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What Really Counts in Schools

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our understanding of the mission of schooling must go beyond the merely measurable to a consideration of more profound purposes.

Deciding what really counts in our schools is the first order of our educational mission. The second is to create the conditions that are consistent with that mission. There is no shortage of opinion about our mission. We hear from the highest offices in our land that American schools are in a dismal state. We hear from others that they are in a state of crisis. We read in the mass media about our lowly position, not in the arms race, but in the "education race." education has become the front line in our quest for international supremacy. For many, there is no mistaking it: Education is not only a business, it is a competitive race.

We are told that we must get our house in order, in order to continue to reside in our house--others are waiting in the wings. The mark of our Success will be our position among other nations on tests that purportedly measure what counts.

I have more than severe reservations about such prescriptions for educational supremacy. Neither supremacy nor the metaphor of the race are, I believe, appropriate for thinking about the kinds of lives we would like our children to lead. A president who, when campaigning for office, spoke of the need for "a kinder and gentler America" cannot logically view our nation's schools as instruments for beating others. There is in such observations, at the very least, a tinge of inconsistency.

It is time to think about what really counts in schools. I think that our analysis ought to penetrate the simplistic, the merely measurable, and the superficial. This article is my effort to make that penetration.

A Starting Point

I start with certain premises about human nature and the mission of education. I start with the premise that when children come into the world, they do not possess minds. People acquire minds during the course of their lifetimes; the task is not completed when students finish the 12th grade. Children do come into the world with brains; brains are biological. Minds are cultural. Minds are forms of cultural achievement, and the kinds of minds that children come to own depend, in large measure, on the kinds of experiences they are afforded during the course of their lifetimes.

We all know what a culture is. In the biological sense, a culture is a place for grooming minds Schools are culture for growing minds. The major instruments that we use to create minds arc the kinds of programs we offer and the quality of teaching we provide. Like the systole and diastole of the beating heart, curriculum and teaching are the most fundamental aspects of our schools. Decisions that we make about what to include and what to exclude from the programs we offer are of the foremost importance. BUT programs, no matter how well conceived, must always be mediated if they are to influence the lives of those with whom we work. This process of mediation, at its best, is an artistic activity. We call it teaching. When teachers transform the inevitably limited and schematic conceptions of school programs into the kinds of
activities that genuinely engage students, when they create the environments that open up new vistas and provide for deep satisfactions, they make a difference in the lives that children lead. No curriculum teaches itself, it always must be mediated, and teaching is the fundamental mediator. Teaching, however, as a form of human mediation, is not the only important influence on children. How we organize the “envelope" within which teaching and curriculum activities occur also matters. That is, how schools are structured, the kind of values that pervade them, the ways in which roles are defined and assessments made are a part (if the living context in which both teachers and students must function. Make no mistake about it, these pervasive organizational features define the kind of place that schools are; they also teach. Dreeben (1968) refers to these features as the non-pedigogical aspects of instruction.

Six Aims That Count in Schools

What really counts in school, from my perspective, may not appear on anyone's list of national educational imperatives. Yet, I believe they are imperative. Let me share them with you.

The Journey is the Reward

First, what really counts in schools is teaching children that the exploration of ideas is sometimes difficult, often exciting and occasionally fun.

I know that such a prosaic aspiration for educational practice as a fundamental aim of education must seem simple. In one sense, it is simple. It is certainly .an aim that is simple to articulate. It is not so simple to achieve. But it is of the utmost importance educationally.

We sometimes seem to believe that the importance of what we do in school is determined by how well children do on tasks they will encounter later in schools or in colleges or universities. I take issue with such a conception. The major goals of schooling are not realized by performances on tasks defined in classrooms or within schools. The important effects of schools are located in the kinds of lives that children lead outside school and the kinds of satisfactions they pursue there. In research terms, the major dependent variables of schooling are not scores on standardized achievement tests, whether norm- or criterion-referenced: they are the kinds of ideas children are willing to explore on their own, the kinds of critical skills they are able to

employ on tasks outside classrooms, and the strength of their curiosity in pursuing the issues they will inevitably encounter in the course of their lives. Indeed, a much better index for school achievement than standardized achievement test scores is the level and quality of the conversations children engage in away from their classrooms.

The reason it is so important for youngsters to enjoy what they study in school is because without such satisfactions, the likelihood that they will pursue their studies outside our institutions is small.

There are, it is said, three reasons that motivate people to do things. The first of these is to secure satisfactions that are intrinsic to the activity itself. Both sex and play are paradigm cases of such satisfactions. In both, activities are pursued for the intrinsic satisfactions that they yield. That is why, I think, intellectual activity at its highest level is often associated with play. When children enjoy playing with ideas and dealing with problems in a playful way, when they secure the kinds of satisfactions that they get from activities that they choose, they are engaged in the kind of activity I am talking about.

