A Child at Risk

Theodore Bradley

More rigor without more love will not make schools better.

I looked with horror at the paper my son had brought home. His flippant reaction to its devastating message denied its impact on him. "It's okay," he said. "No big deal." Then he walked away. I sat down and stared at the paper.

"WRONG." That's all it said—"WRONG." The word was written in huge letters across the entire center of the paper. Beneath it was a picture of a spaceship. My six-year-old's job had been to color the page accurately, and he failed. His crayon had strayed beyond the lines that were to contain it. Even worse, he had scribbled the colors on the paper. No soft shades or dark shades—just lines made by the hand of a little boy seemingly in a great hurry to be finished.

"Well, it's not such a bad thing," his kindergarten teacher explained when I called to ask about that "wrong." "It's just that neatness *is* important, and *that* was the purpose of the exercise. I think Matthew's real problem is that he's in too much of a hurry to get through with coloring so he can go play."

"Oh," I responded, "he gets to play when he's done coloring?"

"Yes," she replied. Then, guessing my next move, she added, "but he has to learn to do his work well before he plays."

"Of course," I genuinely agreed. "I can understand, though, how at this point in time Matthew would be much more interested in joining group fun than in working alone." It was only a month since we had enrolled Matthew in this new school. He had been happy and well-loved in the school that my new job caused him to leave. Now he

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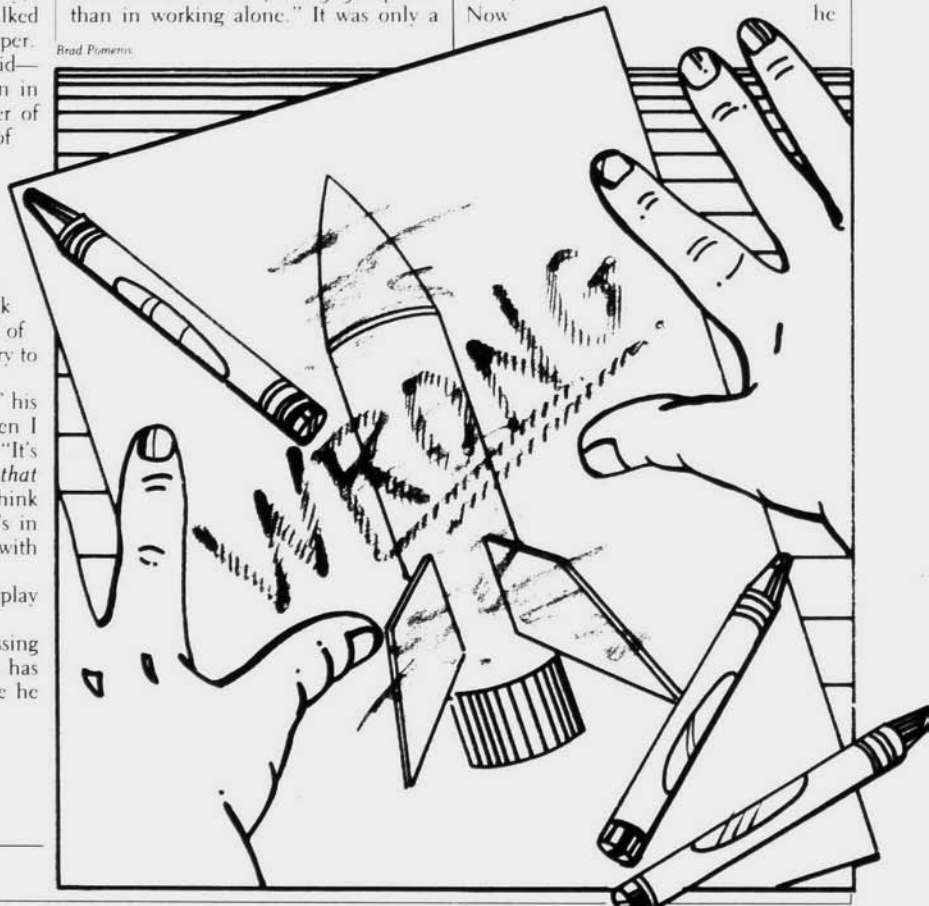

Theodore Bradley is a pseudonym.

was hurting in that silent, unconscious way that parents recognize and feel guilty about.

