

Preparing for Today and Tomorrow

The unknowable future is not a sound basis on which to plan curriculum.

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At first glance, the idea of designing a curriculum that prepares students for the future seems unassailable. After all, education is not only for the present. Students will be living in a world different from the one they now occupy, and schools should enable them to deal with that world.

As unassailable as such an idea appears, who among us can tell what the future will look like? Projections about lifestyles, social arrangements, and problems that will be encountered are notoriously difficult. Who could have predicted 20 years ago the challenges that adults address today? Indeed, some of the most significant weaknesses of education policy stem from the belief that the aims and content of education can be justified on the basis of preparation. "Some day you will need this" is a familiar refrain heard both in schools and around the kitchen table. Alas, such an exhortation does little to stimulate or motivate students.

If an unknowable future is not a sound basis on which to plan curriculum and instruction, then what is? From my perspective, we can best prepare students for the future by enabling them to deal effectively with the present.

School curriculums based on the preparatory conception of education are often intellectually irrelevant or become little more than hoops through which students learn to jump in order to move ahead. Too much of what we do now in schools is of the hoop-jumping variety.

What I desire is an education process that is genuinely meaningful to students, challenging them with problems and ideas that they find both interesting and intellectually demanding. I want to assess that process by the depth of its engagement in students' lives.

Of course, regardless of their view of the future, people have different beliefs about what is important for students to learn in the here and now. For example, many educators value the development of critical mindedness, but some parents may reject this goal because critical mindedness can challenge values promulgated at home. The point is that even if we agree that education should address the present, what constitutes appropriate preparation for the present is itself a contested issue. That, in a democracy, is as it should be. The last thing we need is a one-size-fits-all curriculum with one single set of goals for everyone. Diversity yields richness, and diversity in schooling is a source of richness for our culture. Having said that, let me comment on a number of aims that I embrace as being appropriate for our schools.

What Schools Should Teach

Judgment. The best way to prepare students for the future is to focus on the present in a way that enables students to deal with problems that have more than one correct answer. The problems that matter most cannot be resolved by formula, algorithm, or rule. They require the exercise of that most exquisite human capacity that we call judgment. Judgment is not mere preference, but rather the ability to give reasons for the choices that we make. Good judgment requires good reasons. The disposition and critical acumen that make good judgment possible are among the most important abilities that schools can cultivate in students.

To cultivate this quality, the curriculum needs to consist of problems that permit judgment. Such problems require deliberation and yield multiple possible resolutions. Note that I say *resolutions* rather than solutions. Problems of a substantial magnitude usually need to be considered from various angles and can only be temporarily resolved. The majority opinions of the U.S. Supreme Court justify the Court's findings, but an acceptable finding in one period in the nation's history may no longer be appropriate at another time. We should teach students that the practices of deliberation and judgment go hand in hand.

Critical thinking. A second ability that schools need to develop in students is the ability to critique ideas and to enjoy exploring what one can do with them. To develop this ability, students must be presented with ideas that are worth exploring. Several decades ago, Jerome Bruner identified three questions to guide the development of his curriculum *Man—A Course of Study*: What is human about

man? How did he get that way? What can make him more so? Each of these three ideas can be explored and discussed in class at a level appropriate to the students' age.

Powerful ideas are those that have legs, that take students someplace. The idea of random mutation and natural selection, the relationship between culture and personality, and the protection of minority rights in a government in which the majority rules are examples of the ideas that students might critically examine, explore, and explicate. Each of these ideas is inexhaustible. The problem for students is to tease out their implications and to apply those implications not to tomorrow, but to today.

Meaningful literacy. A third aim for schools is to cultivate multiple forms of literacy. Literacy is normally conceived of as the ability to read and write. Sometimes computational skill, or numeracy, is added to the concept. I mean something considerably broader, however. Literacy involves the ability to encode or decode meaning in any of the symbolic forms used in the culture. For example, one can be literate in one's ability to experience and derive meaning from music, from the visual arts, or from dance.

Our lives are enriched by the ability to secure wide varieties of meaning. Schools that neglect some cultural forms, such as the arts, guarantee that they will graduate semiliterate students—students for whom the arts will be other people's pleasures. Of course, these students may well respond to the popular arts. But we cannot anticipate that they will be responsive to the more classical and complex forms that represent extraordinarily high levels of artistic accomplishment. The ability to experience such forms meaningfully requires instruction.

But I don't want to lose the larger point. By defining literacy broadly, we can identify areas in which some school programs are lacking. Programs that focus essentially on the conventional use of language or the formal use of numbers can limit students' ability to secure meaningful experience from other forms of representation.

