



FROM ZERO TOLERANCE TO A CULTURE OF CARE

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A FEW MONTHS AGO A JOURNALIST phoned me, asking for my reaction to a story about a kindergarten child in Ontario facing expulsion for hugging and kissing some of his classmates.¹ Apparently the parents of the children at the receiving end of his affection were not complaining, but the behaviour was seen as contravening the *Ontario Safe Schools Act* – protecting children from sexual harassment. Zero tolerance in action! I responded that if the story was accurate, it was an example of “a system gone berserk.” Policies of this sort counteract what we hope to cultivate in schools: caring for one another, applauding differences, and creating community.

Zero tolerance policies stem from the culture of fear that pervades many schools today – fear of violence, bullying, and unruly behaviour. The code of

conduct is clearly spelled out and if students disobey, the retribution is swift – usually suspension or expulsion. The rules are designed to apply equally to everyone, irrespective of age, gender, cultural background, personal characteristics, parental influence, or school experiences. Under the guise of “equity,” zero tolerance policies are, in fact, inequitable, inhospitable and discriminatory. They contravene what we hold dear as educators and as a society. Further, they are ineffective on a number of fronts.

I find the concept of zero tolerance oddly out of place in a public school system and jarring to my sensibilities as an educator. It is much more suited to the culture from which it came – the U.S. military, where conformity and control are paramount. The fact that it found its way into the school

system and became lodged there is intriguing to me. Yes, schools are large institutions that need to manage the flow of students and socialize them into appropriate behaviour. But at the same time teachers are taught to promote creativity, encourage individuality, foster independence and self-control, and create an environment where each student flourishes. Teachers recognize that children come from various cultures and backgrounds, with different parental and community influences, that each classroom of students has its own unique characteristics, and that these are to be appreciated, not squeezed into a common mould. Zero tolerance policies do the opposite; they fail to recognize individual differences and the context in which behaviour occurs.

“HERE IS THE RULE; YOU KNEW ABOUT IT; YOU BROKE IT; YOU’RE GONE”.

We live in a society rooted in the values of tolerance, respect for others, diversity, and even forgiveness. Do zero tolerance policies reflect these values? I think not. Instead they legitimize intolerance towards children who, as result of their family circumstances, life experiences, and/or learning frustrations, are unable to follow the rules – and therefore must leave. Exclusion is the punishment associated with zero tolerance – exclusion from an education, from adults who could exert a positive influence, from peers, and from the community of the school.

Even our legal system recognizes the context of behaviour, factors that precipitated an action, and the best interest of youth. Redemption of youth is the primary goal, not punishment. Under the law, youth are entitled to a knowledgeable advocate to act on their behalf and a hearing where their perspective is heard and given weight. Power does not rest solely with the adults who judge and sentence at the same time. There is no “one size fits all” process or sentence. Further, the legal system is accountable to wider principles, reflected in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The school system is not so generous: “Here is the rule; you knew about it; you broke it; you’re gone.”

I have other problems with zero tolerance policies.

Such policies assume that, if a rule

EN BREF Les politiques de tolérance zéro sont le résultat d’une culture de la peur – peur de la violence, de l’intimidation, de l’indiscipline – qui est omniprésente dans de nombreuses écoles. Or, comment expliquer que ce phénomène existe dans une société ancrée dans les valeurs de la tolérance, du respect d’autrui, de la diversité, voire même du pardon. Les politiques de tolérance zéro légitiment l’intolérance à l’égard de l’enfant qui, en raison de ses circonstances familiales, de son vécu et des frustrations qu’il éprouve dans son apprentissage est incapable de suivre les règles. En outre, elles ne sont pas efficaces. Les études sur la compassion nous donnent des indices utiles sur la manière de susciter une culture scolaire qui cherche à inclure plutôt qu’à exclure ces enfants, et qui neutralise de façon efficace leur comportement intimidant et perturbateur.

is spelled out and the consequences are dire, the behaviour is less likely to recur. This assumes that cognition precedes behaviour, and that students knowingly choose to misbehave. For example, in many schools, if a student uses the “F” word, he or she is disciplined, and if the swearing continues, suspended. Yet, for some children,

swearing is part of the vocabulary of their household. Will a rule with strict consequences change this behaviour? Not likely. It will remove the child from others so they don’t have to hear it, but at what cost to the child? What about the kissing example I gave earlier? Will expulsion change this child’s behaviour, or is the rule itself wrong?

They get further behind in their studies and return even more frustrated. They are labeled by teachers and peers as troublemakers, a stigma that often carries into subsequent years with negative consequences. Further, they are denied an opportunity to adapt their behaviour within the context of the school environment.

Zero tolerance policies also rest on the assumption that education is a privilege that can be taken away. The public school becomes a place where only certain kinds of children are welcome. Such policies reflect a tone of moral superiority and blindness to the fact that behaviour is a socially constructed concept. Further, they ignore the fact that the school itself might have contributed to the behaviour.

I have been researching youth who



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What about more serious forms of behaviour, like bullying or violence towards other students? Does the threat of punishment, such as removal from school, curtail acts of violence? Evidence from the criminal justice system is clear: the death penalty does not reduce the number of murders. It is naïve to assume that harsh penalties moderate behaviour, and even more preposterous to assume that a punishment model teaches respectful behaviour towards others. Attitudinal and behavioural change requires a much different approach.

