Sometimes it is important to put aside the research journals, political commentaries, and popular news about the state of education and stop long enough to listen to the voice of a 9-year-old. This past year, my daughter began writing letters to me about her fourth-grade classroom experiences. As a teacher educator who is caught up in educational research, theory, and current issues, I appreciated being granted access to this unique perspective, which, unfortunately, is not often considered in my work. In this age of accountability, standards, and policies handed down from administrators and politicians, perhaps the honesty of a child is our best lens for examining what is really going on in schools.

As I began sharing these letters with college students preparing to become teachers, they were struck by the candidness of a fourth-grader’s words about what matters most. Although these letters come from only one child’s school experiences, the concepts they highlight...
are not new and have been researched substantially for many years. Yet, in this stressful time of increased demands from standards and testing, what once were considered the best teaching strategies often end up being summarily brushed aside. Lina’s letters give us an opportunity to revisit our thinking about what makes a successful learning environment.

Before I share a fourth-grader’s top picks for the elements of a good school, it might be helpful to give a quick summary of Lina’s schooling experiences. Lina began by attending a traditional public school in a northwest Indiana suburban district that boasted of high test scores and strict discipline. She performed well academically, since she carefully completed all her work and was above average in almost all areas. She was quiet in the classroom and complied with instructions.

As Lina began moving through the primary grades, however, I noticed that school was starting to wear her down. There were many times when the workload was too much and frustrations mounted. Lina wasn’t particularly speedy in recalling her math facts and began receiving poor grades on her daily timed math-facts tests. For the first time, she found herself not enjoying school and began making statements about how she wasn’t good in math and not very smart.

A variety of circumstances provided an opportunity for Lina to attend a charter school. This is when she began writing letters, primarily comparing and contrasting her experiences of these two different school environments. After receiving two unsolicited letters regarding Lina’s classroom experiences, I gave her a single prompt: “Write to me about what happened in school today.”

In the excerpts from her letters that follow, I have taken care to quote her writing directly, so as to capture the exact nature of the content, ignoring problems with grammar. I have corrected some spelling to help with readability.

>> Building a Community

One of the first letters I received from Lina indicated that she had experienced a huge shift in philosophy when she transferred into her new school. It appeared that one of the school’s priorities during the first weeks of classes was to establish a sense of community among all learners. “School is so GREAT! At the beginning of the day the 4th-7th grade classes combine until nine o’clock. We play games to get to know each other better.”

Recesses and lunches were also times when students of different grade levels could interact with one another. This arrangement seemed to promote an environment that was inclusive and helped the students build relationships with schoolmates of different ages. Lina was able to make several friends outside her class and grade level. The school also had a Lunch Buddy program, which assigned a younger student to an older one. Lina described this opportunity positively in her letters as well. Many of the activities the school used came from the Tribes Learning Communities philosophy. More can be found by visiting the website www.tribes.com.

>> Caring Teacher

“NOBODY wants to learn if it means dealing with a mean teacher!” was the first line of a letter early in the year, in which Lina recalled her experiences with several teachers she had had in the past. In contrast, Lina wrote fondly of her current teacher, who cared deeply about each of her students: “She is so nice.”

Educators should not be surprised by Lina’s feelings. Nel Noddings is noted for her research regarding caring as a central dimension of effective teaching. Deborah Stipek found that when a teacher provides a caring environment in which each student is valued, students are more motivated and learn more. One of the most dramatic expressions of the importance of caring came from another fourth-grader: “If a teacher doesn’t care about you, it affects your mind. You feel like you are a nobody, and it makes you want to drop out of school.” It seems like a simple enough request: as a classroom teacher, you should care for each of your students. Apparently, kids notice the difference, and it matters.

>> Student-Centered Curriculum

It appeared from her letters that in her new school Lina was experiencing a very different type of curriculum — one that was focused on the individual students’ interests and abilities. “What we did at art was
we wrote down what we wanted to do for art this semester. We have gone to music two times. The first time we wrote what musical instruments we wanted to play, what songs we liked to sing, and things like that.” Clearly, the teacher wasn’t the center of the curriculum here. Acting more as a facilitator, the teacher addressed the needs and interests of the students as a starting point.

