

The Meaning of Education

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Recently, a university professor wrote a letter to the editor of the local newspaper. He commented that people shouldn't put too much weight on the recently released trends in SRA scores of the state's high school students. The professor went on to describe some of the unanswered questions about the nature and value of assessment. He mentioned that one of the problems with assessment was the ongoing disagreement on the very purpose of education.

A few days later, the paper printed a scathing response from a community member who questioned whether the University really wanted someone on their staff who didn't even know the purpose of education. Clearly, this person assumed that *his* definition of education was shared by all. What is the *meaning* of education?

Webster defines *education* as the process of educating or teaching (now that's really useful, isn't it?) *Educate* is further defined as "to develop the knowledge, skill, or character of..." Thus, from these definitions, we might assume that the purpose of education is to develop the knowledge, skill, or character of students. Unfortunately, this definition offers little unless we further define words such as *develop*, *knowledge*, and *character*.

What is *knowledge*? Is it a body of information that exists "out there"—apart from the human thought processes that developed it? If we look at the standards and benchmarks developed by many states—or at E. D. Hirsch's list of information needed for *Cultural Literacy*⁽¹⁾, we might assume this definition of knowledge to be correct. However, there is considerable research leading others to believe that knowledge arises in the mind of an individual when that person interacts with an idea or experience.

This is hardly a new argument. In ancient Greece, Socrates argued that education was about drawing out what was already within the student. (As many of you know, the word *education* comes from the Latin *e-ducere* meaning "to lead out.") At the same time, the Sophists, a group of itinerant teachers, promised to *give* students the necessary knowledge and skills to gain positions with the city-state.

There is a dangerous tendency to assume that when people use the same words, they perceive a situation in the same way. This is rarely the case. Once one gets beyond a dictionary definition—a meaning that is often of little practical value—the *meaning* we assign to a word is a *belief*, not an absolute fact. Here are a couple of examples.

"The central task of education is to implant a will and facility for learning; it should produce not learned but learning people. The truly human society is a learning society, where grandparents, parents, and children are students together." ~Eric Hoffer

"No one has yet realized the wealth of sympathy, the kindness and generosity hidden in the soul of a child. The effort of every true education should be to unlock that treasure." ~Emma Goldman

"The only purpose of education is to teach a student how to live his life-by developing his mind and equipping him to deal with reality. The training he needs is theoretical, i.e., conceptual. He has to be taught to think, to understand, to integrate, to prove. He has to be taught the essentials of the knowledge discovered in the past-and he has to be equipped to acquire further knowledge by his own effort." ~Ayn Rand

"The aim of education should be to teach us rather how to think, than what to think—rather to improve our minds, so as to enable us to think for ourselves, than to load the memory with the thoughts of other men." ~Bill Beattie

“The one real object of education is to leave a man in the condition of continually asking questions.” ~Bishop Creighton

“The central job of schools is to maximize the capacity of each student.” ~Carol Ann Tomlinson

These quotations demonstrate the diversity of beliefs about the purpose of education. How would you complete the statement, “The purpose of education is...”? If you ask five of your fellow teachers to complete that sentence, it is likely that you'll have five different statements. Some will place the focus on knowledge, some on the teacher, and others on the student. *Yet people's beliefs in the purpose of education lie at the heart of their teaching behaviors.*

Despite what the letter writer might have wished, *there is no definition of education that all, or even most, educators agree upon.* The meanings they attach to the word are complex beliefs arising from their own values and experiences. To the extent that those beliefs differ, the experience of students in today's classrooms can never be the same. Worse, many educators have never been asked to state their beliefs—or even to reflect on what they believe. At the very least, teachers owe it to their students to bring their definitions into consciousness and examine them for validity.

Purposes and Functions

To make matters more complicated, theorists have made a distinction between the *purpose* of education and the *functions* of education.⁽²⁾ A *purpose* is the fundamental goal of the process—an end to be achieved. *Functions* are other outcomes that may occur as a natural result of the process—byproducts or consequences of schooling.

For example, some teachers believe that the transmission of knowledge is the primary *purpose* of education, while the transfer of knowledge from school to the real world is something that happens naturally as a consequence of possessing that knowledge—a *function* of education. Because a purpose is an expressed goal, more effort is put into attaining it. Functions are assumed to occur without directed effort. For this reason it's valuable to figure out which outcomes you consider a fundamental purpose of education. Which of the following do you actually include in your planning.

- * Acquisition of information about the past and present: includes traditional disciplines such as literature, history, science, mathematics
- * Formation of healthy social and/or formal relationships among and between students, teachers, others
- * Capacity/ability to evaluate information and to predict future outcomes (decision-making)
- * Capacity/ability to seek out alternative solutions and evaluate them (problem solving)
- * Development of mental and physical skills: motor, thinking, communication, social, aesthetic
- * Knowledge of moral practices and ethical standards acceptable by society/culture
- * Capacity/ability to recognize and evaluate different points of view
- * Respect: giving and receiving recognition as human beings
- * Indoctrination into the culture
- * Capacity/ability to live a fulfilling life
- * Capacity/ability to earn a living: career education
- * Sense of well-being: mental and physical health
- * Capacity/ability to be a good citizen
- * Capacity/ability to think creatively
- * Cultural appreciation: art, music, humanities
- * Understanding of human relations and motivations
- * Acquisition/clarification of values related to the physical environment

- * Acquisition/clarification of personal values
- * Self-realization/self-reflection: awareness of one's abilities and goals
- * Self-esteem/self-efficacy

As Tom Peters reminds us, "What gets measured, gets done." Regardless of high-sounding rhetoric about the development of the total child, *it is the content of assessments that largely drives education*. How is the capacity/ability to think creatively assessed in today's schools? To what extent is the typical student recognized and given respect? How often are students given the opportunity to recognize and evaluate different points of view when multiple choice tests require a single 'correct' answer?

Teachers who hold a more humanistic view of the purpose of education often experience stress because the *meaning* they assign to education differs greatly from the *meaning* assigned by society or their institution. It is clear in listening to the language of education that its primary focus is on knowledge and teaching rather than on the learner. *Students are expected to conform to schools rather than schools serving the needs of students*.

Stopping to identify and agree upon a fundamental purpose or purposes of education is rare. One sees nebulous statements in school mission statements, but they are often of the "Mom, baseball, and apple pie" variety that offer little substance on which to build a school culture. Creating meaningful and lasting change in education is unlikely without revisiting this basic definition. At the very least, educators must be challenged to identify and reexamined their beliefs in the light of present knowledge.

Substantive change must begin with a shift of thinking from things to people. The focus must shift from what's "out there—the curriculum, assessments, classroom arrangement, books, computers—to the fundamental assumptions about and definitions of education held by educators and policymakers. NASA did not send men to the moon by building on the chassis of a model T. In the same way, education cannot hope to move beyond its present state on the chassis of 18th century education.

References

- 1 Hirsch, E. D. Jr. (1987). *Cultural Literacy*. Houghton Mifflin
- 2 Callaway, R. (1979) Teachers' Beliefs Concerning Values and the Functions and Purposes of Schooling, Eric Document Reproduction Service No. ED 177 110

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