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The Power of More Than One

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THE POWER OF MORE THAN ONE**jane king**

When my husband and I moved from New York City to Dickson, Indiana, I found a job in one of the private preschools in town. I frequently felt like Leona, the child Steve Schultz describes at the beginning of his article on resistance, who wants to go back up the slide. While other teachers were planning curriculum—climbing the slide and sliding down in an orderly fashion—I always felt like I was moving against the tide—crawling up the slide toward the platform at the top. The other teachers designed patterns and sent them home to parents who cut neat and identical pieces for the children. In this way, three-, four-, and five-year-olds were able to construct scenes that looked just like the pictures of the rain forest the teacher showed them in the rain forest book.

When I planned curriculum, we didn't study the rain forest. Instead I put out paper, crayons, markers, scissors, glue, and whatever else I could find and let the children create their own record of what they saw outside our preschool windows. They looked at the mountain across the street and drew the trails they had hiked with their families. Instead of gluing on animals their parents cut out for them, the children drew the deer and elk that lived on the mountain. Their drawings didn't look much like actual deer and elk, but the children weren't concerned. Our murals grew bigger and, some might say, messier. I took dictation and we made class books about the places we'd hiked as a class. Some of the older children did their own writing. The classroom was noisy, messy, productive, and exciting. One of the other teachers offered me precut animal shapes. I said no thank you. I hung on to the sides of that slide, and kept climbing up, even though every voice of authority I could hear was telling me to turn around and slide down.

I've been in Dickson almost ten years now. Some days I feel like my grip on the slide is loosening. I stop and think about what's made it possible for me to hang on. A big part of the answer is the years I spent teaching in New York City before I moved to Dickson. My colleagues there had noisy, messy, productive, and exciting classrooms. Together we questioned and explored—with each other and with our students. Now on the days when I find myself feeling alone and at odds with the Dickson school community, I think of the people in the school community I left behind. I think of what they would say to me if they were here. I remind myself that in Dickson, even when I am alone on the slide, I am not alone in the world.

In my second year at the preschool, I worked with a new co-teacher. We circled each other carefully when we met for our first planning meeting. I didn't know what Sandy was thinking. I was wondering how hard it was going to be for me to climb up the slide while Sandy was urging me to go down. But she didn't urge me to slide down; in fact, she climbed up with me. I discovered that Sandy had liked my classroom the year before. She saw beyond the noise and the mess to what the children were saying and doing. The year we taught together was exhilarating. We took more trips. We walked to the neighborhood coffee shop to watch the soda truck unload. We let the children mix their own paint colors. We brought the woodworking table in from outside. Other staff members couldn't believe we welcomed that noise into our classroom. Sadly, Sandy left Dickson at the end of that year. I don't think I've had as rich a school year since.

Resistance from more than one begins to demand attention. Steve Schultz asks, "What respectful teacher would have a bunch of three-year-olds banging on their tables in unison, ignoring all of her attempts to make them stop?" While I admit to the nightmare quality of this scenario as a teacher, I also recognize that while one three-year-old banging on a table and refusing to stop might be escorted to the director's office, a group of three-year-olds would command a different kind of attention. There is power in more than one.

I sensed this power during the year I worked with Sandy. It was infinitely easier to work with Sandy than to work alone. My co-teachers the previous year did not want the noise of the woodworking table in the classroom. The school director agreed with them, and the woodworking table remained outside. It was when Sandy and I insisted together that the sound of sawing and hammering was not merely noise, but the by-product of children's real work, that we were able to carry the table inside.

I believe that a crucial part of our work as teachers must be to help children find their voices. We must listen to those voices. We must help each child recognize that his or her voice, even in disagreement, can be important to the group. If we do, there is a better chance that our students will become adults who are willing and able to question, and perhaps change, the direction in which the rest of us are moving.

I am no longer working in the preschool. I am an at-home mom of a four- and a nine-year-old. I have volunteered regularly in my daughter Meagan's public school classrooms, and I cringe at the hidden curriculum that tries to teach my child, and other children at the school, that homogeneity is desirable. Last year, in Meagan's second-grade classroom, simply taking initiative—using art materials in a way the teacher had not demonstrated, reading a book that was not in your reading group's book basket—was an act of resistance.

At Meagan's school, children who are not "working well" within the established system are seen as outside the "norm," a "condition" the schools try to address in various ways. During IEP meetings [Individualized Education Plan, required by

law for students defined as having special needs], faculty and support staff give parents suggestions of ways they can help their children fit into the school experience, rather than talking about ways the school experience might be adapted to fit the needs of an individual child.

