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Tutoring: A School's Perspective

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All parents know, intellectually at least, that their job is to ready their children for solo flight. The hope is that by the time they go off to college children will know how to navigate the world—to find what interests them, sort out what's needed in order to proceed, adjust to the environment they find themselves in. We love them, we tell ourselves ruefully, so that they can leave us.

Schools as Proving Grounds

Like good parents, good schools prepare children to take off. They design their programs both to challenge students and to give them the tools and resourcefulness they need to clear the runway. At the same time that students master the blending of consonants, the significance of dates like 476, 1861 and 1945, languages (“Ni hao,” “La tarea para manana,” “Des-sine-moi un mouton”), or formulae using cosines to find derivatives, they also learn to outline, underline, memorize, evaluate, question, organize and conceptualize what they know. Even if all systems are working well, however, times will come when a student finds him- or herself grounded by poor weather.

Skills do not spring fully developed in children when they start school or even a school year. They need time to grow, like the feathers that finally fledge birds who are ready to leave the nest. This is a long process, which students undergo at different paces. It demands respect for the messiness of trying, missing, and trying again, as well as for the sweetness of a connection that comes all of a sudden when one is ready for it. As President Obama said in his 2009 back-to-school speech, success comes to those who let their failures teach them: “You have to let them show you what to do differently next time.”

If schools do their job well, it should be a rare student who will need tutoring, at least for purely academic reasons. There are periods in anyone's life when something does not come easily; schools know that confusion is part of the process. Both curriculum and teachers support the assimilation of new material and skills for all students in a class by not expecting

too much or too little. Teachers *like* grappling with what is not clear or natural in the methods they use or the subjects they teach. Especially when something new is introduced, teachers may find themselves expecting more trouble than there actually turns out to be. But it is equally likely that a teacher may not anticipate hidden difficulties that need more taking apart for students in the classroom. Among the eternally fascinating aspects of teaching is the reliable appearance of unexpected challenges in the presentation of material that has gone smoothly for years. The unearthing of an obstacle by one or a group of students illuminates a discipline or a topic for the instructor.

Good Schools Provide Extra Help

One mark of a good independent school is the availability of extra help to individual students outside the classroom and within school. The sight of a teacher working with a student, strong or average or weak, in an otherwise empty room, at a lunch table, on the floor in a hall is endearing and inspiring—and common.

At Brearley, as at many such schools, there are also faculty and consultants in place to work with students with learning difficulties. In our school, a Skills Department first collaborates with _____ like good parents, good Lower School homeroom teachers on language arts, grouping the girls largely according to pace of development in reading and writing. The department then runs small classes on skills development in _____ schools prepare children to take off. _____ in the Middle School and finally continues to work with a few girls whose learning style is still a challenge to them. In math as well, teachers in the Lower and Middle School work with girls whose quantitative or reasoning skills need further development.

Teachers, students and families have all benefitted enormously from the educational focus on the variety of ways people learn. It is a marvel to some of us who grew up decades ago to see children so aware not just of what they must learn, but also of how they will go about the task. The experience of dyslexic students gives us a lesson. Children with this disability who grew up in the nineteen fifties—or even eighties—often were ashamed. One man remembers that when, as a child, he would not (or could not) finish a book, his father expressed his exasperation by comment-

ing, “Sometimes I think I’ve sired an idiot.” Fifty years ago, this destructive view of a problem strangled any exploration of ways that particular student might have learned to compensate. Today, a student who doesn’t read well has learned to listen to tapes and to be patient with and prepared for the slow pace at which she reads. Schools, rather than seeing this as “cheating” in some way, encourage the auditory supplement and work with a student so that she not only takes in reading through the ears, but also practices reading because so much is transmitted in writing. These strategies help prevent stress from becoming an enduring panic. In fact, stress can be healthy: a colleague of mine often describes to parents the importance in horticulture of “stressing” plants so that they can survive in temporarily inhospitable environments and thereby grow.

When Tutoring Works

At its most appropriate, tutoring is an extension of this approach, in which an adult helps a student make sense of something that should be comprehensible or absorbable, but for one reason or another is not. It should take place when student and teacher cannot cross the bridge over a gorge, and it should be temporary, like the roadwork built next to a bridge that is being repaired. Schools view the establishment of well-defined goals and the intent of ending as soon as the road has been repaired as critical to the tutoring enterprise.

Most obviously, tutoring serves a student who has been absent because of extended illness or whose previous preparation has stopped short of linking him or her to the next stage of the journey. A school may establish that a series of sessions covering discrete topics will catch the student up. Sometimes, a student encounters an obstacle in new material or it becomes obvious that suggested new strategies are not taking root. Even when, occasionally, a student who thrives in most subjects has a significant deficit of aptitude for one specific area and is tutored in order to pass a course and fulfill a graduation requirement, the goal is to assimilate content and/or

skills and move forward. Like parents, teachers teach in order that students may leave them. It should be the same for tutors.

