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Equity and Excellence
Dr. Douglas Reeves
Creative Leadership Solutions

Key
Words:

Details, Evidence, Examples, and Illustrations

Summary and Questions

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Summary and Questions

Cheating Our Daughters: Four Toxic Messages Behind the “Good Girl Effect”
By Dr. Douglas Reeves
March 9, 2019

How can young women with honor-roll grades and positive recommendations from teachers flounder in college? Why do women who excel in school often struggle to achieve promotions in the workplace? It’s time to rethink what we reward and how we reward it, because our daughters are getting some toxic messages about what being a “good girl” means.

Toxic Message #1: Good girls get it right the first time. The diligent, rule-following perfectionist is, in the parlance of academic reports, “a pleasure to have in class.” Her work is submitted on time and is invariably flawless. In fact, that’s the problem. Without mistakes – and even worse, without the willingness to acknowledge mistakes – she never takes risks, and never asks for help. Good girls don’t need to, right? Although I have often heard people claim that “in the real world, you have to get it right the first time,” that’s among the many big lies perpetuated about a real world that no longer exists. In the real world of today, people need to make mistakes, get feedback without having a meltdown, and then respond to that feedback by improving their work. The same is true in college, professional school, and every occupation. Effective teachers don’t praise “getting it right the first time” but rather encourage students to acknowledge mistakes, ask for help and, most importantly, respond positively to feedback.

Toxic Message #2: Good girls know that if an A is good, an A+ is better. Clinical psychologist Lisa Damour recently reported in the New York Times that girls are praised by teachers and parents for “inefficient overwork” – pursuing extra credit that often consists of quantity rather than rigor. Call it the “Hermione Granger Effect” – turning in more parchment than the Hogwarts professor assigned. A better message is to challenge students to do work that is greater in complexity and rigor – and therefore with a greater probability of mistakes that are the key to learning. It is essential to change the conversation from “How many points did I get?” to “What can I learn?”

Toxic Message #3: “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.” Of course we value civility and courtesy, but too many girls conflate critical thinking with personal criticism. I’ve heard middle school girls say, “I knew there was a mistake in my friend’s essay, but I didn’t want to hurt her feelings.” There is such a social emphasis on affirmation – and negative consequences for evaluation, criticism, and judgment – that girls arrive in college and the work place not knowing how to give and receive effective feedback to colleagues. This robs them of the opportunity to improve their own performance and to lead others.

Toxic Message #4: “You need to be better than a man to do the job.” Perhaps parents and mentors mean well when they say this, but the effect is pernicious. When girls and women hold themselves to this impossible standard, they select themselves out of potentially great opportunities. Studies find that when there is a list of ten criteria for a promotion, girls won’t

pursue it unless they meet all ten, while boys will pursue the same opportunity if they meet only two of the ten criteria. Dr. Damour concludes that we teach girls competence, but we teach boys confidence. The latter is what explains how so many men – less experienced, less qualified, and less capable – are placed in positions of authority over women.

Perhaps the worst implication of the Good Girl Effect is from research I conducted about students earning honor roll grades who were not able read or do mathematics on grade level. Proud of their honor roll status, these young women will go into debt, enroll in college, and discover too late that we have lied to them when we said grades and quiet compliance were the only necessary qualities for college success.

Let our daughters make mistakes, ask for help, and give and receive accurate and difficult feedback. They don't have to be the CEO and they certainly don't have to become boys. But they do deserve better than empty affirmations every time we call them a "good girl."

The Key to Resilience: Pencil, Not Pen
By Dr. Douglas Reeves
September 29, 2019

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a hot topic in education these days. In particular, we want to build resilience, perseverance, and grit among our students and also among our teachers and administrators. But as much as we celebrate the pursuit of those virtues, I have noticed that many educational systems undermine them with evaluative systems that systematically punish students, teachers, and administrators for the mistakes of the past and fail to reward those people for bouncing back from mistakes – that is, showing evidence of the resilience, perseverance, and grit we claim to value.

