

## Academic Achievement in an Age of Irresponsibility

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My children think I am a terrible mother. You see, I rarely “help” them do their homework. I also rarely “help” them do projects for school, such as the Egyptian project my younger son was required to do last year. The day the Egyptian project was due, I accompanied my son as he carried into school his rendition of a wall of hieroglyphics...It was good for a fifth grader, but it could not compare to the elaborate and stunning works of art that bedecked the classroom. My son looked dejected—clearly his work, though *his*, lacked the skill of his classmates’ projects—skills that could only be attributed to adult help. (Or more accurately, adult work.) It was clear that the *help* these children received was far more than providing support and encouragement, as I had done for my son.

What are we teaching our children about academic achievement and learning when parents take on what should be the responsibilities of the learner? What are the implications for our children when parents do the work, then encourage their children to display it as their own? How much of this kind of thing is happening and why?

As a teacher trainer and reading educator for the past 18 years, I work with classroom teachers and graduate students who are becoming teachers. Their complaints echo mine—many parents, those at all socioeconomic levels, are not allowing their children to take responsibility for their work, or for their actions. Contemporary American culture has taken on protecting children from the consequences of their own actions so much, that we are raising children for whom being responsible for one’s own actions and one’s own work is anathema to *good parenting*. Why this change?

Years ago, I recall my own struggles with homework. I never dreamed of asking my parents for help. In the first place, my parents were largely uneducated, and therefore were not able to offer assistance. Secondly, I would not have thought to ask—they had their work (making dinner, cleaning house, paying the bills), and I had mine—school.

But unlike the culture of the past, many parents spend hours on end with their

children under the guise of *helping them* with their homework. Many parents complain about the time spent doing homework with their children, and the pressure such demands place on evenings at home. Clearly, if parents are complaining about too much homework, they are doing too much for their children. But teachers, too, are partly to blame.

Many teachers presume that those adults at home will help a child if that child encounters problems while doing homework. But I believe the presumption that homework should be a joint effort of the student and adults is wrong-headed. By “helping” students with homework, the sense of competence that one could potentially gain by accomplishing work independently is lost. (Not to mention the frustrations of parents and caregivers who either cannot or do not want to do homework nightly with their children.) Teachers need to learn how to assign homework that is truly independent practice, and to make it clear to students that they should rarely, if ever, request the assistance of others in its completion. Parents, for their part, need to stop assuming responsibility for the work of their children.

But why has our culture shifted so? Why is it that we no longer allow children to learn from their own mistakes, to live out the consequences of their actions, to do their own work? And what of the behavior of our children?

I work with classroom teachers daily, and although those teachers rarely see themselves as contributing to the irresponsibility of their students, parents are indicted frequently. In particular, discipline issues in classrooms have become battlegrounds for parents to defend the actions of their children to their teachers, and an increasing opportunity for kids to be “let off the hook.” Parents consistently tend to provide rationalizations for poor behavior in their children. Rarely, if ever, do parents simply say, “My child was wrong, how do you want to handle it?”

Why the reluctance for parents to admit poor behavior on the part of their children? In part, I believe many parents have become so wracked with guilt over so many cultural issues: the lack of time they spend with their children; the limited quality of family life in general; the high rates of divorce; their competing responsibilities; that admitting your child was wrong is perceived by parents as a poor reflection on their own parenting ability overall. Yet nothing could be further from the truth.

It is the *job* of children to make mistakes. It is no more a reflection on good or bad parenting than any other aspect of childhood. Children, like adults, *learn* from errors, but only when they are allowed to acknowledge them, and live out their consequences. Yet we live in a culture which shields children from the very things which help them develop a sense of competency and confidence in the world, and then wonder as they get older why they do not seem capable of managing their own lives, of keeping a job, of financially supporting themselves.

A simple case in point: recently I was in an elementary school in a moderately affluent suburb, supervising a student teacher at the school. I arrived early in the morning, and watched in sadness, though not in surprise, as a line of at least ten or more little ones waited to use the office telephone. In each case, these youngsters were

phoning home to have a parent bring to school a forgotten item: a book, a permission slip, a lunch, even shin guards for after school soccer practice. As I listened to their conversations, I contemplated the inherent lessons we are teaching our children in such instances: it's okay not to be responsible for your things; nothing bad will happen if you don't do what you've been asked to do; someone else will take care of it for you.

Moreover, what was startling to me was the tone of voice many of these less-than-nine year olds were using to speak with their parents. In nearly every case, they sounded impatient, angry, and annoyed that their *parents* had allowed them to forget whatever they had forgotten. "Why didn't you put my lunch in my backpack?" "I told you I needed that permission slip today!" "You knew I had soccer this afternoon!"

