

## The Fork Debate

My husband and I argue over forks. Specifically, we argue over the direction the forks should point in the dishwasher. Tines up, I assert, results in an assured poke in the hand when one (usually me) reaches into the dishwasher to unload. Tines down, he responds, leads to dirty forks, food poisoning and, ultimately, death. After thirteen years of this argument, one would assume that we would have worked it out by now. Come to some kind of compromise. Agreed to disagree and moved on.

Nope. The fork debate rages on, re-surfacing in times of stress, de-escalating when things are running smoothly.

In my work as a school coach, I spend much of my time mediating conflicts between teachers, administrators, parents and students. We discuss food in the classrooms, hats in the building, and students without pencils. In the midst of powerful conversations about teaching and learning, we suddenly find ourselves hijacked by a discussion of this issue in its latest incarnation.

*“Why do we have this rule if we’re just going to ignore it?”*

*“It’s just a matter of common courtesy.”*

*“I don’t care what the rule is, I’m not going to waste time on a hat.”*

*“I’m going to fail him if he shows up without a pencil again.”*

*“The administration needs to clamp down on this.”*

*“If a kid is hungry, how can he learn?”*

Sometimes I must admit to wanting to scream. To make proclamations like, “From now on, hats can be left on in the building and food is welcome in all classrooms. Now, can we just move on for Pete’s sake?” But I don’t. Partially because it isn’t my place to make these decisions- I’m not a part of this community- and partially because this kind of unilateral decision-making is completely contrary to the democratic practice I’m attempting to model. Mostly, though, because I keep reminding myself that we’re not arguing over forks. Or food. Or hats.

We’re arguing about power. About consistency. About priorities. We’re trying to discuss the Big Issues but we’re afraid to name them so we bicker about minutiae. We fall into the safe arguments that no one will ever win but which will surely fill the time allotted, ensuring that we can return to our classrooms, our departments and our homes. We’ll talk it over in the hallways and in the bathrooms and the parking lots- with our friends, our allies. We’ll say things like “you know, the real problem is...” and “I just wish someone would realize that...” but we’ll only say them to the people with whom we feel safe, never questioning why we don’t feel safe with our colleagues.

We know, deep down, that we'll never resolve the hat issue because we're not talking about hats. We're really talking about respect- about modeling it, about expecting it from our students- and we're caught in a chicken-and-egg battle over whose respect (student or teacher) needs to come first. We won't resolve the food issue because we're really talking about rules that exist on the books but which don't serve the higher purpose of the school. We're really talking about that lack of a higher purpose, or a mission rather than a mission statement.

But, the problem is, we're not. We're talking about hats. Over and over and over again. We blame hats- or food, or pencils- for the problems we face. And we don't talk about the real issues because, if we identify the Big Issues, if we acknowledge them and discuss them, then we can't go back to pretending that the problem is really kids who wear hats in the hallways. We can't "un-know" that which we have named. If we're really going to talk about why kids need to eat in class, then we have to break the silence around the issue of poverty and inequity. We have to open the Pandora's Box that is "our kids don't have enough to eat," and "our school breakfasts and lunches don't offer any real nutrition," and "we've sold our pedagogical souls to the soda companies in exchange for our cut of the take." We don't want to open up that box. We prefer to stay safely ensconced in our ignorance, putting mountains of energy into talking about nothing at all. We appear busy- we **are** busy. But what are we busy at? Nothing of substance, that's for certain.

What will it take for us to engage in the real discussions of the Big Issues? What are we waiting for? Whose permission do we need? What, exactly, are we afraid of?

I think we're afraid because, as Marianne Williamson writes, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure." We're safe if our conversations stay small. We hide in the notion of powerlessness. We spend our time and energy on things that are seemingly simple (to eat or not to eat?), leaving the bigger issues for later. We assume that our circles of influence, our energies, are most appropriately focused on these small issues- that they are the purview of Someone Else. "What if?" is a scary question to ask ourselves. What if as Nancy Mohr used to say, "The wisdom is in this room?" What if we have the answers in us and are just too afraid to look for them? What if we really are powerful beyond measure? What if we're letting our fear keep us from doing that which we absolutely must do- should have done years ago?

The short answer is that kids stay hungry. They lack basic supplies. And, more importantly, they lack a sense of what it is to recognize and use their power as citizens. They don't learn what it is to be wisely powerful because we refuse to show them. They learn to pour their energies into petty battles rather than into real civic engagement.

We are missing out on that educational equivalent of lightning in a bottle- the teachable moment. We have all of the components for powerful learning communities, now we must build them through real, meaningful work. We must dig into these real issues with

all of the energy we currently invest in the “fork” issues in our schools. We must recognize that we hold more power than we recognize. We must ask the difficult questions over and over again. We must begin to build learning communities marked by democracy, respectful disagreement and assumption of positive intent. We must model for our students what it is to be a member of a community, what it is to be a citizen. We must shine a light in the corners of the box, pull all of the messy issues out, sort them, discuss them, wrangle with them, and ultimately, find a way around, over or through them.

In these times of increasing political partisanship, isn't it time for us to teach our students that to look deeply into the well of our own shortcomings is the only solution to those shortcomings? How long will we maintain our charade of infallibility, our blameless collective personae? The greatest gift we can give our students- and ourselves- is the acknowledgement that things **aren't** okay- and won't be okay even if we build a school in which no one wears a hat, everyone has a pencil, and nary a snickers bar or apple is to be found outside of the cafeteria.

So while the fork battle may continue in perpetuity in my kitchen, my husband and I recognize it for what it is- an indicator of our stress levels during tough times. We do not, however, really believe that we'll get anywhere with the battle itself. On our 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, I'm sure we'll still be debating the relative merits of tines up vs. tines down. We also know, however, that we have to discuss the real issues that emerge in every family, that we have to name them and make plans to deal with them.

Let's hope our colleagues throughout the educational community can do the same.

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