

Mindful of Others

A Book Review

About The Book

Inspired by an unexpectedly valuable writing workshop, our protagonist, Suzie Jacobs, gradually manifests the super-educator ability to motivate her students and stimulate both creativity and critical thinking. By allowing her students to take responsibility for their own learning – their own thought – she is able to step back and guide her students as they build their own skills rather than attempting to imprint them with a copy of hers.

Mindful of Others: Teaching Children to Teach, the 1994 book by Suzanne Brady and Suzie Jacobs and published by Heinemann, describes and justifies the process by which one elementary school teacher (Suzanne Brady) in California changed the structure of her classroom from being teacher-centric to one which draws its strength from the group work of the students themselves. Although the students in the book are at the elementary school level, the reflective explanations render it valuable to teachers of all kinds and at all experience levels. This general applicability is enhanced by the comments of Suzie Jacobs, a professor at the University of Hawaii and a researcher who provides an interested bystander's perspective.

Substance

The most powerful message from Suzanne's story is that we, as educators need to step back from the directive approach so common today – even when the rules of the school district and even social norms tell us otherwise. Instead of micro-managing our students, we must trust them to live up to our expectations as long as we model those goals and provide some guidance along the way.

The children in Mrs. Brady's California classroom were no different than those found elsewhere: she had overachievers and trouble-makers and everything in between. When they came to her, each of them was at a different stage in the process of learning to deliver what their teacher wished them to provide. They all knew how the game was played and they were doing their part.

Then she changed the rules and took herself out of the game. No longer could her students look to her for the right answer – instead, they must look to each other. The new class structure provided options for flexibility and choice which facilitated student ownership of the assignments. At the same time, she did impose an overall class schedule and loyalty to their classmates provided pressure to meet that schedule. This combination of stress and freedom of choice produced the rare climate in which the elusive beast creativity thrives.

Mrs. Brady took her first tentative steps by bringing writing response groups to her classroom. In these groups, four students would meet every few days to read each other their works in progress and provide each other with feedback. This feedback was non-threatening to the recipient because it was, by design,

based upon a work in progress and therefore not something expected to be correct. The net effect was a feeling of trust amongst the students.

Suzanne Brady did not stop at writing response groups, she replicated her experiment with her reading groups by skipping the standard basal book reading groups based upon measurable reading skill level. Instead she grouped her students based upon their own chosen story book. Once again, freedom and responsibility to the community motivated her students to progress by leaps and bounds. These students consistently demonstrated throughout the year that they were asking their own questions. They were relevant and drove at information that was interesting to them, not because their teacher prompted them, but because they truly wanted to know.

Impressively, these significant and visible changes were made with little assistance or support from the school administration. These modifications were made within the construct of the public school system while it largely perceived business as usual. The students continued to meet and often exceed the standards for improvement and Suzanne used student contracts to assign the expected workbook assignments entirely out of context simply to maintain the façade of a traditional classroom. As the experiment progressed, our teacher was emboldened and she began discussing her techniques with others. At one point, she even saved the district some money by requesting the cancellation of an order for basal readers since her students did not read them. However, there are no indications that the administration played any significant part in these changes.

Form

This book presents its content in the form of a conversation taking place between the two authors. This is an effective mechanism as it allows for questions to be posed by Suzanne, the outsider, as a proxy for those of us silently reading. The dialog renders a text which takes a familiar, yet respectful and professional tone as it introduces two distinct voices to provide variation which keeps the reader engaged. Furthermore, it insures that no details are left untold and no decisions left unexplained; the narrative is complete and flows naturally.

However, this convention, as implemented, is not without its drawbacks. The book attempts to strike a middle ground between speech and prose by attributing expanses of text to one author or the other through the use of labels in the margin. This is non-invasive, but at least one reader took more than one chapter to understand what exactly was going on and why the perspective shifts were occurring – particularly since the two authors frequently quote dialog between them and this caused the object of the referent “I” to change regularly. To further compound the problem, the two authors’ names (Suzie and Suzanne) are confusingly similar and this often made it difficult to keep track of who was speaking.

Implications

Our schools, and therefore our society since it builds upon the conditioning performed by our schools, cause much of our talent to go wasted as students are taught to take their instructions from external sources. By adopting and expanding upon the techniques employed by Suzanne we might get more in

touch with our interests and the pursuits about which we are passionate. We must be guided by a faith in man's desire to learn and interest in the world around him.

If we create a safe, nurturing environment and then step back, our students will be able to get in touch with their inner goals which they will pursue tenaciously. The product of such labors may be inconsistent in form, but perhaps this only indicates that we need to update our evaluations to adapt instead of forcing the students to conform to an arbitrarily selected standard.

Recommendation

I would (and already have) highly recommend this book to anyone interested in human achievement – particularly in the classroom. Although the method presented is specific and represents a single case study, it includes the designer/implementer's clear and straightforward rationale which elucidates the concepts driving her decisions and makes it possible for followers to implement the same strategy in different contexts. Additionally, the book is an easy read and makes a number of insightful comments and observations with regard to the human condition.