I could only imagine the parental angst on the other end of the phone and perhaps even the guilt-laden apologies from adults whose children were arrogantly reminding them that they were less than perfect parents. My guess is that there was not a single parent who responded to the phone calls of that day with, "I am sorry, but it is your responsibility to remember to bring your books to school with you, not mine. You need to go back to class and accept responsibility for this yourself."

But this last response would be precisely what a good parent should say. The failure of parents to allow children to take responsibility for their actions (or their forgetfulness in this case,) leads children to continue to live irresponsibly, and to continue to blame others for their actions. Indeed, were I principal of the school, I might ban any opportunity on the part of these children to make the initial phone call, thereby circumventing the parent taking responsibility altogether.

But the real crux of the issue for us as educators is considering how does this culture of irresponsibility affect learning? One of the most critical differences between successful learners and non-successful learners is *persistence*. And one only becomes persistent through taking on responsibility for the tasks given them. If you are always allowed to act irresponsibly, when do you learn how to stay with a responsibility long enough to truly grapple with it?

I think video games are an excellent contemporary example of the lack of persistence in our culture. *Cheat codes* are easily accessible on the internet for the various video games being marketed. When kids play, if the going gets too tough, they simply look up a cheat code to find an easy way to beat the game. Irresponsibility is the cheat code of academic achievement. Why things get tough, get others to do it for you, blame someone else, give up, because it's not your responsibility anyway.

The minority achievement gap is equally attributable in part to the culture of irresponsibility in which we are engaging. Being from a background of poverty, a broken home, a dangerous neighborhood, a non-English speaking environment, and whatever else, leads many educators to accept less from students, to make excuses for their lack of responsibility and persistence. At a conference sponsored by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) on student motivation, one of the major conditions that limited academic success was found to be the lack of high expectations for low-achieving students. The report states:

In an attempt to be fair and protect their pupils' self-esteem, teachers often excuse disadvantaged students from the effort that learning requires. This practice obscures the connection between effort and accomplishment and shields children from the consequences. The practice also sets the stage for later failure. (1992)

By taking struggle and persistence out of our children's lives, we take away the very qualities that will provide them with academic achievement. It was Albert Einstein who once said, "It's not that I'm so smart, it's just that I stay with problems longer." Persistence matters to academic achievement. Taking responsibility for one's own actions is integral to learning—regardless of ability, regardless of background.

Recently, researchers have begun to consider more acutely the importance of self-regulation to academic achievement. The research clearly indicates that "the desire to accomplish goals, in addition to an interest in and effort toward schoolwork...and persistence in the face of difficulty are all important elements of success in school" (Corno, 2002). Further, Corno states that "the central theme in classrooms that encourage children to take responsibility for their learning is that students need *less* rather than more instructional mediation" (p.82).

What does this mean for those of us who teach? As a reading teacher and a trainer of future reading teachers, the recent return to an emphasis on skill instruction and testing may need to be tempered by the concerns for responsibility and persistence. Good readers, like good learners, persist in the face of difficult texts. Good readers find a sense of accomplishment in what others consider a "hard read." I believe persistence is particularly critical to the nature of literate persons, and a culture which does not teach persistence can never be fully successful in its goal for full literacy.

The legacy of our culture of irresponsible behavior is now beginning to reach university levels. Last year, for the first time in my 18-year career as a university professor, a student initiated a law suit against me because this student received a grade of "C" in my course. Any grade below a "B" in a professional program, such as the teacher preparation program in which I teach, requires that the student retake the course. The logic of this requirement is completely appropriate: if you don't know the material covered in the course, you cannot be a professional in the field, but you do have the opportunity to take the course again.

Yet, the student was adamant that because all the assignments were completed, there should be no failure. That the quality of the work was lacking, or that the student never took advantage of my office hours or came for extra help after failing the mid-term exam, did not seem to be relevant factors.

I believe our public schools, our culture, and our parenting have failed students such as this one. For a student in a professional program not to understand the responsibility one should take for one's own work, and the quality of it, is not only sad, but dangerous. How many others, like this student, are on their way to professions such as medicine, teaching, business? How many others, like this student, will find ways to "get around" the requirements while in training, only to fail

once their mettle is tested in the real world? How many patients, young people, or businesses, will be hurt under their false capabilities?

It is extremely important that as a culture, and as educators, we begin to consider seriously this 21<sup>st</sup> century trend towards irresponsibility and the lack of persistence that students show in the face of academic difficulty. The pressure of *No Child Left Behind* cannot mean that parents or teachers must pick up and carry a child each time they fall. Such children may not be left behind in the immediate; but that child, as an adult, most certainly will be.

### References

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