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What Should We Teach? Pages 26-29

Literacies for Life

To meet the demands of modern life, students need three kinds of literacy—economic, social and emotional, and aesthetic.

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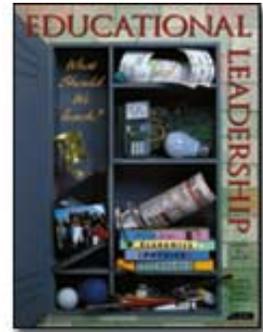
We travel around the solar system, under the seas, and inside the cell; we are wired and wireless; we can cure disease and treat disorders. With all these advances, the issue of deciding what to teach has never been more difficult. Curriculum designers face exciting but daunting challenges. The volume of data has grown exponentially, and information technology has made accessing that data possible by many means. Traditional categories and disciplines are breaking down and recombining, and new fields of study are emerging. Paralleling this growth in content is the public's heightened expectations for education.

Those who design curriculums also face the challenge of responding to a changing social context. New family structures and reconfigured gender, ethnic, and racial identities have reshaped the communities that schools serve. English language and European ethnicity no longer define the U.S. population. Diversity and globalization have blurred cultural barriers.

Moreover, opinions about the role and nature of U.S. public schools are increasingly at odds with one another. Privatization, charter, and home-school movements contest the primacy of public education. The reformers' motivations differ, too, often aimed at corporate profits instead of the social weal. Policymakers and pundits—usually noneducators—often impose policies on schools. Publishers, too, are a powerful voice in curriculum because of the materials that they market and the clout of their political lobbying efforts.

In addition, educators face changes in their profession. Unable to raise real incomes for teachers during the prosperous 1990s, U.S. schools now confront an ongoing loss of talented teachers to other fields. High-achieving minorities and women, for whom education was once one of few available professions, now take other career paths. Out-of-field teachers and those with emergency licenses are increasingly prevalent: 49,000 teachers occupy these two categories in California alone.

Education, the largest of all professions, is also sub-dividing in ways that may be perilous to its effectiveness. The curriculum field has seen the gradual separation of college faculty from public school educators, each group with its own conferences, organizations, journals, and



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perspectives. University-based theorists seem increasingly distant from the curriculum directors who make the choices about what students in public schools are taught. This gradual divergence within the curriculum field is more a function of numbers and scale rather than of conscious design, but it is another development that shapes curriculum work today.

But what are the skills and knowledge that students need today? How should curriculum designers shape students' schooling? We should look at what students need and broaden both the scope and depth of curriculum to meet those needs.

Economic Literacy

In the United States, where pragmatism has a strong tradition, the least controversial purpose for schooling is to prepare students for economic productivity, both for their own well-being and in the interest of society. We have tried to fulfill this mission through vocational education and the practical application of knowledge in the academic curriculum. Neglected in this curricular tradition, however, is the development of personal economic skills, including an understanding of credit, real estate ownership, retirement planning, taxation, and investing. Understanding topics such as these, which can make or break families financially, is necessary for prospering in adult life.

The consequences of our general ignorance of these topics can be dramatic. Recently, for example, the U.S. Internal Revenue Service stopped a large tax preparation firm from touting "instant refunds" that were actually short-term loans with up to a 500 percent annual rate of interest. Many state governments are struggling to control "payday loan" operations that advance cash against forthcoming paychecks at similarly exorbitant rates of interest. Consumers have fallen victim to high-interest second mortgages that deplete home equity, add hidden charges, and cause default. Such business practices aggravate disparities of wealth, and economic ignorance leads to victimization and financial ruin. These scams would not succeed if the general public had mastered the basic principles of economic literacy.

Why have we been so remiss in addressing this content in the curriculum? One reason is that many education critics try to steer schooling toward the three *Rs* and a liberal arts curriculum. The insight they miss—and have missed for more than 100 years—is that the best intellectual learning occurs in a context that illustrates its practical value. Demonstrating the impact of compound interest, for example, makes math teaching more effective and develops students' life skills.

Often reluctant to associate themselves with practical affairs, educators are also at fault for this lapse. They have been slow to adapt schooling to the practical needs of all students, including students' needs as future working adults. But educators do not have to choose between theory and practice; they can combine practical applications with general principles.

Social and Emotional Literacy

Social and emotional skills should play a bigger part in the curriculum, though such an imperative flies in the face of the current mania for standards and high-stakes testing. Least controversial is the need to develop an appreciation of citizenship and civic values. According to

the 2000 U.S. census, the percentage of U.S. citizens who vote has decreased; about 60 percent of those eligible voted 50 years ago, but less than 50 percent vote now. Hispanics, the fastest-growing and largest minority in the United States, vote at a significantly lower rate. Such trends threaten the social contract and demand a strong response from educators.