"Sure," the teacher said in a seemingly sympathetic tone.

"I'll talk with him and see if I can help him understand the importance of attending to his assignments before he rushes off to play," I said. "Are you having any other problems with Matthew?"

"No. He's not a bad boy," she replied in a tone that sounded more deciding than decided. "He just needs to settle down a bit."

Matthew and I talked. (Or rather, I talked—he wrung his hands and shuffled his feet and looked around the room, desperately trying to avoid criticism while passing the time until I finished.) I told him I knew it must be hard for him to learn how to please a new teacher and make new friends and blah, blah, blah. But he needed to do what his teacher said. Then I hugged him and he ran away and I felt like I'd done my fatherly duty.

This time the note on the paper said, "This is all Matthew got finished during the ENTIRE period." Matthew handed it to me and ran to his room. I called his teacher. "What happened?" I pleaded.

"Nothing that bad," she said in a way that diminished and denied the badness both Matthew and I were feeling. "It's just that he brought his little crayons to school today. During coloring he took them out one at a time and spent what seemed like an interminably long time coloring each balloon on his paper. A couple of times I told him to hurry up because he wouldn't finish in time if he spent too long at that task."

"I'll talk with him," I said dully and shortly ended the conversation.

"What happened today?" I asked Matthew later.

"Nothing."

"You didn't get your work done. Why?"

"I was trying to be careful." His voice quivered on the verge of crying. I looked at his paper and noticed the balloons were colored perfectly. There wasn't a mark outside the lines. On each balloon the border was colored darkly and the inside was shaded softly with the same color.

"Why did you take your own crayons to school?" I asked him.

With a rush of emotion, desperation, and frustration, he explained, "Because I can't stay in the lines with the fat ones I have to use at school." I tried to hug him. I wanted him to cry and I wanted to comfort him, but he struggled away. To him, I was a part of this grown-up conspiracy of frustration. To him we were all playing Catch 22 with his young life—don't hurry, take time, and finish your work . . . as long as you hurry, don't take too much time, and finish your work. Precision is important, but not if it interferes with the agenda.

I was very angry. I wanted him to know that I felt his teacher was being unfair to him. Yet I felt I could hurt him by telling him of my anger. So I decided to tell his teacher.

"You know, lots of parents side with their children against teachers," I imagined her saying in her own defense. "What would you have me do? The world is not a fun place all the time. Children must learn to do things that are unpleasant, and they must learn to conform."

She would speak the truth to me, and I knew it. Yet I also knew that Matthew wanted to please her so very much, and she wasn't letting him. In fact, she was teaching him that he *couldn't* please her. More, she was teaching him that unpleasantness was associated with learning. He was learning that he must do his homework to get his star . . . that he must round his *w* or it would be marked "wrong" . . . that he must color carefully but not slowly . . . that he had to practice what he's bad at, not do what he's good at.

So I didn't call her. After all, he had to learn to deal with teachers, homework, and red marks on his papers. That's life—and, as my wife pointed out, we have another child who'll be in her class, and we wouldn't want the teacher to take it out on either of them.

That night Matthew and I sat in his bedroom awaiting his drowsiness, talking about nothing. "What's 4 times 6?" he asked.

"You try to figure it out," I responded.

We played this game often. "It's the same as 6 times 4," he began. "That's the same as 6 plus 6 plus 6 plus 6. That's the same as 12 plus 12." Then his fingers came out and he quietly counted for a few seconds. He looked at me and offered "24?" without commitment.

"Fantastic!" I yelled. Then I tickled him and he laughed and we settled back down.

"Are there 40 quarters in $10.00?" he asked, smiling. He immediately guarded his ribs, knowing he was right and knowing the tickling that would follow. We went on like that for some time, answering riddles like, "What's 10 to the zeroith power? How many years is it until the year 2001? How many zeros in a million? How much is a trillion times a trillion?" until it was time for lights out.

Returning to the living room, I thought about his report card, which indicated he could count to 15 "satisfactorily." I thought of the other skills the card said it was important for a six-year-old to know. I thought about the tortures he faced as he tried desperately to do what others—those he needed to trust—told him was important. Before it's all over he'll probably have to learn how to quit thinking about rocks, coins, numbers, and other objects of wonder and excitement so that he can learn how to concentrate on his coloring, counting, and the other important things in life.□

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