

Richard Rodriguez and the working class student



Richard Rodriguez deserves a great deal of credit for bringing a humanist approach to looking at education. While most treatises on the effects of education and the school system on youth is presented in an anti-septic, clinical manner, Rodriguez provides the valuable personal experiences required for truly gaining an emotional response from the reader and, hence, a more deeper understanding of how education effects children from certain backgrounds.

In particular, Rodriguez invests a great deal of his writing on the subject of working class students. (Imagine John Lennon's song " Working Class Hero" directed at grade school students with a touch of sociology and you have Rodriguez's opus) While it would be fair to say that Rodriguez often over generalizes his impressions of children in school;

Because he tempers his observations with poignant reflections from his own childhood, his writing becomes significantly compelling and the generalities can be somewhat overlooked.

In order to understand Rodriguez's themes and theories, it becomes important to critically examine his writings. Since much of what he is basing his opinion on is based on his own autobiographical musings, it becomes doubly important that we examine those text references to his childhood.

Perhaps the most important (and poignant) message he states in regards to this is found in the following excerpt: " A primary reason for my success in the class was that I couldn't forget that schooling was changing me and separating me from my life before I was a student."

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In this quote, we see that Rodriguez clearly considers the home life of a student and the schooling of a student to be two separate worlds that the same individual exists within. In other words, school starts to become a huge preoccupation in a student's life that involves the encoding and decoding of information.

Since school removes a student from his or her home life and provides various knowledge and experience that is removed from the home life, the student begins to develop an "evolved" personality based on knowledge.

In other words, it becomes impossible for the student to develop a home persona and a school persona. If the student takes a strong aptitude in schooling, then the school persona is what will become the dominant, primary personality at the exclusion of the home life.

Rodriguez further develops this concept by drawing comparisons to Hoggart's ideologies on the difference between home life and schooling with particular attention to how the effects of schooling on a working class child will lead to something of a minor rejection of working class beliefs and values. Hence, a schism from his or her previously respected home life.

Rodriguez, paraphrasing Hoggart, notes the following: "The scholarship boy reaches a different conclusion. He can not afford to admire his parents.

He permits himself embarrassment at their lack of education. And to evade the life of nostalgia he has lost, he concentrates on the benefits that education bestows upon him." In other words, the organic being of the

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student is transformed into a new identity that rejects the limitations of his prior life and, in part, rejects his parents because they represent the prior stage of his evolution.

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Now, there is some credibility to the argument that Rodriguez is putting forth with this statement. To a certain extent, when one's education increases and the thinking process evolves, the educated person may find himself or herself with little in common with those whose education has not continued or evolved.

In some cases, this can lead to a schism between children in parents on a host of cultural, social and political issues. In a way, this may backfire on the parents as they desire an educated child who shines, but then wish the child would maintain a thought process or outlook on life that is similar to their own. Of course, this is impossible as the child is drawing an outlook on life based on different experiences.

However, Rodriguez does take his assessment a little bit too far in terms of painting the scholarly student as a tragic anti-hero. Consider the following excerpt:

“ He is no fabulous hero, no idealized scholar worker. The scholarship boy can not reconcile, can not straddle the two great opposing cultures of his life. His success is unromantic and plain. He sits in the classroom and does not offer those sitting besides him no calming reassurance about their own lives.”

Quite honestly, that is an incredibly nihilistic portrayal of a successful student. In a way, it almost hints that being a successful student is ultimately not successful because what comes with it is harmful psychological baggage.

While this may have been true for Rodriguez based on his own personal experience (his essay is, of course, primarily autobiographical), but it is truly indicative of the experiences of all successful students? In reality, it is probably not.