Akin to the idea of student-centered curriculum is the notion of allowing students to have several choices and trusting them to make their own decisions involving the work they need to do. Here’s how Lina described her teacher’s approach to spelling:

We get to pick our spelling words. What Mary [the teacher] does is she writes down a list of words that have to do with pirates [the theme of the unit]. She puts a star by four of them and then you pick six more words and write them down on a piece of paper with the four other words. Mary pairs us up for the spelling test. One person looks at the other persons list and tells them the words to write down and then we switch.

This idea of a student-centered curriculum certainly is not new. More than 100 years have passed since Dewey’s progressive philosophy of schooling advocated a student-centered approach. More recent theories, such as constructivism, differentiated curriculum, child development, and multiple intelligences, also support appreciating diverse abilities and interests and adapting teaching to allow for these differences. The idea of a child-centered curriculum, while growing in popularity, still struggles against the push for a more standards-based curriculum and accountability through testing. See Robert Marzano’s book *A Different Kind of Classroom* for six helpful suggestions for creating a learning-centered classroom.

**>> Cooperative Learning**

“This school is a lot different from all the other schools I’ve been to because we work in groups a lot more and we don’t have desks, instead we have tables.” The work of Lev Vygotsky and Robert Slavin helped shape the theory that collaboration can be a great way to enhance the learning process. Vygotsky believed that knowledge is socially constructed through interactions with adults and peers. Teachers who prefer having children learn in isolation or individually in order to show that they can learn independently do not understand the broader picture: “What the child can do in cooperation today, he can do alone tomorrow.” As Lina advises, “You should have at least one time every day that the class works together. It’s fun to work together and you learn more that way.” The work of David Johnson and Roger Johnson supports Lina’s suggestion with evidence that cooperative learning can be one of the most effective tools teachers have.

**>> Learning Is Fun**

Letters from Lina described learning that was integrated and included many meaningful projects. Whereas her class the previous year had relied heavily on worksheets and workbooks, she wrote that in her new school, “We almost never do worksheets.” One example of a project Lina was involved in was to make up a pirate, invent facts about him, write a story, and then draw a picture of him.

The previous year, Lina had completed hours of homework every night, most of which was worksheet- or workbook-related. At her new school, she had homework, but she described it differently. “My teacher is the best. She said she would never give homework. Instead she calls it home practice and it’s a lot more fun than homework.” One example of home practice was an assignment to interview parents about what they read on a day-to-day basis. At the time the students conducted
the interviews, they were studying literacy.

Home practice was not the only aspect of learning that Lina was enjoying in her new school. “I think teachers should be like Mary. Make it so that half the time you don’t even know your learning. Doing three subjects at a time, working together, fun! Always doing new things! Encouraging ideas! This is how I think teachers should be.” Lina compared going to school to “going to camp where you make friends, play games and learn.”

The idea of making school fun has been challenged by critics who assume that academic rigor or discipline is being replaced with a “feel-good curriculum.” Maureen Stout accused the self-esteem movement of dumming down curriculum, lowering expectations, belittling competition, and turning schools into centers for therapy, not learning.1

As a parent, I am glad that my daughter is enjoying school and feeling good about it. She understands that school is more than just drudgery and appreciates the social and playful components of her learning experiences. I think that many teachers have forgotten the joy and fun that can be found in learning something, or that one can learn something through play. Carl Orff, the 20th-century composer who had a great influence on the field of music education, once said, “Since the beginning of time, children have not liked to study. One can only be persuaded to work hard when playing.”2

Lina is the kind that any parent, teacher, administrator, or politician would want for all children. Above all, such an environment can help them grow physically, emotionally, socially, and academically. After all, isn’t that what schools are for?

Clearly, there are many differing perspectives among informed adults about the best approaches to teaching and learning. With all the statements we hear from policy makers, administrators, teacher educators, inservice teachers, preservice teachers, and parents, it would be easy to dismiss a fourth-grader’s opinions about what matters in schools. But I believe that the child’s voice is the one that we can least afford to ignore. Lina ended one letter in the middle of the year with this thought: “My favorite day used to be Saturday because no school. But now my favorite day is Monday because it’s so great to go back to school! This is the best school I’ve ever been to.”

I only hope that the kind of school environment, teacher, and curriculum that inspired these feelings in Lina is the kind that any parent, teacher, administrator, or politician would want for all children. Above all, such an environment can help them grow physically, emotionally, socially, and academically. After all, isn’t that what schools are for?
