



Red4EdNC

We Need a Paradigm Shift in Education

Angela Scioli, Wake County Public School Teacher

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I remember learning the word “paradigm” for the first time in college. The presenter showed us a visual puzzle that was totally perplexing. He gave us a single word that allowed us to shift our perspective and look at the problem through a new “lens”, and “click!” - all was clear!

We need a paradigm shift in education.

In my last two articles, I wrote about how education is and is not like business. While that was a worthy mental exercise, I hope to convince you that we need to throw that whole “lens” out and use a different referencing institution when we think about schools: family.

In simpler times (think hunter gathering / farming economies), education was mostly handled in the family unit (here’s how you hunt, here’s how you preserve food, etc.) It was only with exploration and industrialization that we began outsourcing the education of children to formal schools.

Increasingly, and yet strangely, our schools have come to resemble businesses more than families. We think of parents as consumers, student as products, and we seek to quantify what “value – added” outcomes students will demonstrate by matriculating through an orderly, standardized, age-based processing system.

That system worked well for an industrial economy, but in a post-industrial context, the limitations of this approach are becoming evident. Increases in technology, communication and transportation have created a population that demands more individualized and efficient ways of learning. At the same time, we are struggling to close an “achievement gap” and deal with students who are difficult to educate because they are absent, don’t speak English, have experienced trauma, or suffer from food insecurity and/or homelessness.

What would a family mindset look like in education?

First, you don’t take an exhausted child to Disney World. It doesn’t matter how engaging and entertaining the setting, there will be a meltdown. Parents know they must first make sure a child’s most basic needs are met: they are fed, they are rested, and they feel safe.

We bring exhausted, hungry, scared kids to school every day. We’ve convinced ourselves that if their teachers are entertaining enough, or if the subjects are interesting enough, that they will magically forget about their aching tooth, their rumbling stomach, or their anger about what they have seen too soon.

We must first attend to students’ most basic needs, emotional and physical, before we can proceed with the wonders of learning. We need more therapists, we need [wrap around services](#) that provide basic health and dental care, and we need social workers. We must show kids that they are valued,

and that their school is a place they can come to find safety, nutrition, peace of mind and care. And we must do these things first, as no environment, even Disney World, can overcome a child's basic needs.

A **second** key aspect of family is acceptance and negotiation. I sometimes look around at family gatherings and think what an odd and random family assortment we make. My classroom is the same. We are rapidly becoming a very diverse nation. A random mix of students show up on day one, and we struggle from that day forward to accept, accommodate and negotiate to make our time together as productive and affirming as possible. But that progress is built on a foundation of mutual respect, acceptance and encouraged by the fact that we are “stuck” together.

Navigating both of these contexts requires a sizable serving of emotional, social and soft skills. It involves communication, anger, expectation and conflict management. I've been aided by studying EQ (emotional intelligence) models, mindfulness, the constructs of gender and race, and personality types. As a result, I've learned how these skills are of increasing importance to our professional and personal satisfaction, but they are not explicitly taught in school. Meanwhile, more and more of us are burying our faces in electronic devices and ingesting a steady diet of digital media. Entertaining for sure. Preparation for real life and relationships? Hardly.

We need to make relational studies a central element of being an educated person in this society. We need to make isolation less common, strengthen the social fabric of our communities, and make the long-term relational health of “our” kids our highest priority. Schools and families can and should unite in that vision.

The **final** elements that are key to family are commitment and stability. Long term investment in an institution leads stakeholders to make different decisions - they tend to pursue their own self-interest less, and consider the health and viability of the whole. Currently in education reform, we are pursuing policies that create “free agents” out of teachers. With the end of tenure, the rise of charter schools and ideas like differentiated pay, we are suggesting to teachers that they might switch into a business / corporate mindset and simply pursue their own self-interest. Teachers will be one of the last categories of workers to break out of their “institutional” mindset and join the grand “talent shuffle” that is so common in other fields. These reforms are touted as ways to get rid of weak teachers, but I wonder if many people have considered what fundamental shift it is creating among all teachers.

We need to pursue policies that will attract the best teachers we can to the classroom, and we need them to stay there, at that school if at all possible, for a very long time. It took me about ten years to become a good teacher - to know my subject, to understand the developmental level of my students, to understand the community context of the school. It takes considerable time to build trust and understand the personalities of your colleagues so you can collaborate and know where they are coming from. Teachers that are committed to a specific school sit in meetings with a different mindset – they are invested in the decisions that are being made. They buy spirit wear in the school colors, their reputation is intertwined with their school. They teach siblings, they get to know families – they care deeply. And students can see that, they sense that, and that is a very different dynamic than the one we are creating through most educational reforms today. Students want to know that their teachers are invested in the long-term well-being of the school family, just as they seek stability and commitment from their parents.

So, we need to pick up a new set of lenses to see our schools. Let us set down the business frames, and pick up the family mindset. Let us remember the primary job of our schools: to nurture children, to help them come to know themselves and others so they might better understand the world they are inheriting, and let's be sure they are in the hands of committed adults that have their long-term interests in mind. Loved, nurtured, accepted and secure people can figure out most problems together. Strong families always do.

Make our schools more like strong families, and they will serve us, and our future, well.