The last word
A capital punishment

FOR THE GREATEST GOOD FOR THE GREATEST NUMBER, AND BECAUSE THE ENDS JUSTIFY THE MEANS, WE OUGHT HUMANELY TO EXECUTE OUR MOST DIFFICULT STUDENTS. DAVID RISH ARGUES THE MERITS OF THIS MODEST PROPOSAL.

WHEN I WAS AN INFANT SCHOOL TEACHER, the tropical fish tank was very popular, but Cedrica* had untreatable gill fungus. It didn’t seem to affect her, but the other fish got infected and died. Our fish graveyard soon covered most of the school oval and the footballers were being constantly spiked by little crosses. After a discussion with a parent who was a vet, it was decided the best thing for all concerned would be for Cedrica to be removed from the tank but, being a social animal, she couldn’t cope alone – the fish, that is – and quickly died.

‘Why is she swimming upside down?’ asked Jeremy, sniffing. Mind you, Jeremy always had a cold so it was a bit hard to tell if his runny nose was really a sign of grief, but the accusing faces of the rest of my Year 2s as we stood by the solitary confinement tank was clear: killer!

Jeremy, like Cedrica, infected his fellow inmates with new bugs on a seemingly weekly basis. He also had a big effect on the number of ticks in the absent column of my class register. Our room never won the assembly award for best weekly attendance. It was one thing to remove Cedrica, but if only I’d been permitted to take Jeremy, our human virus factory, out of circulation, I’d have prevented so much misery.

Like any decent utilitarian, I realise of course that killing Jeremy would’ve been unfortunate for him, but it would have made the lives of everyone else much more pleasant, so why stop at eliminating just bearers of bugs?

If teachers were only allowed to humanely remove their most difficult students, how much better an educational experience would school be for the remaining hard-working majority? I’m not suggesting that teachers have the power willy-nilly to assign death just anyone to death. There would be guidelines. A teacher could only don the black cap, say, once or possibly twice a year. The act of actual extinction would not, of course be done in public. That would reek of bad taste. The anointed could be quietly taken to the sick room were the school nurse would offer hot chocolate and biscuits before efficiently and painlessly dispatching the condemned trouble-maker. There’d be no heads-on-pikes-stuff afterwards either, unless, of course, it could be shown there were positive educational outcomes.

Needless to say, executions would only occur after due process and teachers would be encouraged to opt for this ultimate solution only if there was a real need. Executing to keep up with Mrs Jones in Room 4 would certainly not be encouraged. A sub-committee of the school council would debate the merits of each case. It would be necessary to demonstrate to within reasonable levels of doubt that there was little or no hope of returning the candidate to the straight and narrow before deciding there’d be no need to bake them another birthday cake.

The question, of course, is why stop at the trouble makers? What about that student who is so far behind that he is dragging down your class scores, making you look a bad teacher and diminishing your chances of promotion – as well as taking you away from the students who are able to learn?

I’m not suggesting we engage in wholesale slaughter. I’m simply posing the question as to the merits of a judicious trim in which that child who just really gets on your goat could be considered a candidate to whine no more. No one in their right mind could deny that teaching is a taxing profession, so why not allow teachers to remove a burr in the seat of the pants? You can bet those important national test scores will rise like mercury in a thermometer on a beach day.

Death is a part of the real world, and we all say we want to provide our students with real-world, experiential learning, so we actually have a duty to embrace execution as a part of our educational program.

If you’ve got the vocation, you’d kill to be a teacher. Start making your list now. You know you want to.

* Names have been changed. Cedrica was named by the students, although we didn’t actually know if she was a she, but her gender would’ve made no difference in the development of my thinking.

This month’s Last Word was written by David Rish, writer and occasional columnist for Teacher. It was not sponsored by the funeral industry. They get you anyway so why would they bother?

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