Talking Education with James Harvey

BY AMY BAUMAN

James Harvey proved a delightful and inspiring presence at the National Writing Project Spring Meeting April 3–4 in Washington, D.C. The keynote speaker of the Friday meeting, Harvey had a roomful of NWP network people captivated by his interactive presentation, which had more of a feeling of a conversation among friends than of a presentation by a nationally known writer and speaker.

Harvey, a noted education writer and a fellow of the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington, worked with the National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges to produce a report (see note, page 9) that focuses on the status of writing instruction in the nation’s schools. The principal staff writer of, among other works, the 1983 education report A Nation at Risk from the National Commission on Excellence in Education, Harvey opened his presentation by admitting that when he learned that NWP wanted him to speak about writing—for an hour and a half—he nearly cancelled the engagement.

“That’s not what I do,” Harvey insisted playfully. “I’ve never talked about writing, and I rarely speak for more than 20 minutes.”
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If that was just banter, we would never know, as Harvey launched into an engaging discussion of education, achievement, testing, and the expectations that drive all of it, moving from one topic to the next and back with an exhilarating dexterity. He began with the plea that the National Writing Project group gathered in the Washington Court Hotel that morning should help him write—or at least help him imagine—the text of an editorial he was writing for the Seattle Times. “And I promise you’ll be able to see the results,” Harvey pledged. (The article ran in the paper’s Sunday, May 4 issue. See http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/opinion/134688604_harvey04.html.) And then he lobbed a loaded thought into the crowd, stating that after 20 years in school reform, he’s come to believe that “we have badly misjudged what’s involved and what we’re doing.”

“What we all want is straightforward,” he insisted. “We want high achievement for all students no matter their background. Whether they’re rich or poor, whether they’re black or white, whether they speak English or any of maybe 40 other languages spoken in many big cities, it’s clear what we want . . . and everyone wants it.”

But the “getting there” is the hard part. And whether or not students do get there, Harvey proposed, has as much to do with what goes on outside of school as what goes on in school. To support this proposition, Harvey offered up 15 minutes of the documentary 28 Up, part of a British series by director Michael Apted. The film follows a group of 14 children—some of them children of affluence, some not—by simply filming their lives and capturing their thoughts and aspirations at seven-year intervals. The first of the series, 7 Up, debuted in 1963; most recently, 42 Up was released in 1998. One of the strengths of the series, as Harvey puts it, is that it “traces the development of a group of human beings over time in a way that ordinary people can . . . comprehend.” Another strength of the series—a strength that fit the context of the discussion with James Harvey that morning—is what it suggests and perhaps even warns us about in regard to education, achievement, and expectation.

“We’ve made the mistake of thinking that because we measure achievement in schools, that’s the only place it’s produced,” Harvey stated emphatically. “We conveniently ignore what goes on before the child arrives in school. We find it easy to overlook what’s happening outside the classroom, and we act as though the choices students and their families make don’t matter.”

That, in part, is what’s bothersome James Harvey, and the clip of the film series certainly gave credence to his discomfort. Uncannily, the film and the issues it raises spoke as easily to this audience of educators in 2003 as it must have spoken to educators ever since its introduction.

After running the clip, Harvey then posed five questions tying these issues both to the film and to today’s educational system:

1. In one portion of the video, Charles spoke of a conveyor belt leading privileged English youth to “Oxbridge” before dumping them out at the end. Is that an English phenomenon or do similar conveyor belts exist in the United States?

2. A lot of the young people [in the film] made life-shaping career decisions very early. Is it true, as Wordsworth put it, that the “child is father to the man”?

3. The England we view in this film is consciously class based. People are supposed to know their place. Is class as powerful a factor in the United States? How does class play itself out in American education?

4. It has been estimated that American students are [physically somewhere other than inside a school] for 80% of their waking hours between birth and age 18. How should policy and practice respond to this reality?

5. What do you make of the fact that many of the wealthy students portrayed had their educational careers mapped out for them at age seven, probably by their parents, while the east end kids were left to sort it out for themselves . . .

From there the discussion took off with Harvey bouncing ideas to and from the group as quickly as he moved from one side of the large Washington Court Hotel ballroom to the other.

While the questions, as presented, make specific references to the film series, that fact didn’t inhibit understanding of their gist. In fact, you don’t have to have seen any of Michael Apted’s series, you don’t need to be British, and you don’t have to have experienced James Harvey’s presentation to have thoughts raised by these questions. No one with any interest in education whatsoever can help but have thoughts, opinions—even raised ire—in response.

And then Harvey wrapped the whole presentation and discussion back into the idea of writing.

“The point I want to make is that in a democratic society, educators cannot acquiesce in the construction of an education system that aligns all its graduates and points them in the same direction,” Harvey said. “That’s why this commission on writing is too important to be overlooked. To truly make learning their own, says the commission, students must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else. In short, they must write.”

For Harvey, “not acquiescing” appears to be as much about demanding more from the educational system as about protecting what’s good about it. And in his conclusion, even as he continued to introduce issues that need immediate and constant attention such as class and privilege, he was quick to point out some of the system’s strengths. Describing himself as coming from the society described in the film series—he is a native of Ireland—Harvey explained that he came to the United States, in part, because “the United States offered opportunities available nowhere else.”

“So it’s the promise of the United States, as manifested in its schools, that I find so attractive,” Harvey said. “And it’s the potential loss of that promise that troubles me greatly.”

As it does us all.

Note: The report, “The Neglected ‘R’: The Need for a Writing Revolution” was released by the National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges in late April. Both NWP Executive Director Richard Sterling and National Council of Teachers of English President David Bloome served on an advisory board to the commission. Read the report online at www.writingcommission.org.