

What Is Relevant for Today's Students?

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ANYTHING is relevant to something else to the degree that it has a "bearing upon or [is] connected with the matter in hand." There are degrees of relevancy. In educational circles obviously the term in recent years has been intended to designate a high degree of bearing on the matter in hand. Hence, the only basis on which educators can determine what is relevant in a program of schooling is to analyze fully what the matter in hand is, and then judge the degree of bearing which the item under consideration has on it. Such analyses require a statement of a point of view about schooling itself.

Basic Considerations in Relevancy

The two basic determinants of any program of schooling are the students being educated and the society which establishes the schools—the personal and the social factors. From the standpoint of the student, primary consideration must be given to his or her capabilities and potentialities, motivations, aspirations, self-concepts, status of personal, intellectual, emotional, and social development, interests, "hangups," the nature and character of the family or foster family and peer group relationships and climate, and the whole gamut of similar characteristics that shape the development of an individual. The social group provides the value

systems, the social pressures, the conditions of living, a system of priorities of wants and comforts, the ethics for personal and group living, the modes and means for communication, including language, opportunities available for productive work, a prestige hierarchy of success, happiness, and security in the group, the methods and means of social advancement, and opportunities for contributing to the improvement of the life of the social group.

These are basic considerations in defining the primary purposes and goals of schooling, in planning and carrying out an educational program within the school, in selecting modes of instruction, in allocating resources, and in determining priorities among feasible programs, courses, activities, and innovations. These are bases on which we can decide what is relevant.

Two axioms of curriculum planning also must be considered in examining the relevancy of any bit or, for that matter, the entire program of schooling: (a) The general goals defined by a school—the broad basic statements of purposes for which the school is established—may be attained through many alternative routes or sets of learning opportunities; and (b) In planning and carrying

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out learning opportunities, not only are the primary goals controlling factors, but the concomitant outcomes that may occur as a result of participation in the activity may be highly important considerations in selecting the route to be used in attaining the goal.

Let us now apply these two sets of considerations to the question. Only a few examples will be possible, but they may illustrate the application of appropriate criteria and points of view in determining relevancy. Obviously, my own views on the goals of the school and the nature of applicable criteria will be evident. The reader has the same privilege in judging relevancy of any segment of the school's program.

Is It Relevant? Why?

Is a course or activity that provides students an opportunity to play and listen to hard rock music relevant in today's school? That is, to what degree does it have a "bearing upon the matter in hand"? If a school has accepted as a general goal "To Help Students Appreciate Culture and Beauty in Their World," the answer is "yes," *provided*

such an offering is only a small part of the school's program in aesthetics.

Why? Because music in the popular idiom of the day (whether it survives or not) is a means of involving some students in musical activities who probably would reject the more traditional offerings. Moreover, the serious and competent student of music will find it an excellent vehicle for understanding musical theory, the nature of style, and similar matters of interest. The course or activity will be even more relevant if an insightful instructor uses it as a means of comparing and contrasting rock with other kinds of music, including a Beethoven symphony. But for many students in a school, rock is not their dish, nor should it be; they should have opportunities for participating in other types of music activities, particularly advanced programs in composition and theory and orchestras and choral groups. There are many alternate routes to acquiring an appreciation of good music, as well as to the development of skills and knowledge that may become the basis for a career; and such opportunities, too, are relevant for many students.

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gory for the U.S. Office of Education, and in many local schools (especially if they can get a chunk of the federal money available). Is career education relevant? Again, we must answer "yes, *provided* . . ." The term is being so broadly defined that almost anything a school provides in learning opportunities may be brought under the career umbrella, but I will examine segments of the project.

Plans to acquaint young children, even at the kindergarten level, with the occupations of their father, with some of the common kinds of jobs performed by people in the community, and with means of carrying on commerce and supplying the important needs of people for food and shelter are highly rewarding routes to a number of general goals of the school. Details are not necessary, but such activities provide opportunities for learning to communicate effectively, "to examine and use information," and "to understand and practice the skills of family living."

If career education programs enhance the opportunities for students to analyze, with the insightful help of a counselor, their own capabilities, talents, aspirations, and developmental status in general, particularly beginning about age 12 to 15, it is highly relevant to the students (although all of this should be taking place without career education as a vehicle). If such efforts and the tenor of the project nudge, push, or direct young, immature students into the choice of or preparation for a specific area of work, it is highly irrelevant; in fact, the antithesis of valid education.

Why? Because it perpetuates and intensifies a classification system of young people that militates against the fullest measure of personal development, tends to limit greatly choices among occupational opportunities in the future, and runs counter to social experience in this day and age on the validity of such choices early in one's life.