Different forms of representation evoke, develop, and refine the modes of thinking that contribute to the cultivation of what is broadly called *mind*. The school curriculum that excludes such resources neglects the development of mind to its fullest capacities. Although brains are primarily biological, mind is mainly a form of cultural achievement. The provision of opportunities in the school curriculum for students to encounter a variety of forms of representation not only engenders meaning that is specific to each form, but also promotes the growth of mind.

To push this idea even further, we might say that the primary aim of education is to enable youngsters to learn how to invent themselves—to learn how to create their own minds. Cultural literacy provides not only *recreation* but also *re-creation*. What we re-create throughout life is the self.

Collaboration. A fourth aim for schools that can make a difference in the lives of students here and now is the provision of opportunities to learn to work with others collectively, cooperatively, and in harmony. We tend to think about schools as producing solo performances. We also need to think about schools as helping students learn to work collaboratively with others, particularly with students who are culturally different from themselves. What we ought to seek through education is both individuation and integration.

By individuation, I mean that schools ought to cultivate what is personally and productively idiosyncratic about each student. Schools ought to promote the realization of each student's distinctive talents, aptitudes, and proclivities. And at least to some degree, schools ought to help students identify their individual strengths and make it possible for them to follow their bliss.

But schools should also help students learn how to work with others on meaningful projects. The process of collaboration gives birth to new ideas and develops social skills that matter in a democracy. Schools should provide ample opportunity for such activities to take place and for the forms of learning that those activities promote to be realized. Education, after all, is more than an individual affair. At a time when a sense of community seems to be dissipating in our neighborhoods, the opportunity to form community through collaborative work in schools is especially important.

Service. Related to collaborative work is a fifth aspiration for schools today: the creation of conditions through which students can make a contribution to the larger community. Schooling should be about more than individual achievement intended to serve one's

own personal ambitions. Providing payback to the community makes sense, not only as a form of appropriate socialization, but also as a moral virtue.

Service learning moves in this direction. In addition to formal service learning programs, schools should plan opportunities for all students to have some connection with cultural centers, social agencies, medical institutions, and other community resources to which they might make some contribution. We are so wrapped up in test scores that we often marginalize the importance of developing socially responsible citizens who are willing to contribute to the larger social welfare and who know how to do so. This aim, too, is appropriate for schools today.

What Schools Must Become

To achieve the aims I have described, we need a radically different conception of what matters in education. Test scores need to take a back seat to more educationally significant outcomes. As long as schools treat test scores as the major proxies for student achievement and educational quality, we will have a hard time refocusing our attention on what really matters in education.

The issue is not one of having accountability or not having accountability. We are all accountable: The question is how. We need an approach to accountability that is wider than measurement and more sensitive to nuances that count. Such an approach will require a radically different view of where we look to find out how well students are learning. After all, the major lessons of schooling manifest themselves outside the context of schools. The primary aim of education is not to enable students to do well in school, but to help them do well in the lives they lead outside of school. We ought to focus on what students do when they can choose their own activities.

We also need to revise our school programs so that they address the important issues outlined here. So much of what we do in our schools is simply a reflection of traditional categories that basically serve as selection mechanisms. We need to question these traditions. How do we justify what we require students to pay attention to? Do most students need a course in calculus? How about one in chemistry? Do we believe that the subjects we teach develop the students' minds? Do we think that these subjects are relevant to tasks beyond schooling? Do we teach these courses because they are sources of satisfaction to students? We need to raise such questions and develop thoughtful responses. When our answers to these questions are found wanting, revision is in order.

Finally, we need to embrace a broader view of mind, by which I mean a broader view of the ways in which thinking occurs. By no means is thinking limited to what words alone can carry. The limits of our cognition are not defined by the limits of our language. As Michael Polanyi commented, "We know more than we can tell."¹ The acknowledgment that thinking occurs in any of the sensory modalities that humans possess—sight, sound, touch, taste, smell—opens up the door for the development of programs that can do justice to the ways in which humans do think and have thought throughout their history on this planet. We may not want to address every aspect of mind that can possibly be cultivated, but we should pay attention to our options and make selections on the basis of grounds that we can justify.

Preparation for tomorrow is best served by meaningful education today. The development of mind is a form of cultural achievement in which schools have an important role to play. If we endorse these propositions, we will realize that genuine reform of our schools requires a shift in paradigms from those with which we have become comfortable to others that more adequately address the potential that humans possess for shaping not only the world, but themselves.

Endnote

¹ Polanyi, M. (1966). *The tacit dimension*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, p. 4.