
What Does It Mean to Educate the Whole Child?

Nel Noddings

*In a democratic society, schools must go beyond
teaching fundamental skills.*

Public schools in the United States today are under enormous pressure to show—through improved test scores—that they are providing every student with a thorough and efficient education. The stated intention of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is to accomplish this goal and reverse years of failure to educate many of our inner-city and minority children. But even if we accept that the motives behind NCLB are benign, the law seems fatally flawed.

Some critics have declared NCLB an unfunded mandate because it makes costly demands without providing the resources to meet them. Others point to its bureaucratic complexity; its unattainable main goal (100 percent of students proficient in reading and math by 2014); its motivationally undesirable methods (threats, punishments, and pernicious comparisons); its overdependence on standardized tests; its demoralizing effects; and its corrupting influences on administrators, teachers, and students.

All these criticisms are important, but NCLB has a more fundamental problem: its failure to address, or even ask, the basic questions raised in this issue of *Educational Leadership*: What are the proper aims of education? How do public schools serve a democratic society? What does it mean to educate the whole child?

The Aims of Education

Every flourishing society has debated the aims of education. This debate cannot produce final answers, good for all times and all places, because the aims of education are tied to the nature and ideals of a particular society. But the aims promoted by NCLB are clearly far too narrow. Surely, we should demand more from our schools than to educate people to be proficient in reading and mathematics. Too many highly proficient people commit fraud, pursue paths to success marked by greed, and care little about how their actions affect the lives of others.

Some people argue that schools are best organized to accomplish academic goals and that we should charge other institutions with the task of pursuing the physical, moral, social, emotional, spiritual, and aesthetic aims that we associate with the whole child. The schools would do a better job, these people maintain, if they were freed to focus on the job for which they were established.

Those who make this argument have not considered the history of education. Public schools in the United States—as well as schools across different societies and historical eras—were established as much for moral and social reasons as for academic instruction. In his 1818 *Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia*, for example, Thomas Jefferson included in the “objects of primary education” such qualities as morals, understanding of duties to neighbors and country, knowledge of rights, and intelligence and faithfulness in social relations.

Periodically since then, education thinkers have described and analyzed the multiple aims of education. For example, the National Education Association listed seven aims in its 1918 report, *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*: (1) health; (2) command of the fundamental processes; (3) worthy home membership; (4) vocation; (5) citizenship; (6) worthy use of leisure; and (7) ethical character (Kliebard, 1995, p. 98). Later in the century, educators trying to revive the progressive tradition advocated open education, which aimed to

encourage creativity, invention, cooperation, and democratic participation in the classroom and in lifelong learning (Silberman, 1973).

Recently, I have suggested another aim: happiness (Noddings, 2003). Great thinkers have associated happiness with such qualities as a rich intellectual life, rewarding human relationships, love of home and place, sound character, good parenting, spirituality, and a job that one loves. We incorporate this aim into education not only by helping our students understand the components of happiness but also by making classrooms genuinely happy places.

Few of these aims can be pursued directly, the way we attack behavioral objectives. Indeed, I dread the day when I will enter a classroom and find *Happiness* posted as an instructional objective. Although I may be able to state exactly what students should be able to do when it comes to adding fractions, I cannot make such specific statements about happiness, worthy home membership, use of leisure, or ethical character. These great aims are meant to guide our instructional decisions. They are meant to broaden our thinking—to remind us to ask *why* we have chosen certain curriculums, pedagogical methods, classroom arrangements, and learning objectives. They remind us, too, that students are whole persons—not mere collections of attributes, some to be addressed in one place and others to be addressed elsewhere.

In insisting that schools and other social institutions share responsibility for nurturing the whole child, I recognize that different institutions will have different emphases. Obviously, schools will take greater responsibility for teaching reading and arithmetic; medical clinics for health checkups and vaccinations; families for housing and clothing; and places of worship for spiritual instruction.

But needs cannot be rigidly compartmentalized. The massive human problems of society demand holistic treatment. For example, leading medical clinics are now working with lawyers and social workers to improve housing conditions for children and to enhance early childhood learning (Shipler, 2004). We know that healthy families do

much more than feed and clothe their children. Similarly, schools must be concerned with the total development of children.

Aims of Education

The habits we form from childhood make no small difference, but rather they make all the difference.

—Aristotle

Democracy and Schools

A productive discussion of education’s aims must acknowledge that schools are established to serve both individuals and the larger society. What does the society expect of its schools?

From the current policy debates about public education, one would think that U.S. society simply needs competent workers who will keep the nation competitive in the world market. But both history and common sense tell us that a democratic society expects much more: It wants graduates who exhibit sound character, have a social conscience, think critically, are willing to make commitments, and are aware of global problems (Soder, Goodlad, & McMannon, 2001).

In addition, a democratic society needs an education system that helps to sustain its democracy by developing thoughtful citizens who can make wise civic choices. By its very nature, as Dewey (1916) pointed out, a democratic society is continually changing—sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse—and it requires citizens who are willing to participate and competent enough to distinguish between the better and the worse.

If we base policy debate about education on a serious consideration of society’s needs, we will ask thoughtful questions: What modes

of discipline will best contribute to the development of sound character? What kinds of peer interactions might help students develop a social conscience? What topics and issues will foster critical thinking? What projects and extracurricular activities might call forth social and personal commitment? Should we assign the task of developing global awareness to social studies courses, or should we spread the responsibility throughout the entire curriculum (Noddings, 2005b)?