The zero tolerance model assumes that when a child is removed from school, he or she will repent from wrongdoing and return to school a changed person. But what really happens when children are excluded?

have been expelled from school due to zero tolerance policies and have finally found safety in a novel program that embraces their uniqueness and welcomes them into the learning family.² Each of these students comes from a disruptive family environment, often compounded by poverty and abuse. Many of them also have diagnosed learning challenges, and all are on probation for criminal activity. Interestingly, although these students reported that they were labeled early in their schooling as “problem kids,” and, as they got older, were suspended or expelled for negative behaviour, at no time, in their view, did anyone do anything to help them. Sometimes they were sent home to parents who beat them for disobeying the school rules. Other times, they wandered the streets, getting in further trouble and

avoiding school because of embarrassment and feeling excluded. These students talked about wanting to be accepted at school and hoping that teachers would respect them, get to know them, and help them.

These “problem kids” walk among us at school. Children who hurt and who need our protection and care, not our judgment. Children who have few (or no) positive role models in their lives. A recent study in British Columbia schools by the McCreary Society revealed that one in five adolescents reports being abused, physically or sexually. Abused youth are more likely to have experienced violence in their lives, to be involved in fights themselves, to do poorly in school, and to feel less attached to their school. Students already labeled as behaviour problems because of their tumultuous life circumstances and their learning difficulties are the ones most often subjected to zero tolerance policies. Suspending these students for misbehaviour does nothing to help them; it shifts the responsibility for their care to other sectors of society, and it communicates a message to all students that it is acceptable to ostracize and further marginalize those who don't fit.

many years, relied on external methods of control to shape and contain students – rules and structures, or the purchase of canned programs – rather than creating a holistic culture where relationships are paramount, the hierarchical structure is flattened, and students and staff work out the solutions together in the daily tussles of school life.

The ethic of care literature offers some insightful clues for building a school culture that embraces rather than excludes children, and effectively counteracts bullying and disruptive behaviour.⁴ Modeling, practice, dialogue and confirmation lie at the heart of the ethic of care. As teachers, school administrators, and support staff model and practice care with each other and with students, find spaces for students to practice caring, make dialogue around care central, and confirm caring when observed, these working principles act as a powerful catalyst for moral development. They emphasize engaging all players in the school (including parents) to build a positive culture of care, rather than reacting to perceived negatives in the environment. The students that I've been researching say that they want teachers and principals who



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Notes

- 1 Sarah Schmidt, “Kisses Land Five-year-old in Hot Water,” *National Post*, 13 September 2004, A5.
- 2 Wanda Cassidy and Anita Bates, “Drop-outs’ and ‘Push-outs’: Finding Hope at a School that Actualizes the Ethic of Care.” Accepted for publication in the *American Journal of Education* 112, no. 1 (2005). The school reported in this study is Whytecliff Education Centre; see www.focusbc.org
- 3 Ontario Human Rights Commission, “An Intersectionality Approach to Discrimination,” Discussion Paper, available at www.ohrc.on.ca/english/consultations/intersectionality-discussion-paper.shtml
- 4 Wanda Cassidy and Heather McAllister, “Transforming Schools Through the Ethic of Care: Results of a Study of Educators who have Embraced and Enacted Care” (paper presented at the 9th annual Values and Leadership Conference, Barbados, West Indies. 30 September 2004).
- 5 Parker J. Palmer, “Learning Communities: Reweaving the Culture of Disconnection,” *Washington Center News* (May, 2000).

SO IF WE ABANDON THE ZERO TOLERANCE PHILOSOPHY, WHAT CHOICES REMAIN?

A strong case also can be made that zero tolerance policies contravene the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, as they unduly discriminate against a sector of society that already faces discrimination. The Supreme Court seems to be saying that when children experience multiple levels of discrimination, multiple levels of protection should be offered, rather than equal application of school rules and policies.³

So if we abandon the zero tolerance philosophy, what choices remain to create the kind of school that reflects our vision and values and contributes to the well being of all students? What policies and practices are effective in re-directing students who act out, bully, fight or disrupt the school community?

The solutions are both simple and challenging. Simple, because they must come from within and grow out of our values and beliefs about children, learning, and community. Challenging, because schools have, for too

“listen,” “don't judge,” “are a friend,” “worry about me,” and “go beyond the boundaries of what you're supposed to be doing ... to help the person learn, because if not, the kid will say, ‘Oh, they're giving up on me, so I might as well give up on myself.’”

Parker Palmer encourages educators to value each child: “I believe that we educators hold in our hands the power to form, or deform, students' souls, their sense of self and their relation to the world. The world is badly served by a system of education that disconnects people from each other, from their own hearts, and from their own knowledge.”⁵ Lest one think that care is a weak concept, with no teeth and little effect, it is known to break apart existing structures, revolutionize teaching and learning, and profoundly affect school culture. Caring moves us away from mechanistic ways of dealing with children – like zero tolerance policies – that are hurtful to them, to ourselves and to society. |

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