Furthermore, actual preparation for a vocation in high school is highly irrelevant in today's world. Why? First, it decreases opportunities in school to "gain a general education" (another stated general goal), except as an insightful instructor in vocational courses may include some general education

outcomes as concomitant learnings, which, observation shows, is not commonly done. Second, much of the vocational training in high school does not adequately develop an understanding of basic principles and theory, which, as Harry Broudy points out, is the essence of a real education.¹

Third, what is the hurry? Let every student in high school have more time—at best still not ample—to explore the real world: engage in community activities and study, investigate personal concerns both of an individual and a social nature, engage in personally significant activities independently in research, investigations, or creative endeavors, serve an internship in community services (not vocationally designed or planned), probe deeply into one or more fields of study, particularly disciplinary areas, test out one's interest and capabilities in several areas of study (these tryouts may guide a choice of occupational preparation in post-secondary institutions), and similar feasible activities.

What about the relevancy of courses, minicourses, or other sets of learning opportunities in such areas as sex education, drug education, driver and safety education, and man's relation to his environment? Highly relevant, *provided* . . . These areas of study are indeed relevant from the standpoint of student concern and interest, and relevant in terms of contributing to a student's ability to cope with his or her world. For these reasons, they provide an excellent alternative route to the attainment of several widely accepted general goals of a school.

But the crucial point of relevancy from a social point of view is whether such sets of learning opportunities do push on in depth to the attainment of these goals. Many of the programs and much of the material with which I am familiar seldom get beyond even the first or possibly the second or third level of Bloom's categories of objectives in the cognitive domain, ignoring and neglecting

¹ If the reader gets only one thing from this article (and Dick Foster says that is all one is entitled to in a speech or an article), I hope that it will be the stimulus to read Broudy's book, *The Real World of the Public Schools* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1972).

overt efforts to attain objectives in the higher levels of the cognitive process, such as generalization, synthesis, and conceptualization, nor seek to attain hardly any in the affective domain, such as judgment, valuing, and developing sets of generalized values. These possibilities exist in such subjects—it is just that too few teachers take advantage of them. However, another consideration enters in the matter of relevancy: Are such programs of current concern and interest squeezing out other sets of learning opportunities that could be even more relevant (in terms of our full set of criteria) for many students? I am inclined to think that they do.

How relevant are special programs in remedial reading? A glance shows that many are of little relevancy or are even irrelevant. Why? The large file boxes full of drill cards, tests, practice exercises, directions for proceeding with the activities, etc., violate, in my opinion, the criteria of needs, motivation, and capabilities with respect to most students subjected to such programs. I recognize that some good programs are being carried on, but they seem to be a meager exception.

Drill cards in profusion from commercially published sets: no; reading material that must be absorbed before a student can do something of interest or wrestle with a concern: yes. A 14-year-old youth who wants to overhaul a small engine, perhaps his parents' lawnmower engine or a motorcycle engine, and must read accurately the mechanical instruction book before he can complete the job will probably learn to read in a hurry, assuming no physical deterrents to reading. A seven-year-old who wants to plant a few seeds and tend them as they grow in the school window box or in a plot at home will probably learn readily to read the seed catalog or a simple government bulletin on planting and caring for growing things.

What Is Relevant?

One final point about what is relevant in today's schools. The school as an institution has three primary functions: (a) to contribute in significant ways to the transmission of the culture of our society; (b) to serve as

a major agency in the socialization of the young; and (c) to contribute fully to the maximum development of each student. Most of us feel that our schools have not adequately fulfilled these essential functions in the past.

But such inadequacies do not call for or justify demands that the school as an institution be radically uprooted, become merely one of many voluntary agencies for the schooling of the young, or serve simply as a vehicle for the radical reform of society. The public has been bombarded in recent years by such statements as these: "There is a crisis in American education precisely because Americans are quietly satisfied with the educational institutions, and deluded by its icons. By any dispassionate judgment, the country's educational system is not fulfilling even the modest objectives expected of it."² "Life is learning; but learning dies when it is constrained in a certain place, provided only for a select group, conveyed through certain people and media, confined to outmoded categories of thought, chopped up in courses, periods, units, lessons, lectures, measured by invidious certificates and credentials."³

Hogwash! The school as an institution is more relevant than it has ever been in the history of the nation. The basic purposes of education can only be attained through a system of schools that are relevant in today's world. To assure that schools have a high degree of "bearing on the matter in hand," professional educators in league with students, parents, and other citizens should reaffirm the basic values of the American society, define the basic goals of the school, and then work together to plan and provide a highly flexible, diversified set of learning opportunities that constitute appropriate routes for attaining these goals—routes that permit students to choose in terms of personal needs and interests the experiences most meaningful and significant to them in striving for these goals. □

² Theodore R.Sizer. *Places for Learning, Places for Joy: Speculations on American School Reform*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1973. p. 34.

³ Ronald Gross. "The Faith of the Educator." *Journal of World Education*, Summer 1973. p. 8.

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