Here is one key to showing that we really value resilience: pencil, not pen. That means that when students make mistakes early in the semester, we are honest about it, but the evaluation early in the semester is not held as a hammer over their head at the end of the semester. In his wonderful new book, *The Years That Matter Most*, Paul Tough describes the calculus class at the University of Texas, Austin, that welcomes students who traditionally have struggled in college – low income, immigrant, ethnic and linguistic minorities – and yet produces remarkable results. These students, who are often channeled into less demanding classes, not only thrive in calculus, but remain in advanced classes and go on to become mathematicians, engineers, physicians, and scientists. This is not because of a lack of rigor at one of the nation's most exclusive universities. Rather, it is because the professor, a 50-year classroom veteran, promises students that their last score – the score on the comprehensive final – will replace all their early failures. That's one reason UTA has more diversity in advanced math than other colleges and universities that rely on pre-selecting wealthy and Anglo students who waltzed into class ready to succeed in advanced mathematics. College should add value, not confirm pre-existing prejudices. Read Tough's book to get more details on how they do it.

The “pencil, not pen” ethic also applies to teachers and administrators. One of the most frustrating experiences for teachers and administrators is to be evaluated at the end of the year based on observations and mistakes they made six months earlier. If evaluators see something wrong, they need to deal with it – ideally within 24 hours of the observation – and address it forthrightly. Nobody ever was evaluated into better performance at the end of the year, but we can be coached and supported into better performance with feedback that is specific and immediate. And then, when the end-of-year evaluation does take place, we can erase all those errors that were entered in pencil and focus on how we bounced back from failure. We can enter the successes – the resilience, perseverance, and grit – in pen.

Let us be enlightened by the wisdom of toddlers. If their self-evaluations of walking were based on permanent marks in their record for every calamitous fall, our species would remain wandering about on all fours. But toddlers are smart enough to erase those many mistakes and enter in pen only their successes when they walk. We can do the same with students and colleagues. I'm not suggesting we ignore mistakes – toddlers know that falling on their rear ends and smashing into walls constitute mistakes from which they must learn. But they are able to erase those mistakes and focus on their ambulatory successes. We can all do the same with our students, our colleagues, and ourselves.

What Does “College Readiness” Mean?

By Dr. Douglas Reeves
August 25, 2019

Few school systems’ mission and vision statements fail to include the phrase “college and career readiness.” Who could possibly be against it? But while there is nearly universal agreement that students should leave high school ready to either pursue additional education or enter a career, there is wide disagreement on what “college readiness” means.

It’s a critical question, because more than 40 percent of students enter college with the requirement to take remedial courses that cost the same college tuition, but that do not count toward the completion of their degree. That may be why so many students who enter college never finish it. They thought they were “college ready,” but more than 70 percent of community college students never finish, and more than 40 percent of students entering a four-year college never finish. They had enough knowledge and skills enough to finish high school, apply for college, get accepted, and perhaps even secure some financial aid. But they were far from “college ready.”

New research from the Center for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) Knowledge Hub podcast casts some light on this. Scholars from the University of Washington who have researched the issue extensively noticed that students, parents, colleges, and teachers in the K-12 system have wildly different perception of what it takes to be ready for college. Because teachers are often the most influential source of information about what the college experience is, the UW scholars interviewed teachers, focusing on “early college” high schools – that is, schools that were dedicated to offering college credits and sending 100 percent of their students to post-secondary education. If any group of faculty members had “college readiness” clearly defined, it should be them. That’s not what the researchers found. Here is a sample of the advice that teachers offered – often stridently – to their college-bound students. The following notes include what the UW researchers found along with some of the nuggets I’ve heard along the trail:

- “It’s all about group work – you need to learn to collaborate.”
- “There’s no more group work – you are on your own and need to work alone.”
- “Social skills, including the need to advocate for yourself, are crucial.”
- “Soft skills don’t matter, especially in the sciences.”
- “Writing is paramount -- that’s all you do in college.”
- “Writing is less important than online collaboration and speaking in class.”
- “You’ll have graded homework every week, and late work is never accepted.”
- “Your grade is one final project that will go through many iterations, and nobody grades homework.”
- “You can get the lectures on the web – huge lecture halls are a waste of time.”
- “You’d better go to every lecture in person, because there are always things in those sessions that are not in books or online, and that will be on the test.”

What the researchers found was not malice or ignorance by the purveyors of this wildly contradictory advice, but rather that the vast majority of advice was based on one of three

sources: the teacher's own college experience, often decades ago; the experience of the teacher's own children; or the experience of the children of friends. What was not included? Picking up the phone and actually talking to today's college professors. When a piece of advice from anyone over the age of 21 begins with "You know, when I was in college..." it should be considered a bit of interesting piece of archeology, but not necessarily conclusive evidence of contemporary practices on college campuses.

