

Winning, Losing . . . and How You Play the Game

I've always been bothered by critics' declarations that education is too process-oriented and not sufficiently student-centered. On the contrary, I've observed that student-centeredness already is the cause of some of education's most serious management problems.

For example, a common criterion and unstated belief underlies most decisions in educational practice -- *this is what's best for the kids*. The separate acts of teachers, administrators, and board members alike are driven by their personal views of what's best for children. Unfortunately, the potential power of this common focus becomes instead a fundamental weakness when decisions are made in isolation, with no way to take advantage of relationships to others who share the same goal.

The work of schools has been student-centered in the same way that the work of a basketball team might be called "hoop-centered." The success of the whole team (organization) is tied directly to success in putting the ball through the hoop.

But imagine a team in which the centers, forwards and guards each were trained separately, and each provided with opportunities to individually practice the necessary decisions and moves for putting the ball through the hoop every time. What would happen when they came back together to play a real game?

Because of their "hoop-centeredness," each would attempt to shoot directly for the basket every time he or she got the ball. It would be relatively quiet on the court, too. There isn't a need for very much talk, especially when you don't really trust the others. How can you trust those you don't know?

The result: many cases of individual "success," but a team that most often would lose the game. Would you play on a team like that . . .

- Where each player is an isolated goal-seeker?
- Where the conditions of the game limit you to your own skills and experience?
- Where continuing improvement is difficult because there is little connection between practicing and playing the game?
- Where there's no collaboration and sense of joint accomplishment?

Look around you! If you're a teacher alone in a classroom . . . a principal in a building . . . a superintendent in a district -- each day making singular decisions you believe to be in the best interests of children -- you're already in that game.

- You've been trained with peers in non-game settings;
- You play on a "court" where talk among the players is infrequent and not part of playing the game;
- There are few opportunities between "games" to learn from mistakes and develop new "game plans; and
- You usually end up shooting for the basket *alone*.

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What can you do to convince your other team members, and their "fans," that there is a connection between winning, losing, and how you play the game?

How can you convince them that if 85% of the losses come from breakdowns in relationships among the players; just recruiting and training "better" players won't solve the team's problem?

And how are you going to convince them that you will have to make many of your improvements on the court--while the game is underway. Will your fans understand and allow you the time to improve from experience? Will they believe you are still "hoop-centered" while you are learning how to play together? Remember, your fans think every action you take must influence the ball going through the hoop. Otherwise, you're not playing the game. But while you're fixing the relationships among your processes you may not look like you are very hoop-centered.

Finally, will they recognize that there are no finite, "final scores" in your game; that the purpose of the game of schooling is to develop the capability to continue to play?

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June, 1992