

CITIZENSHIP--LOCAL TO GLOBAL: CHANGING THE WORLD ONE CHILD AT A TIME

By
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"Children learn to care by experiencing good care. They come to know the blessings of gentleness, of sympathy, of patience and kindness, of support and backing, first through the way in which they themselves are treated."

~ James L. Hymes Jr.

Introduction

At age four I knew I was on my own." This statement was shared with me several months ago by a dear friend of mine, and I must admit, I was taken back by the reality of her childhood experiences.

I have had the privilege to view many classrooms world-wide through the lens of students participating in my online course entitled: 'Bullying In Schools: What Educators Can Do'. What am I "seeing"? I am seeing that like my friend who "at age four knew she was on her own," our children and youth today are "on their own" far too often. This is not just a localized phenomena but an emerging persistent problem for our global neighbors near and far.

World-wide children and youth have more needs than ever before. We live in a changing world that has thrown our young people into an environment of competition and social change that tests their decision-making skills, their understanding of integrity and respect for self and others thus blurring their ability to identify their purpose and place in their families, schools and community.

It's nearly impossible to open a newspaper or turn on the television and not be confronted by the harsh reality of violence invading the lives of our children – bullies on the playground, guns in school, kids as murder suspects, bullycide, high school hazings, and the ever escalating cyberbullying.

For many, great apprehension about their general safety is a grave concern. It is often the teacher who first identifies anxiety or fear in a child. A fearful child cannot concentrate in school, he/she cannot learn. And if they can't learn, how can we expect them to grow and become responsible citizens and community leaders?

Most children and adolescents want to “be good” and “do what is good.” However they find it difficult as they face the competing social pressures placed on them. Often they feel they must choose between loyalty to friends and “doing what is right”.

Making our students safer at school, on the playground, and in our communities

• **Empathetic adults must provide children and youth with opportunities to communicate so they understand they are not alone, especially when faced with the threat of physical, emotional or verbal harm.**

For many children the threat of bullying comes with little warning and is a new experience for which they are often unprepared. Protecting and nurturing children and youth is not the sole responsibility of parents or classroom teachers. While it should be modeled by parents and teachers, the entire community including local youth organizations and the leaders of churches, synagogues, businesses and industries, should all participate and become involved.

A couple of weeks ago I observed two parents as they listened to their daughter share an experience of being bullied by a classmate on the playground. Together, they discussed options, what to say to the classmate, how to respond proactively, assertively and with respect. When bringing this situation to the attention of the classroom teacher, the parents carefully considered “next steps.” Together the parents and teachers worked proactively to guide the students in resolving this conflict. This level of cooperation and communication is a necessary response to an often complex problem that involves multiple players including the bully, the bullied, bystanders, supervising adults, school support personnel and administrators.

• **Empathetic adults need to provide children and youth with guidance in social decision-making which results in opportunities for proactive participation premised on the values of respect and responsibility.**

Recently I had the opportunity to visit with a family from India. As parents they chose to model for their children a generational value, something they learned from their parents in India. Specifically, they impressed upon their children to “always give back to community.” To make this value tangible and active, their children were invited to choose when and how they would give to their community. In this case, the children ages six and seven, chose to share their birthday with senior

citizens, visiting with them, playing bingo, sharing stories, giving hugs. While the local initiative of two small children celebrating their birthdays with a group of senior citizens may appear trivial on the surface, the cumulative effect of these kinds of responsible and respectful gestures can shape the lives of children—our future citizen leaders and decision makers—and thereby shape the future of our country and the world.

• **Empathetic adults need to model for children and youth that little decisions and small actions can have a huge impact on the world.**

In the last analysis, all historical events are local events. The effects of some events will reverberate only on the personal and local level. However, other local events will cast a long shadow across the landscape of history. On 9/11 for example, a small group of 19 men (international bullies if you will) working in coordinated fashion took the world hostage through shockingly violent acts designed to create fear in the hearts of people everywhere. Their actions were premised on the principle that a much localized event can reverberate internationally.

One obvious lesson is that while the outcome of local events can never be predicted with absolute certainty, it is certain that character, integrity, purpose, and responsibility will have a lasting impact on the lives of people everywhere. Just as the highly visible but localized violence of the terrorist can hold the world hostage, so the kindness or perhaps the cruelty of a child can shape the future for all of us. It is the future after all that stands in the balance.

It is therefore the duty of empathetic and responsible adults to impress upon children and youth through the power of modeled behavior, the lasting and far reaching impact respectful and reflective actions can have. The only image scarier than the smoldering ruins of the World Trade Center is the idea that future citizens will not think deeply about it. As Margaret Mead once said, “Never think that a small group of concerned individuals cannot change the world, for indeed it is the only thing that ever has.”

Phyl Burger has been a middle school classroom teacher, high school vocational education teacher, elementary principal, educational consultant, director of special needs programs and currently is a university adjunct professor with UW-Stout. She develops bully awareness and prevention programs for schools, is a skilled public speaker, and facilitates teacher in-service and professional development seminars. She has been interviewed for feature news articles on the topic of bullying, student harassment and violence in schools

Ms. Burger was selected as a 2005 contest judge by MindOh! a non-profit organization that empowers youth to achieve their full potential through innovative character education programs that inspire moral and ethical behavior. The 2005 topic was 'Bullying'; students were asked to share their thoughts and ideas about how to take a stand to end bullying.

Phyl's programs reflect the following:

"Together ~ We Build A Community of Caring, Confidence and Character"