At Meagan's school, there aren't meetings in which students discuss how to make sure school is a safe place for everyone. When bullying becomes an issue on the playground, recess times are shortened. When some children end up sad because they have no one to sit with during lunch, everyone is assigned a seat in the lunchroom. As a result, opportunities the school might provide for children to learn how to work out conflicts, how to get along with and take care of one another, are missed. During music time, children sing songs about community; but little classroom time is spent talking about what the word "community" actually means.

I am a member of the PTA. I chair fundraising events for the school. Outwardly, I am seen as a supportive parent. At the same time, I continue to resist, to teach my children to resist, and to recruit others who will resist with me.

Some days I feel discouraged. Other days I talk with the small handful of parents I have gotten to know who are uneasy about their children's school experience(s) and the school's hidden curriculum of conformity. When I am with this group, I believe that change might be possible. I realize that even in Dickson, I am not alone. I feel able and ready to go into the school and make whatever small changes I can.

When I volunteered in Meagan's second-grade classroom, I got out extra bottles of glue for children who wanted to use more than the teacher's recommended "dot, dot, not a lot." I handed scissors to a child who asked me to cut something out for him. I taught strategies other than "sounding out" when I read with children. I showed Katie where to find books that were not in her assigned reading box. I watched her face light up as she realized that part of being a reader is making choices about what to read, and as she absorbed my unspoken message about where to find other books.

I taught my daughter, Meagan, who in turn taught her friends, how to sneak back into the school if they forgot their mittens when they went outside for recess. (Going back in is against school rules). The first time Meagan helped a friend get her mittens, she came home filled with pride at the power she had been able to claim as she helped a friend in a system that generally renders children powerless.

I am frustrated with the school system. I see my children working to make sense of the world they live in, and I see their questions going not only unanswered in school, but some days unasked as well. They learn that there is no school on Monday because it is Martin Luther King Day, but they do not learn about the Montgomery bus boycott. I seesaw back and forth between wanting to return to work myself, and wanting to preserve my time with my children, those quiet after-school snack moments when we talk about Martin Luther King as a person who believed in breaking and changing rules.

In first grade, my daughter had two close friends who spent many days after school at our house. One day they decided to build a town out of shoeboxes and other found materials. They took over a corner of our living room, and worked for weeks. They wrestled their way through many questions. Should they work on buildings alone or together? Should the biggest box be used for housing or the school? Could they have a town without a park? They decided they needed a hospital in case anyone got sick. At one point they had too many businesses and not enough people to work in them. They solved that by consolidating the restaurant and the grocery store.

At the end of the year, my daughter brought her report card home from school. We read it together. When we got to social studies, she asked me what “social studies” meant. As I explained, Meagan asked, “Was the town we made like social studies?” When I answered yes, Meagan said, “Skip that part of my report card. We don’t do social studies in school.” I hugged her. I am grateful that she is able to resist, even in this private way, the labels her school attempts to put on her learning and experiences.

Some days I think about taking Meagan out of school. I think about home schooling. The argument goes round in my head in a vicious circle. I don’t believe in home schooling. I don’t think Meagan, or any child, can do their best learning alone. I want Meagan to be part of a community of learners. I yearn for a classroom where she will be empowered to take charge of her own learning and decision-making. I want Meagan to have opportunities to work out questions with her classmates such as: How do you choose a good book? How do you get along with other children on the playground? How do you make new friends? How do you solve a math problem? She needs a teacher who will help facilitate these discussions. I worry that if I leave Meagan in school, the values I have worked so hard to teach her—asking questions, talking things through, speaking up when you disagree—will not be nurtured. At the same time I worry that if I take her out of school, I will give her a message that it’s okay to leave a bad system rather than try to change it.

Now Meagan is in third grade. She has a wonderful teacher, who has survived as an outsider in the system for over thirty years. She helps children work out for themselves and with each other how to keep their supplies organized; how to make new friends; how to choose an appropriate, independent reading book; how to decide what they will work on learning this year; and how they might work on it. I love volunteering in her classroom. I love talking with her about children and about curriculum. When I am with Mrs. Thomas both of us are energized, excited, and filled with the possibilities of change and exploration. We experience the power of two.

Even when I think about home schooling, I know that Meagan will remain in school. Part of this decision is based on what I know about Meagan and me—she needs input from someone who’s not her mom. Another part of it is based on my own hidden curriculum: if I’m not at the school, who will encourage and applaud

the small acts of resistance that some of the children engage in? Who will encourage Mrs. Thomas and any other teachers like her? I suppose I have a hidden curriculum for my children, as well. Deep down, I hope that throughout their school years, as the system shows its flaws (and perhaps its possibilities) and as we talk at home about possible courses of action, my children will grow to understand more and more about the possibilities and ways of resistance.