

On My Mind

2/4/00

As though they were working together, the words of CNMI Teacher of the Year Barbara Gilles and those of James Traub, author of an article in <I>New York Times Magazine</I> on the role of the community in education echo and support each other. Gilles wrote, in a local letter to the editor last week, about the important role families and communities play in the reading/learning process. Traub, in his article "What No School Can Do," says that no matter how much money one pours into them, schools, by themselves, cannot improve the lives of disadvantaged children.

The family and the community play a bigger role.

Traub's article cites school after school, innovative program after innovative program, case after case where money spent on new, more, different projects and activities and materials do not have a lasting effect on the educational or achievement level of urban ghetto students on which they are expended. "There is reason to believe that schools can make some kind of difference, but right now they are not making nearly enough," he writes.

The truth is, claims Traub, that the effects of home and community can blot out all of the advantages of such special programs. For children who grow up in homes without books, where they are isolated from the world beyond their neighborhood, where curiosity is neither satisfied nor encouraged, and where flat edicts are used rather than reasoning, no enriched school program is able to overcome the educational poverty at home. But where those factors are present, Traub says, where parents do read to children, take them on trips, reason with them, children have a "headstart," and do benefit from school programs.

Since the home and the community play such a critical role in the educational success of children, it is important to make sure that both the home and the community are directly involved in the educational practices of their children's schools, as Gilles points out. Traub takes that position one step farther: the problem is that not all homes and communities have the skills, the capability, the education or experience to provide the support needed to help students do well in school.

Before the family, the community, can be effective, they themselves must be helped. The parents must become sufficiently literate to be able to respond to children's questions, to arouse their curiosity, to instill a love of reading. The parents must be economically secure enough to have time for their children. The community must become sophisticated enough to value formal education, to accept diversity.

In short, the answer to educating the disadvantaged child does not lie in the classroom. The answer lies with the family. But neither can a disadvantaged family, living in a disadvantaged community, help the child, or the school. First, one must help the disadvantaged family.

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I'm not sure where the responsibility lies in this case, either, but the choice of movies on island

sure is disappointing. Not only is it disappointing, it is also disturbing. Granted the situation is much improved from what it was before. Saipan now has a spacious new movie house with comfortable modern seating. There are eight films to choose from, rather than just one. Each of the movies run twice each day, with some actually running three times a day; on week-ends, there are as many as five showings a day. There's plenty of parking. And everything is clean - from the lobby to the individual showing areas to the restrooms.

But for someone who dislikes violence, who dislikes raunchiness, who isn't amused by liberal use of cusswords, liberal use of fake blood, liberal exposure of naked bodies, the menu of offerings at Saipan's fancy new movie theatre leaves a lot to be desired. Of the eight shows on at the moment, for instance, six are rated "R" (Anna and the King 's rating of "R" is an error). That leaves only two, and neither of those is a family film; they are both labeled "PG."

But it's not just that the films shown here are not to my taste that bothers me. It's also that such a large proportion are "R" rated - show violence, use rough language, are erotic. Those qualities do not reflect positive values. They are not conducive to a moral or civilized society. Instead, films with such qualities encourage just the opposite. As all the literature tells us, the overexposure to violence, eroticism, bad language - be it on tv or in the movies or on video - makes it seem ordinary, dulls the horror of it, invites imitation, contributes to the increase in crime and violence in our streets, and in our homes and schools and places of work

I'm well aware of the right to freedom of speech, of the limits to censorship; that I have no right to restrict what movies others choose to watch. And that is not the intention here. What I am asking is that the rights of those who do not wish to subject themselves to such stuff also be considered, that a larger proportion of those eight offerings every week reflect more positive social values, be more pleasantly entertaining, or more thought-provoking, or address larger issues than whose gun draws faster, whose boobs are bigger, or whose body can take more abuse.

Such films are out there - they are reported, reviewed and advertised in the papers, in magazines, and tv. Some of them even reach Guam. But they do not generally come to the CNMI - though improvement has been promised. But why have they not come in the past? Does whoever is responsible for distribution of those films believe that because we have a relatively small population, we fit the demographic pattern of small towns on the mainland - whatever pattern that is?

It's been mentioned that it might be possible, at least, to hold an annual film festival on Saipan, during which a broader variety of film might be shown. The Wallace theater chain is not, I was told, opposed to that idea. All it would take is a mail campaign requesting that a film festival be held. It might be a good idea, though, to specify in the letters, just what kind of films the festival should include. With the historic limit on films shown on island, it might be interesting to do a festival of "golden oldies" - of legendary past films with legendary stars that never made it to the CNMI, for example.....

Address letters to Kurtis Steger, P.O. Box 50219, Saipan, MP 96950, or to David Lyon, 919 Southwest Taylor Street, Suite 800, Portland, Oregon 97205.

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Speaking of things graphic, has anyone noticed the editorial/political cartoons in the <I>Tri-
bune</I>? One after the other, they propaganda the progress, the harmony, and the bright future
that are all about to come to the CNMI thanks to assumption of the House speakership by
Benigno S. Fitial. Today's cartoon, in fact, includes even the president of the Chamber of
Commerce in its rosy picture of all the good things to come under Fitial's leadership.

Gloating once is forgivable. Gloating repeatedly is not. Particularly since not a single positive
action has yet been taken by this new and supposedly powerful and progressive so-called
leadership team.

I'll wait, thank-you, til there's more than words - or pictures - on which to make a judgment.