A second reason for doing something is not because the activity itself is pleasurable, but because its results are. Most people like to have a clean kitchen, but I suspect few of us enjoy kitchen-cleaning chores. Many people work at jobs whose processes they don't enjoy, but they do take pride and satisfaction in the work once done.

A third reason for doing something is not because the process is satisfying, nor because the results are, but because one likes the payoff in the form of a paycheck. Too many people, lamented Hannah Arendt (1958), are engaged in this kind of activity as a way of securing a Iivelihood. For Arendt, such activity constitutes labor. Work, by contrast, is related to the first and second forms of motivation.

I happen to think that in our schools many children arc inadvertently motivated by extrinsic reward systems that teach them that the important reason for engaging in an activity is to secure a reward that typically has little or nothing to do with the activity itself. We call such motivators, “stars," "brownie points," “grades," and "honor classes." What will happen to those students when those motivations arc no longer available? Will they take the journey? They will, if in the context of schools and classrooms they discover that the journey is the reward.

Formulating Questions, Seeking Answers

A second aim that really counts in schools is helping youngsters learn how to formulate their own problems and flow to design the tactics and strategies to solve them. We often talk in education about the importance of problem-solving skills, and clearly the ability to solve problems is important. But the most difficult of intellectual tasks is not primarily in solving problems but in formulating the questions that give rise to them. We place great emphasis in our schools on setting tasks for students and expecting them to pursue them. We call these tasks assignments. They emanate from teachers and are directed to students. The child's job is not to question why, but, as they say, to do or die.

Some writers (Apple 1982) have referred to this process as a process of deskilling. What is deskIled when such a process dominates classroorns and schools is the child's ability to assume responsibility for the aims as well as the means he or she might employ in dealing with them. Since in the course of life the ability to conceptualize what is problematic and to formulate interesting questions is fundamental in maintaining one's intellectual autonomy, it does not seem unreasonable that schools should be places in which students could practice such skills. This would require giving children an opportunity to formulate their own aims, to conceptualize their own problems, and to design the ways in which such problems might be addressed. It means that finding out what students want to know about after teaching is as important as determining whether they possess the answers we hoped they would. The kinds of questions students can formulate is as important an educational outcome-perhaps even more so-as how well they can converge upon the correct answers that populate our textbooks.

Providing school programs that make it possible for students to formulate their own problems increasingly as they get older and to work on tasks related to them would, undoubtedly, Iead to increased heterogeneity in the classroom. I am fully aware that it is neither feasible nor desirable for such activities to be all that is provided in our curriculums. There does need to be some common fare and some effort at cooperative group activity. Every child going off on his or her own track in an utterly independent way is not what I have in mind. But what I do envision is providing children with opportunities to learn how to formulate their own goals, questions, and problems. Providing such opportunities will, of course, make the process of evaluation more complicated and difficult. However, our educational aspirations should not be defined by the current limits of our testing technology. We need to reach for more.

Multiple Forms of Literacy

A third aim that counts in schools is the development in the young of multiple forms of literacy. Literacy is typically thought of as the ability to read and write. Literacy surely includes such skills, but I conceptualize it in broader ways (Eisner 1985). Literacy is, broadly speaking, the ability to encode or decode meaning in any of the forms used in the culture to represent meaning. Aristotle observed long ago that "man by nature seeks to know." The knowing that Aristotle talked about is embedded in human experience, and human experience, in turn. is influenced by the forms of representation that we can meaningfully employ. School programs ought to develop literacy, that is, the ability to secure meaning, from the wide range of forms that are used in culture to express meaning. This surely includes far more than the literal use of language or the ability to write precise "standard" English. Language itself takes many forms. There is the literal use of language, the literary use, the figurative, the poetic, and the vernacular use of language. Language is diverse: the kinds of meaning that can be represented and secured in poetry, for example, are simply unavailable to those limited to prose.

Similarly, the meanings that are engendered through choreography, through music, and through the visual arts are unique or special to their forms. There are some meanings that can be grasped through visual form that cannot be described in

language or in quantitative form. Toshiba, IBM, Apple, and other computer companies have long recognized that spreadsheets, pie charts, scattergrams, and visuals in living color increase the meaningfulness of some kinds of information; they know that the way in which we construct meaning depends upon the way in which forrns of representation are configured. Not everything that we want to say can be said in language. Not everything that we want to convey can be reported in number. The moral here for school programs is clear: those that neglect or marginalize the fine arts, for example, embrace an educational policy guaranteed to graduate students who arc semi-literate. The great ceramic figures of the Zapotec, the bronze vessels of the Han Dynasty, the egg tempera madonnas of 14th Century Italy, the Abstract Expressionism of the 1950s will be for our students other people's pleasures if they are denied the opportunity to learn how to see and understand what these works make possible.

