democratic philosophies of education and theories of self-actualization. Despite that, because of a commitment to an ill-defined pluralism, a weightily baptized "multiculturalism," both schools and parents in this Land of the Free and Home of the Brave collude in pressuring children to be neither self-directed nor courageous. Our children, tomorrow's citizens, will be judged by some special interest, some body of "professional" practitioners, to be forever at risk, forever dependent. Forever unfree.

Notes

1. Rebecca Renner, "Nietzsche's Toxicology," *Scientific American* (September 2003): 28-30.

2. On allergies caused by hypercleanliness see <http://www.babyworld.co.uk/news/jun%2002/270602_cleanlinessandallergies.asp> or, on antibiotic use generating bacterial resistance, see <<http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0007/19/tl.00.html>>.

3. See Edward G. Rozycki, "The Practice of Special Education: Definitely Immoral, Potentially Illegal," at <<http://www.newfoundations.com/EGR/SpecEd.html>>.

4. Peter W. Cookson, Jr., and Caroline Hodges Persell, *Preparing for Power: America's Elite Boarding Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 130.

5. See Gary K. Clabaugh, "Risk Management in Education: Fantasies of Educator Omnipotence," at <<http://www.newfoundations.com/Clabaugh/CuttingEdge/RiskManagement.htm>>.

6. See Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases," in *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*, ed. Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 3-20.

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