Tutoring works best when there is an open partnership between the school and the family, so that the student may work through problems more efficiently and effectively. The school can help a family pinpoint the need, and the classroom teacher can then guide, and be guided by, the tutor. Families and tutors should set specific goals that include increased self-awareness of the individual learning process. Much of the progress in dealing with learning styles is the product of looking at them as a scientist would: How does the phenomenon look? What provokes it? What remedy can be devised or discovered? Part of the emphasis on skills and on student-centered classrooms grows out of lessons educators want to impart to students about understanding how they themselves learn. This is the role a good tutor should play in the life of a student, too.

Tailoring Reality

What makes the issue of tutoring such a problem today is the increasing temptation to think we can tailor reality as we want it. Plastic surgery allows people to erase perceived minor defects. Facebook lets people ration information according to “levels” of friendship; Twitter defines our lives minute by minute if we wish it to; GPS can locate anyone anywhere. Cell phones keep all our friends within easy reach and iPods surround us with the music we already know and allow us to tune out things we consider to be extraneous. Television, which used to keep us all centered in a common culture, has fragmented into thousands of channels, which in turn compete with an Internet that offers a website and entire world to every conceivable affinity group. Especially in New York, the land of 24/7 takeout, high stakes competition, and attention-getting uniqueness, why should families not feel inclined, or

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even entitled, to achieve exactly the academic outcome they desire in every instance?

The pursuit of happiness is healthy, as Thomas Jefferson asserted; a too narrow definition of it is less so. The scourge of secondary education is that at some deep level, school is often seen as merely a springboard for college, which in turn becomes nothing more than an opportunity to network, brand oneself and achieve status. Families and schools would do well to remember that hard work and long relationships with many disciplines forge

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real education; that mistakes make excellent teachers; and that grappling builds strong muscles and good habits. The fact is that most students are succeeding—every day—even when they occasionally earn a noble C on an assignment. But students with B's want A's, and families want an edge in “the college process,” so they are tempted to turn to a tutor to provide the patch where the student, teacher or school is not “delivering.” This kind of tutoring, like an invasive plant, reshapes and diminishes the delicate, varied ecosystem of an education.

One of the characteristics of an “edge” is that others may not know you have it. Hence, tutoring can go underground because a student wants to seem naturally able to her teachers or classmates. Just a little nip and tuck here and there and, presto, off to Harvard, Wash U., Davidson or Stanford. Never mind that tutoring, rather than burnishing a transcript, may fray a student by demanding energy and time in overscheduled and frequently cluttered lives. Or that a student may come to see the tutor as always necessary when in fact she is able to fly under her own power. As Wendy Mogel writes in her article “Kicking the Tutoring Habit” (see p. 40), tutoring for enrichment carries hidden costs: in seeking extra help, parents are inadvertently creating dependent, helpless and “lazy” learners rather than independent, engaged, self-advocating students.

Coming Out of the Shadows

Teachers, trying to gauge where to set the next challenge in a course, may not be able to judge what is appropriate work. The tutor-assisted polished essay from a seventh grader may suggest that it is not too soon to expect

such work; it may eclipse the rough, awkward gropings of other students in the class, who in fact achieve the more real triumph. Teachers, of course, are wise old folks and can usually smell excessive help a mile away, but they cannot catch it—and they cannot be sure. The damage to the working environment is done when shadowy _____
doubts arise. Schools owe their students _____
instruction in how to use the tools they _____
will need; but how are they to judge the _____
need when there is a hidden economy _____
producing evidence that no further instruction is needed? How can teachers arrive at more accurate and inventive exercises to help all students grow when needs are masked? Today, teachers debate how they can arrange to give in-class work so that they will know a tutor has not had a hand in it.

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While statistics on the number of students being tutored, for whatever reason, are impossible to come by, rumors abound—urban legends perhaps, but frightening nevertheless—that “everyone” has a tutor. This is probably not the case. When our Parents Association met to discuss tutoring last spring, there was a wave of relief as it became clear that not everyone was hiring tutors for their children.

At our school, we will be spending a lot of time this year looking at what constitutes too much or unnecessary help. No one believes that an education in which you may not ask questions, get a response, or discuss a topic is what we are after. We live in a collaborative world and much of the joy in life, professional and personal, comes from practicing our craft and art with others. What schools want is that their students learn how to build knowledge, skills and confidence by realizing that—in the end—they themselves are in charge.

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