At present, American schools are embarked on set of educational priorities that are both narrow and shortsighted. We think about literacy in the tightest, most constipated of terms. We need a more generous conception of what it means to know and a wider conception of the sources of human understanding. The poet, the painter, the composer, tile playwright, as well as the physicist, the chemist, the botanist, the astronomer have something to teach us. Paying adequate attention to such forms of understanding in schools is the best way to make them a meaningful part of our students' intellectual lives.

In Praise of Wonder, Imagination

A fourth aim that really counts in schools is teaching the young tile importance of wonder. So much of what we teach in schools seems to undermine the importance of wonder. Indeed, wondering, even daydreaming has been regarded as an "off-task" activity. The tacit image of pedagogical virtue conveyed by so much of our educational literature is an image of youngsters with their heads buried in workbooks who never come up for air. Academic engaged time, by itself, is no virtue. Whether being academically engaged is or is not a virtue depends, at minimum, on the nature of the task in which one is engaged. Often times daydreaming and wonderment are forms of respite from activities that children find meaningless and distasteful. They are means children use to maintain their psychological equilibrium.

But more than the satisfactions afforded by escape from meaninglessness are the potential worlds that wonder makes possible. The imagination is, fundamentally, an important dimension of human consciousness and, at bottom, the engine of cultural and social progress. It is a resource distinctive to our species. Some people have argued that bees are great architects and proceed to support their case by pointing out that bees use a material that is soft and malleable to build not only beautiful architectural structures of great proportion and precision, but structures of great strength as well.

The fact of the matter is, however, that bees are not great architects. Bees create honeycombs because they can do nothing else. They have been creating these same honeycombs for years now, and I suspect that they will continue to do so in the future. What architects require, and what humans possess, is imagination. Humans create

buildings that take the forms they do by virtue of wonderment and by the strength of imagination. When bees are able to create Baroque beehives I might change my mind, but until then I am unwilling to regard bees as creative architects.

Wonder and imagination are fundamental not only in architecture, but also in science and in all creative aspects of human affairs. I believe our schools should create the kind of environment and provide the kind of tasks that elicit and develop respect for wonder and stimulate the imagination. One of the features of schooling that dampens the inclination toward wonder and that limits the imagination are the kinds of assessment practices we typically employ. If there's any single lesson that multiple-choice tests teach, it is that for every question there is a single correct answer and for every problem a single correct solution. The correct solution is known by the test maker or the teacher, and the student soon learns that his or her task is to converge upon the correct one. The tacit message is a message of convergence, of singularity, of homogeneity.

If we created teaching practices that put a premium on the imaginative aspects of learning, if we encouraged children to maintain that wonderful fantasy and speculative ability they possessed when they started school, we would be better able to create a culture that was much more receptive to the possibilities of human experience and much more educationally productive.

In speaking of the development of tile imagination and the enhancement of wonder, I risk the possibility of seeming to talk about aims that are -pie in the sky." I do not believe such aims are "pie in the sky." I believe they can be attained. Their attainment will require a shift in what we consider really important in school. Equally as important, we will need to invent curriculum activities that afford youngsters opportunities to use their imagination and to engage in wonder. I have no doubt whatsoever that such activities can be designed, even in subjects that appear to be literal and highly rule-governed.

The School as Community

A fifth aim of fundamental importance in schools is helping children realize that they are part of a caring community. Such a realization will not occur unless the school itself becomes a community. Many schools lack a sense of community; and many students, particularly during the time they are most vulnerable, their adolescence, is in institutions in which sustained and intimate contact with a caring adult is limited. Departmentalized school structures, which are tile norm at the middle and senior high school levels, often provide adolescents with no adults in a counseling capacity nor any who are responsible for their pastoral care. Typically, a student will have five to seven teachers, will often see these teachers each day for 45 to 50 minutes, and in some schools will have access to a school Counselor, but more often than not when such contact occurs, it is for the purpose of vocational or academic counseling or for discipline. In few schools is there someone in touch with the emotional and social aspects of the students' lives. Whether we're students or teachers, all of us inevitably bring our personal lives into our classrooms.

