

An Interview with William Glasser, M.D.

Interviewed by Thomas G. Nelson

William Glasser, M.D. is the author of numerous books including, Schools Without Failure, Reality Therapy, The Quality School, Choice Theory, Counseling Using Choice Theory, Every Student Can Succeed, and his most recent, Unhappy Teenagers. He is director of the William Glasser Institute in Chatsworth, California. He was interviewed for Teacher Education Quarterly by Thomas G. Nelson, a professor in the Benerd School of Education at the University of the Pacific and editor of the journal.

William Glasser, M.D. served as the keynote speaker at the recent California Council on Teacher Education Spring Conference in San Jose on April 11, 2002. Prior to that event, I had had the pleasure of meeting with him on several occasions over the past year and a half with the intent of completing an interview for publication in *Teacher Education Quarterly*. The following is the result of many hours spent in conversation about schooling, education, and specifically the role of teacher educators in preparing teachers to work in contemporary schools.

Tom Nelson: In your recent book, Every Student Can Succeed, and I believe throughout much of your work, you use the term "schooling" in a very specific way. Would you please explain what you mean by the term schooling and its relationship with the concept of education. In other words, how would you characterize the difference between schooling and education?

William Glasser: I have to go back and explain what I think is a big deficiency in the schools. If we had in

this room a hundred teachers, good teachers from good schools, and asked them to define the word education, there would be very little general agreement. I think it is totally wrong and terribly harmful if education is defined as acquiring knowledge. You can acquire a lot of knowledge without ever going to school. I think education is both using and improving knowledge and that changes the whole picture. If we look at all the tests given in high school at any week during the course of the year, we will find that 90 to 95 percent of the test questions are questions where students have memorized something prior to the test and showed that they have acquired the knowledge at least for the duration of the test.

Charles Schultz, who was a great friend of mine, said, “the difference between an A student and an F student, is that the A student remembers until five minutes after the test, the F student until five minutes before the test.” So, we need to start understanding the difference between what I call factual knowledge and educational knowledge, and we don’t focus much on educational knowledge. We don’t focus as much in schools on educational knowledge which requires thinking and application, as we do on acquiring facts. This is important because the system now that we have is terribly discriminatory against students who don’t come from families where they are wealthy or their education is valued at home. Kids from poor families or poor backgrounds like A’s as much as anybody else, but early in their career, by second or third grade, they give up on the idea that they’ll ever get them and therefore we are killing them off on something that isn’t even important, memorizing facts. In a Glasser Quality School there is no such thing as a closed book test. Students are told to get out their notes and open their books. There is no such thing as being forbidden to ask the teacher or another student for help. Now schooling, to get back to your question, schooling is basically 98 percent factual knowledge and so schooling is that what you’re asked to learn in school and punished for not learning, that no one in the real world would ever ask you to know. There is no job any place you can go where they are going to ask you something you can’t find out and say, “oh, you don’t know four questions, sorry you are going to get an F.” I’m saying that school is flawed because in the real world there is really much more education going on than in school. Workers are told, “please don’t memorize facts, look them up, use a calculator, or ask someone.” For example, the secret of surgery is not knowing it’s a heart, it’s in knowing what to do to fix the heart’s malfunction, and schools miss that totally when they ask students to memorize facts without using them. Schooling doesn’t promote critical thinking, it only requires students to parrot back what teachers tell them.

TN: In your book, Every Student Can Succeed, on page 131, you make the statement that “Emphasis on using what has been learned is not a common school experience, even though it’s been the core of learning since the beginning of time.” What is it that you believe ought to be at the heart of a common school experience?

WG: I think that there is such a thing as competence. As long as acquiring knowledge is the educational goal of schools, educational opportunities will be limited, as they are now, to affluent families. Poor students don't memorize or do homework. Changing that definition to education is using knowledge and backing that up with all classroom work and tests focused on doing this is the way to upgrade the low grade system we have now. What we are doing is a vivid example of why the extracurricular activities are so successful and our classes so unsuccessful. All extracurricular activities reflect the use of knowledge, never just the acquiring and regurgitating that now extend into many of the classes that prepare teachers to teach: a tragic example of the blind leading the blind. What students lack in school is an intellectual relationship or conversation with the teacher. We can spend billions of dollars. We can train our teachers a thousand times better than how we're training them now. We can pay teachers a hundred thousand dollars a year, and we'll do nothing to improve our schools as long as we keep the A, B, C, D, F grading system. Now we're getting down to the heart of education, which our schools don't even touch right now. Every single major push in education has made it worse and right now it's really bad because everything we've done is de-humanizing education. It's destroying the possibility of the teacher and the student having a warm, friendly, intellectual relationship. This is at the heart of all good education, where the teacher asks students to think and engages them in encouraging dialogues, constantly checking for understanding and growth.

TN: What do you believe are some of the most important issues facing teachers today in America's classrooms?

WG: There are two vital issues that teacher educators are not addressing. The first is to teach prospective teachers how to relate to their students so that the students feel the teachers *care about them and respect them*. Without pay, no human being will work up to their ability if he or she is not cared for and respected. The second is how to teach prospective teachers to introduce the concept of competency into their classrooms. No human being will work hard at anything unless they believe that they are working for competence. The first will only be possible if the prospective teacher is taught to use *choice theory* in his or her classroom to replace the external control theory that is used now. The second can only be achieved through getting rid of all grades below B and making grades above A possible. No credit but a lot of help to get credit will be offered to any student who does not do competent work. These two standards presently exist in all schools in the extracurricular activities. Students enrolled in these want to do competent or higher work and don't expect to be allowed to continue in the activity if they are incompetent. The model is in place. We have to extend it to the curriculum, but especially to the way we teach by eliminating schooling.