Once again, we can convey worthy academic subject matter while addressing this practical aim. Print, film, and other media can bring to life the story of participation in a democratic society—including the place of unions, boycotts, protests, mass rallies, courts, and the ballot box—and in the social evolution of the United States. Social studies curriculum standards typically minimize goals of this type, focusing instead on laundry lists of lower-order knowledge objectives. But if we cannot arouse young people to participate in democracy, we can expect disaffection and a weakening of democratic institutions.

More controversial, but just as needed in the curriculum, are personal and family skills that affect daily life. We have made some headway in health education; teaching about the hazards of smoking, substance abuse, suicide, and HIV among young people has mobilized parents and confirmed the preventive power of education. Educators also need to address another set of less obvious aims. Teaching students how to manage stress, for example, would prevent the onset of many health problems. Obesity is a great affliction of youth, affecting one in seven children in the United States; teaching nutrition and exercise could address this epidemic. Following the principle that students learn best when they can connect new knowledge with their experience, educators can integrate these topics in psychology, health education, or biology.

The greatest lost opportunity in the area of social and emotional literacy is an understanding of developmental psychology. Although each person's life and relationships are colored by psychology, few people understand the concept of developmental stages, the characteristics of those stages, and how they affect interactions among individuals. The potential to advance this curriculum is evident in the popular acceptance of such terms as *puberty*, *adolescence*, *second childhood*, and *midlife crisis*, but we need to move from a conversational familiarity with these words to an organized, comprehensive grasp of the evolution of personality. A deeper understanding of developmental psychology could help head off the social and economic costs of conflict in the home and the workplace.

Literature is the best traditional subject matter for helping students understand human psychology. The challenge in curriculum is to bring these psychological themes to the foreground and to give them the context that makes them comprehensible. Studying films provides another vivid opportunity for teaching social and emotional literacy while meeting conventional expectations of appropriate scholastic content.

Aesthetic Literacy

Education has an aesthetic component. The mastery of a subject invites rewards similar to those that come with the mastery of an art form. This creative dimension of education addresses central human needs—for example, feeling competent to intercede in one's environment and having the means to do so effectively. Knowledge, however, is not

instrumental for action only; gaining knowledge is a rich experience in itself, akin to aesthetic appreciation, providing a major source of meaning and enjoyment. Academic study is potentially inspirational, curative, sustaining, and generative. The young people we teach deserve to hear us make this case. Daily life, the media, and the routines of school allow messages about truths and enduring principles to slip away when we should emblazon them on school doorways and on classroom walls.

Art should permeate the school environment through painting, sculpture, poetry, and other forms of expression. Our readings should be more timely and literary than textbooks. What does *Harper's*—or the *New York Times*—say about matters of taste and form and about politics, science, and the economy? The Internet also has current, unexpurgated information about these topics. Students and teachers should explore together the great myth-making machines of our time: film, television, and popular music.

Schools should stand out from the other institutions of society. What we do obviously has a practical impact, clearly affecting economic affairs, but education must also provide another type of meaning. We need the moral courage to push society in alternative directions and to resist the pressures that steer us away from unconventional, higher-order aspirations. This tension among institutional aims is, however, central to education's purpose. The contest of viewpoints and values generates insights that would not otherwise emerge. Our role is to be a source of innovation and inspiration, to sometimes be different, to speak other views, and to bear witness to a human realm not governed by material values, or, for that matter, by sectarian religious ideals.

In our public schools, we are uncomfortable with talk about spirit and soul. Such terms remain the province of religion in U.S. society, and their use in schools has been discouraged. There remains the language of aesthetics, however, and the approach to spirituality that it represents. Students and teachers cannot fully experience education without an awareness of the ultimate aims of our pursuit. The curriculum, at its best, offers one way to think deeply about meaning and experience.

Application and Inspiration

Today's schools are caught in curriculums that are neither practical nor steeped in higher-order learning. On the one hand, we do not help students deal with the powerful economic, family, and health issues that directly affect their lives. We lose an opportunity to engage learners and to prepare them for the future. On the other hand, we tread lightly around the ultimate rewards of learning, fearful of grandiosity as well as of infringement on the province of organized religion. Our curriculum is, therefore, both less practical and less inspirational than it should be. Students lack motivation because we have limited our scope to an unsatisfying middle ground. We lapse into a blandness that leads many students to lose interest in school. By not inspiring motivation, we minimize our effectiveness.

Among extreme positions, the center is normally not a bad place to be. To sustain consensus for the existence of public education, U.S. schools have to operate among competing viewpoints. But schools should not find a middle ground by neglecting education's full range of

purposes. Currently, we achieve our balance through constraint, neglect, and avoidance of innovation and insight. We must create consensus from a more thoughtful inclusion of the range of human experience. When we, through the curriculum, reach more broadly into realms of application and inspiration, we will create the type of life in schools that the times—and our students—demand.

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