

What We Don't Know About Our Students – And Why (##)

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By Alfie Kohn

*There's a scene near the beginning of *Small Change* (also known as *Pocket Money*), Truffaut's übercharming movie about children of all ages, in which a teacher makes each of her students recite a passage from a Molière play – a test of both memory and dramatic skill. The teacher is especially tough on one boy who chants the lines in a leaden monotone: She stands next to his desk and threatens (in front of his peers) to keep making him repeat the lines until his performance is to her liking. Abruptly, though, she is called away, and the moment she's gone, the boy comes to life. He stands up and begins to wander around the room while delivering the Molière monologue with remarkable power and spontaneity, revealing to his peers his considerable talents as an actor.*

The point, of course, is to remind us adults how little we really know our kids and what they're capable of doing. That was a lesson I personally learned some years ago when I was teaching high school. I gave a ride one day to a 15-year-old girl, a student of mine who had no apparent interest in anything that I – or, from what I could gather, any of my colleagues – was teaching. Awkward and taciturn as usual that

afternoon, she spoke only to ask if I would turn on the car radio, at which point she proceeded to sing along with every song that came on for the duration of the ride, displaying not only more enthusiasm than I had thought possible but also an astonishing gift for recall.

Thinking back on this incident, I'm struck not only by what she did but by how I reacted. In relating the event to my colleagues the following day, I shook my head and smiled condescendingly at how this girl, a washout in the classroom, had evidently taken the time to learn pop lyrics to perfection. I mean, talk about misplaced priorities!

Only much later did it dawn on me that this student had something to teach me – about why her talent came as a complete surprise to me, and also about motivation and its relationship to achievement. If I (and her other teachers) had never seen her steel-trap memory in action, or witnessed the look of total absorption I glimpsed in the car that day, that was undoubtedly because we hadn't taken enough time or shown enough interest so that she felt sufficiently safe to reveal who she was and what mattered to her.

And why wasn't she engaged in the classroom? Well, people tend to become more enthusiastic and proficient when they're in charge of what they're doing. How much choice had she been given about her schooling – not only the broad curriculum but the daily details of classroom life? Indeed, I had fallen back on grades to induce my students to do what I hadn't been able to help them find meaningful in its own right. This girl had chosen to learn those songs; no one had to promise her an A for doing so, or threaten her with an F for messing up. Her impressive achievement did not require carrots and sticks. In fact, it probably required their absence.

It was particularly disconcerting for me to realize that when the priorities of adults and kids diverge, we simply assume that ours ought to displace theirs. Stop wasting your time

learning song lyrics when you could be doing important stuff – namely, whatever’s in our lesson plans: solving for x or using apostrophes correctly or reading about the Crimean War. We tell more than we ask; we direct more than we listen; we use our power to pressure or even punish students whose interests don’t align with ours. This has any number of unfortunate results, including loss of both self-confidence and interest in learning. But let’s not forget to number among the sad consequences the fact that many students quite understandably choose to keep the important parts of themselves hidden from us. That’s a shame in its own right, and it also prevents us from being the best teachers we can be.

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