TN: If you were in charge of making policy decisions about how schools are

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operated, what would you suggest we do differently? What do you believe schools ought to look like?

WG: If I were in charge I'd follow my book, *Every Student Can Succeed*. The schools would look like the ten Glasser Quality Schools listed in that book. They are doing what I suggested in the previous question. All students are succeeding, they love school, and there are no discipline problems. The teachers have been taught to do this by reading this and other Glasser books in classes taught by the William Glasser Institute. It would be much easier for teacher educators to do this because they get the prospective teachers first before they have taught the wrong way for years and they have much more time to practice these skills. The William Glasser Institute is prepared to teach teacher educators how to do this. See Appendix of *Every Student Can Succeed*. I would love to be invited to speak at other teacher educator meetings or visit colleges and universities. We have a whole training program available to anyone who is interested.

TN: Considering these ideas about what schools should look like, what do teachers need to be knowledgeable about prior to entering the profession?

WG: Prior to being allowed to enter the profession, prospective teachers should be asked to talk with a group of friendly students for at least half an hour and be able to engage them in an interesting conversation about any subject the prospective teacher wants to talk about. If after a lot of help in learning the ideas in *Every Student Can Succeed*, the prospective teacher doesn't have the human relationship skill to do this, he or she should be counseled to enter another profession. Before they go to their first education class, they should be alerted to this minimum requirement. We can teach a lot of things, but if the teacher can't relate by talking to a group of friendly students, he'll never be a competent teacher.

TN: We know that schools tend to create competitive environments. However, throughout your work you talk about school environments that emphasize cooperation and "competence for everyone." How can we, as professional educators, begin to think differently about not only the purpose of schools, but the organizational structures that support them as well?

WG: There is plenty of competition in a Glasser Quality School in that there is winning but no losing. The competition is for how far above competence the student chooses to go. That's the same competition that exists in the extracurricular activities now. I played first trumpet in the high school band. I was competent and felt fine. I realized I wasn't talented enough or didn't want to work hard enough to become solo trumpet. The competence based classroom I advocate works fine in practice. Students like it because it is a win-win situation where competence is the floor and there is no ceiling. They can all achieve their own personal best and go as high as they want. The organizational structures in place now are part of the

problem. Changing the system means giving up the way things have always been done that are no longer working. I offer ideas to change the system that I believe will help all students succeed.

TN: What ideas would you introduce into the policy conversation around teacher preparation?

WG: I don't think any of my ideas are drastic. I learned most of them from observing good teachers. The only seemingly drastic idea is getting rid of Cs, Ds and Fs. People worry that many students would be held back. But, in practice, it works just the opposite. Told that the passing grade is a B or competence and that we will help you to get there, students do competent work. The lowest passing grade in the real world is competence. Why do schools accept so much less?

TN: So, what do you think about the current emphasis on high stakes standardized testing?

WG: Standardized tests now are based on being satisfied with scores that are less than competent. Competence on these tests are a fair measure for any school that wants to declare itself a Glasser Quality School. When every student succeeds, the standardized tests are easily passed. Our Glasser Quality K-8 school in Boulder, Colorado, was first in the state in mathematics and science. They don't use special test preparation. The education they get every day of the school year is preparation enough. They are getting an education and if you get an education, and you feel you are a competent person, which they do, they are going to do well on the tests. If students get a real education where they are intellectually involved, where they have to show how they use the knowledge or improve the knowledge, they'll do fine on these tests. But if we think that improving the test scores is equivalent to improving education, I'd say that there is only a small correlation. If you improve education by teaching for competence, eliminating schooling, and connecting with students, the test scores will improve.

TN: We know that one of the stated purposes of the public school system is to foster understanding of democracy and citizenship. What role should schools and school curricula play, for instance, in the issue of promoting democratic ideals and social justice and equity?

WG: Running a school where the students all succeed, even if some students have to help others to make the grade, is good preparation for democracy. But in a Glasser Quality School, nothing is done without a discussion of how we can get the most out of the school day and what we are willing to do for ourselves and others to accomplish this. This is what democracy is all about—living it as well as studying it.

TN: How can we think more productively about the relationship between the school and the community at large?

WG: Involving student in community problems by explaining what the problems are and asking them what they are willing to do to help. Students as well as all people feel good about themselves when they contribute to the solutions of problems and see results because of the effort they made.

TN: I've read in your books and heard you speak of the "seven deadly habits."

WG: If you use external control psychology which is "I know what is right for you and I'm going to change you," it will harm your relationships. Of the seven deadly habits, criticizing is the most dangerous. Do students get criticized in school? Yes, tremendous amounts of criticism, more than any other place in the world, because of the age differential. Adults criticize kids. Parents criticize their children, but not as much as they usually get in school. The second is blaming, the third is complaining, the fourth is nagging, the fifth is threatening, the sixth is punishing, and the seventh is punishing by rewards, and I call it rewarding to control. Now the problem with these habits, because they are so present in school, and even if you used the competency based classroom and all the things I've said up until now, these habits will destroy your school as well as your ability to educate, because they destroy relationships. Students who don't feel connected and competent will not succeed in school. The seven deadly habits result in resistance which leads to disconnection.

TN: Let me give you the opportunity to say anything you want to say right now to the teacher education profession.

WG: My message to the world is that we have no hope for anything that we want as long as we continue to use external control psychology. We teach it not only in classrooms, but parents and grandparents teach it to their children. As long as we have external control psychology as the psychology of the world, there is absolutely no hope to improve the world. We, as teachers, may not be able to change the world, but we can change our schools. Getting rid of external control in schools is the change we need. I offer Choice Theory to replace it. Teachers who have chosen to use what I teach have told me over the years that their classrooms are more need-satisfying places not only for their students but for themselves.