So what are today's high school students to do? There are some timeless truths: Keep a calendar and assignment notebook, ask for help, be willing to admit what you don't know. My previous post on what colleges need now might be of interest [read here]. But most importantly, just go to a college and spend some time with students and professors. I am dismayed when I see the prospective students of our many Boston-area universities dutifully following the campus guide from one building to another, with special interest in the student union, the size of the dorm rooms, and the quality of cafeteria food. I wish they would stop the tour and just go to a class. Look at the interaction between professors and students. Look at the level of questioning by the professor and the degree of interaction. Talk to some first-year students and ask, "What do you know now that you wish you would have known a year ago?" That wisdom may be far more useful than the confusing mash of advice that reflects what colleges were in previous eras. If you'd like to listen to the CPRE blog and hear the UW Researchers, here is the [link to their podcast](#).

The Power of Psychological Safety
By Dr. Douglas Reeves
November 24, 2019

[The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth](#) is one of the most important books of the past several years for educators and for leaders in every field. It can help improve learning, productivity, happiness, and just about every other personal and organizational variable you might consider. Harvard Professor Amy Edmondson ([@AmyCEdmondson](#)) weaves together massive amounts of evidence from a variety of contexts and cultures to make powerful arguments that should inform everything from the language we use in the classroom and in meetings to the way we provide feedback to how we encourage greater levels of creativity and innovation.

Edmondson begins with a puzzle: Which team has a greater number of errors the one with high psychological safety or low psychological safety? Based on the preceding paragraph, you might guess the latter - low safety equals more errors. But the answer is more circuitous than that. In fact, her data from a groundbreaking study of medical errors suggested just the opposite - that teams with high degrees of psychological safety actually reported more errors. But that is not because safety led to sloppiness. On the contrary, teams with high levels of psychological safety were more likely to report errors and learn from them, while teams with low levels of psychological safety were more like to cover up errors or attempt to quietly compensate for mistakes, preventing any systematic individual and organizational learning. We see the same phenomenon in the classroom all the time. The teacher asks, "Is everybody with me?" Heads nod and hands flutter, but rarely does a student honestly say, "Actually, I don't get it at all, and I'm completely lost." What do you think the teacher's actions might be? In many classroom observations I have made, the student who openly expresses confusion is met with a facial expression that betrays disappointment, a sigh of exasperation, and a quick repetition of the lesson. The illusion of perfect learning continues in those classrooms right up to the point that the students and teachers are confronted with assessments that show that the students were not nearly as proficient as the teacher thought.

Are the students nodding their heads and waving their hands to express understanding just devious little liars who are eager to get the lesson over with? That's one explanation, but a better one, Edmondson argues, is that they do not feel safe asking questions and appearing to be foolish. Certainly, they don't want to disappoint one of the major adults in their young lives – their teacher. And even though teachers often say, "There's no such thing as a dumb question," the conversations in the faculty lounge suggest otherwise. The same is true of staff meetings when the principal brusquely asks, "Are there any questions?" with the clear expectation of silence. My fellow providers of professional learning don't get off the hook either. We can get so consumed in delivering eloquent presentations that we rarely conduct meaningful checks for understanding. I watched presenters addressing veteran professionals react in the same way our theoretical teacher did to the honest student who admitted his failure to understand a lesson. After all, if we presented a lesson expertly to a group of college-educated professionals, what could possibly go wrong?

A lot, Edmondson argues. Her research suggests that only about 20 percent of organizations have high levels of psychological safety, while the other 80 percent maintain the veneer of collegiality, burying conflict, questions, and mistakes – and the learning that goes with them – in a deeply concealed organizational shaft. It is why, as I wrote in the “[Myth of Buy-In](#),” leaders who claim to have buy-in from everyone are much more likely to have simply sent signals that bury or punish dissent.

In a psychologically safe environment, people ask more questions, are willing to be more vulnerable, and give and accept more accurate feedback. Even when doing the same tasks and with people with the same capabilities, environments of psychological safety dramatically improve not only organizational safety but also the personal satisfaction and engagement of employees.

Edmondson is one of those generous researchers who places her survey instruments in the public domain so that anyone can use them (we try to do this at Creative Leadership as well). She is also the sort of scholar who, even though she is clearly the leading expert in the field, shares credit throughout the book with researchers around the world. Leaders will be talking about this book decades from now, just as Jim Collins’ *Good to Great* is still widely followed. I just hope that we don’t miss this book’s essential message for teachers, parents, and students, all of whom are perhaps more important than any corporate CEO in creating and maintaining the models of psychological safety in schools and homes that the world’s future leaders will need.

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