

**Foreword to *The Lives of Children* by George Dennison
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What do we do when children progress through schooling without learning what they're supposed to learn?

Raise standards. That's today's rallying cry, given in answer to the problem of students' poor performance. We'll be stricter, firmer, we'll expect more, and students, in turn, will deliver more.

Except for the ones who don't. Or won't, or can't. The curriculum can be meticulously planned, the standards high as the moon, and it's still possible for a child to sit in a classroom and *not* learn what he knows he's supposed to be learning.

George Dennison, writing about thirteen-year-old José, says that this was a student who "had failed in everything." He had been promoted from grade to grade though he hadn't learned to read (or to do much else in the classroom). Sitting with Dennison and struggling to learn to read, "his concentration still breaks down in almost panic confusion. His eyelids flutter, he looks around with spasmodic little movements of his head, doesn't see anything, makes wild guesses at the words."

What happens when a child knows that a standard exists and knows that he has continually, year after year, failed to meet it? This was José's experience of school. To imagine that he viewed the standard against which he was measured as a motivating challenge, an inspiration to persevere, is to miss the paralyzing effect of feeling oneself a failure. Working with José, Dennison knew that the experience of being "judged and found wanting" lay at the heart of any attempt this boy now made to learn to read. He knew that years of fear and shame in the classroom were suffocating what potential for actual learning José might still possess. At the beginning of his work with Dennison, José is "so used to an atmosphere of testing, and of comparisons that inevitably humiliate [him], that he cannot yet realize that he is not being asked to perform."

Perform. How frequently is that word equated with *learning*, so that the question "How well do the children in this school district perform on standardized tests?" is thought to be a question about the actual quality of the schools, about the children's actual understanding of the world. Meanwhile, what does the pressure to perform feel like to the children sitting at those desks taking those tests? How do children behave after years of laboring under that pressure?

On these questions, there is perhaps no better writer than George Dennison. His descriptions of anxiety and of gradual release into true learning are among the most vivid and moving anywhere. *The Lives of Children* is an account of the two years of The First Street School, a small private school on New York's lower east side. The school enrolled twenty-three children, all from low-income families and about half arriving from the public schools with severe learning and behavior problems. *The Lives of Children* is a

story of what worked, it's a story of healing and growth, and in many ways it's a story about not giving up.

Many people had already given up on José, Vicente, Maxine, and the others. When the school inspectors came around to evaluate First Street's unorthodox methods (which must have seemed even stranger in 1964 than they would just a few years later), they were mostly just relieved that someone was willing to work with these kids. They must have been surprised, too, that kids who had been so familiar to the truant officer were now attending school eagerly and regularly. (Had the inspectors realized that attendance at First Street was essentially voluntary, they would no doubt have been further mystified.)

Many people had already given up; Dennison and the others did not. This alone makes *The Lives of Children* powerfully relevant to today's teachers, who must sometimes wonder, especially on tough days, whether dedication and hope are inspiring or foolish. The dedication of the teachers at First Street was not ultimately enough to save all of the kids. Was it worth it, then? Was the effort wasted?

As Mabel Dennison, George's widow and fellow teacher, writes in the preface to this new edition, education cannot magically guarantee success over the long haul – not even when it does make a significant difference in the immediate moment. We can approach someone like José filled with all the hope in the world, and we can use that hope to power the energy and passion that the work will require. But perhaps we have to do that work because it seems to be the right thing to do at the time, rather than because we have any certainty about what its results will be. What Dennison did with José, and what, it seems to me, all the adults did with the students at First Street, was to say, "We will not assume that you can never be anything but what you have been up to now. We will offer a fresh start, and we will offer ourselves and what we know and care about. We have this time together and we will try to live well during that time." They concerned themselves, in other words, with the present lives of those twenty-three children, and tried to do what they could. Sometimes it was a great deal. Sometimes it didn't manage to be enough. Either way, they threw themselves into it, working to figure out how to meet each child directly (so that there was less general theory than careful individual response: Dennison writes of the teacher Gloria, for example, that she was "firm with Maxine and permissive with Laura").

The Lives of Children is about shame, fear, healing, growth, and freedom, but in Dennison's prose, these big concepts never blur into jargon or platitude or vagueness. They are always firmly rooted in actual event and description: what Maxine did, what Gloria said, how José acted. And from these concrete and detailed descriptions, there emerges a clear sense that there is another way to respond to failure, both children's and our own.

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