The absence of pastoral care for students might not be so significant if the

communities in which they lived were characterized by strong nuclear families and strong social bonds. The fact of the matter is that 25 percent of school-aged children are raised in single-parent homes; 52 percent of minority school children are raised in single-parent homes. Very often these children come home to a home with no one at home. We call them latchkey children. 'The seven to eight million latchkey children in America are twice as likely to use drugs as those who have a parent working at home. Since we have approximately 46 million students in public schools, seven to eight million latchkey children represents approximately 20 percent of our school population. In short, the school has always had a caring role to play, but this role is considerably more critical today. Developing an ethic of caring and creating a community that cares is, as far its I know, on no one's list of educational priorities-but it ought to be.

Each Student's Personal Signature

A sixth aim I believe to be of fundamental importance in schools is teaching children that they have a unique and important personal signature. Much that we teach by virtue of the curriculum content we emphasize and how we choose to evaluate what students have learned diminishes their sense of personal signature. The tasks we use to teach beginning arithmetic, spelling, punctuation, writing, and even reading emphasize the acquisition of social conventions. It is, of course, appropriate for schools to assign great importance to enabling the young to learn those social conventions we call the three R's. One of the features of these social conventions is that the child's task is to take conventions from the outside and, so to speak, to internalize them. These tasks can be regarded as requiring tile skills of impression: they are intended to impress the child. And indeed there are no teachers I know who seek from their students ingenuity in spelling. We want students to be able to communicate, to possess a shared set of conventions, and knowing which letters are to appear in what words in what order is a part of that aspiration. And it should be.

The problem is that such tasks dominate school programs. Children need opportunities not only to acquire the skills of impression, but also the skills of expression. In expressive activities the source of content is not located primarily outside the child. It is not simply a matter of acquiring those skills that demonstrate that social conventions have been learned but, rather, helping students reach down into their unique beings in order to find content that can be made visible in the public world. Again, the fine arts, including creative writing, are fields in which personal signature is particularly important. When a teacher gives a class of students the same words to spell, the pedagogical end-inview is uniformity of outcome. The teacher wants all of the students to spell all of the words correctly, and that means the same way.

When that same teacher asks children to write a creative story, or paint a landscape, or choreograph a dance, or compose a piece of music, the last thing the teacher wants is uniformity of outcome. What the teacher seeks is heterogeneity, diversity, idiosyncracy, works that attest to the distinctive ways in which individual children see, feel, and imagine.

I am not arguing that such tasks should monopolize our programs, but we should at

least have some semblance of balance. The provision of such opportunities and the inclusion of the fine arts and related subjects make it possible for children not only to realize, some for the first time, their own positive uniqueness, but also to find a place in our educational sun. Equity is achieved in education not only by giving students an opportunity to come to school, it is also influenced by what they find when they arrive. School programs that create a very narrow eye of a needle through which all children must pass diminish educational equity. Thus, the social-and indeed the moral conditions-that ought to prevail in our Schools are those that broaden the eye of the needle and make it possible for all children to discover their aptitudes. Such programs would expand considerably our conception of giftedness. Indeed, if we provided opportunities in school for them to display their interests and talents, we would find that virtually all children were gifted in some way. At present, the game is far too narrow.

Related to this outcome is another, and that is the view that the genuinely good school does not diminish individual differences, it expands them. Virtue in the context of education is not achieved by bringing all children to the same destination; it is achieved by helping them learn how to become who they are. Variance, not homogeneity, is what counts in schooling, and we ought to design the environments and invent the activities that will make that variance possible.

Our Legacy to Students

The aims that I have identified concerning what really counts in schools are not those inscribed in A Nation at Risk (NCEE 1983), they are not on the list generated by President Bush during his September 1989 education summit, and, as far as I know, they are not in any state department of education’s educational priorities. Yet, for me, they are central to any adequate conception of education. The realization of such aims will require more than the appearance of articles in Educational Leadership or speeches at ASCD's Annual Conference. The center-piece of change is the teacher and the central location, the classroom and the school.

I have no doubt that the creation of the conditions instrurnental to the achievement of these values is possible. I also have no doubt that their realization will require the active engagement. of teachers, and the serious support of school administrators. It will, most certainly, also require the support of communities, who often need to understand better than they do at present what education is about and what really counts in schools, not only in the short term, but in the long run.
My hope is that educators will be moved to begin the kind of dialogue that leads to genuine reform in education, a reform that pays attention to what really counts. Genuine reform will require attention not only to the mission of our schools, but to their educational ecology. It will require attention not only to our intentions, but to the ways in which we organize our workplaces, to the scope of the programs that we provide, to the quality of our teaching, and to the means through which we assess what really matters. The agenda is large, formidable, and important. But the creation of that agenda and its realization are the legacy that we have the privilege to leave to our students. What other legacy could be more important?
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