In planning education programs for a democratic society, we must use our understanding of the aims of education to explore these questions and many more. Unfortunately, public policy in the United States today concentrates on just one of the *Cardinal Principles* proposed by NEA in 1918: “command of the fundamental processes.” Although reading and math are important, we need to promote competence in these subjects while also promoting our other aims. Students can develop reading, writing, speaking, and mathematical skills as they plan and stage dramatic performances, design classroom murals, compose a school paper, and participate in establishing classroom rules.

If present reports about the effects of NCLB on the education of inner-city and minority children are supported by further evidence, we should be especially concerned about our democratic future. Wealthier students are enjoying a rich and varied curriculum and many opportunities to engage in the arts, whereas many of our less wealthy students spend their school days bent over worksheets in an effort to boost standardized test scores (Meier & Wood, 2004). Such reports call into question the notion that NCLB will improve schooling for our poorest students. Surely all students deserve rich educational experiences—experiences that will enable them to become active citizens in a democratic society.

Life in a healthy democracy requires participation, and students must begin to practice participation in our schools. Working together in small groups can furnish such practice, provided that the emphasis is consistently on working together—not on formal group processes or the final grade for a product. Similarly, students can participate in

establishing the rules that will govern classroom conduct. It is not sufficient, and it may actually undermine our democracy, to concentrate on producing people who do well on standardized tests and who define success as getting a well-paid job. Democracy means more than voting and maintaining economic productivity, and life means more than making money and beating others to material goods.

The Whole Child

Most of us want to be treated as persons, not as the “sinus case in treatment room 3” or the “refund request on line 4.” But we live under the legacy of bureaucratic thought—the idea that every physical and social function should be assigned to its own institution. In the pursuit of efficiency, we have remade ourselves into a collection of discrete attributes and needs. This legacy is strong in medicine, law, social work, business, and education.

Even when educators recognize that students are whole persons, the temptation arises to describe the whole in terms of collective parts and to make sure that every aspect, part, or attribute is somehow “covered” in the curriculum. Children are moral beings; therefore, we must provide character education programs. Children are artistically inclined; therefore, we must provide art classes. Children’s physical fitness is declining; therefore, we must provide physical education and nutrition classes. And then we complain that the curriculum is overloaded!

We should not retreat to a curriculum advisory committee and ask, “Now where should we fit this topic into the already overloaded curriculum?” Although we cannot discard all the fragmented subjects in our present school system and start from scratch, we can and should ask all teachers to stretch their subjects to meet the needs and interests of the whole child. Working within the present subject-centered curriculum, we can ask math and science teachers as well as English and social studies teachers to address moral, social, emotional, and

aesthetic questions with respect and sensitivity when they arise (Simon, 2001). In high school math classes, we can discuss Descartes' proof of God's existence (is it flawed?); the social injustices and spiritual longing in *Flatland*, Edwin Abbott's 1884 novel about geometry; the logic and illogic in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; and the wonders of numbers such as φ and π .

For the most part, discussions of moral and social issues should respond to students' expressed needs, but some prior planning can be useful, too. When a math teacher recites a poem or reads a biographical piece or a science fiction story, when she points to the beauty or elegance of a particular result, when she pauses to discuss the social nature of scientific work, students may begin to see connections—to see a whole person at work (Noddings, 2005a). Teachers can also look carefully at the subjects that students are required to learn and ask, "How can I include history, literature, science, mathematics, and the arts in my own lessons?" This inclusion would in itself relieve the awful sense of fragmentation that students experience.

The benefits of a more holistic perspective can also extend beyond the academic curriculum and apply to the school climate and the issue of safety and security. Schools often tackle this problem the way they tackle most problems, piece by piece: more surveillance cameras, more security guards, better metal detectors, more locks, shorter lunch periods, more rules. It seems like a dream to remember that most schools 40 years ago had no security guards, cameras, or metal detectors. And yet schools are not safer now than they were in the 1960s and 1970s. We need to ask *why* there has been a decline in security and how we should address the problem. Do we need more prisonlike measures, or is something fundamentally wrong with the entire school arrangement?

Almost certainly, the sense of community and trust in our schools has declined. Perhaps the most effective way to make our schools safer would be to restore this sense of trust. I am not suggesting that we get rid of all our security paraphernalia overnight, but rather that we ask

what social arrangements might reduce the need for such measures. Smaller schools? Multiyear assignment of teachers and students? Class and school meetings to establish rules and discuss problems? Dedication to teaching the whole child in every class? Serious attention to the integration of subject matter? Gentle but persistent invitations to all students to participate? More opportunities to engage in the arts and in social projects? More encouragement to speak out with the assurance of being heard? More opportunities to work together? Less competition? Warmer hospitality for parents? More public forums on school issues? Reduction of test-induced stress? More opportunities for informal conversation? Expanding, not reducing, course offerings? Promoting the idea of fun and humor in learning? Educating teachers more broadly? All of the above?

We will not find the solution to problems of violence, alienation, ignorance, and unhappiness in increasing our security apparatus, imposing more tests, punishing schools for their failure to produce 100 percent proficiency, or demanding that teachers be knowledgeable in “the subjects they teach.” Instead, we must allow teachers and students to interact as whole persons, and we must develop policies that treat the school as a whole community. The future of both our children and our democracy depend on our moving in this direction.

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Nel Noddings resides in Ocean Grove, New Jersey, and is Lee L. Jacks Professor of Education, Emerita, at Stanford University, Stanford, California; noddings@stanford.edu.

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