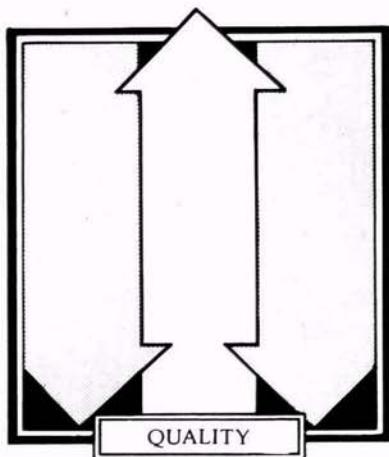


Improving the Quality



of Education

John Martin Rich

Four criteria may be used as the basis for determining the quality of educational programs.

Everyone is in favor of quality education and that is where the problem begins. We do not agree on what programs will provide quality. We don't even agree on the meaning of quality itself. Until we do, it is unlikely that much progress can be made in providing quality education.

Quality involves descriptive and normative dimensions. In terms of description, a quality is any peculiar or distinctive feature by which something may be identified or its constituents understood. These attributes, which taken as a whole constitute what something is, may be inherent. Thus a study of quality must first examine the actual characteristics of educational programs, processes, and products. But such a study alone is insufficient without the normative dimension.

On the normative side, we imply that any group of qualities may have merit, value, or

worthwhileness. In other words, an evaluation is made of a group of qualities and may be made by ranking or by comparison with an independent set of standards. Thus the quality of a program may be evaluated by comparing it to a program of the same type or by judging to what extent it fulfills an independent set of standards.

Descriptive Dimension

Presently the two leading approaches in education for studying qualities are behaviorism and humanism. Historically, educational research was based on a positivistic model, which has now been modified to include social science and behavioral research methodology. The behavioral approach studies people as objects rather than subjects; it examines external behavior, searching for regu-

larities and uniformities characteristic of a whole class of objects. In contrast, the humanistic approach attempts to reveal the particular pattern in a unique individual. Whereas the behavioral approach focuses on the incidence and distribution of one datum within a population, the humanistic approach looks at various factors and interactions that shape the total person. The latter approach seeks to understand the individual as a unique being rather than as a specimen of a class.

The behavioral approach is effective in delineating qualities of things and products; it can also discern characteristics of persons, but needs to be supplemented with the humanistic approach to avoid reductionism and to understand the qualities of the student as a person. It is not a case of either-or, but one of deciding where each approach can best be employed.

Normative Dimension

The normative dimension embraces the value issues in quality education. Certain factors, however, place limits upon value decisions. All programs are faced with scarcities of one type or another—scarcity of qualified personnel, time, funds, facilities, and the like. In order to achieve certain goals, other goals must be dropped. For instance, to provide historical knowledge and understanding, an individual may have to forego promoting aesthetic appreciation.

The role of risk in decision making should also be considered. Risk represents both the probability of failure and the willingness to pursue complex tasks with high risk factors. In comparing two or more tasks, the relative costs and risks can be assessed, and a decision can be made in terms of the task to be undertaken. Where risks are relatively high, greater incentives and rewards are needed to promote such programs.

To put the matter of costs in philosophical terms: No single normative position can embrace all major philosophies of education; and since there is no one philosophy to which all Americans subscribe, any normative position will likely support qualities more consistent with a particular philosophy. Notwithstanding these limitations, let us propose criteria for improving the quality of programs.

1. *Programs should give priority to experiences, such as the rudimentary acquisition of*

language and number skills, on which other experiences depend. The child needs to develop a fruitful cognitive style for approaching and resolving problems, and techniques for dealing with classes, relations, and numbers. By early adolescence, experiences should be provided to enable the student to use symbolic methods for developing hypotheses about relations and classifications.

Other building-block experiences are found in interpersonal relations. The child must develop concepts of authority and respect for persons. In other words, the child needs to move from an egocentric stage to a position where he/she can grasp the function of authority structures. In secondary education, the student should be able

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to raise meaningful questions about rights, freedom, equality, and civil disobedience.

2. *Programs should give priority to experiences that promote critical thinking.* And this thinking should be promoted by using important ideas drawn from the organized disciplines, the culture-at-large, and personal life.

Critical thinking is necessary for students to continue learning and to fulfill democratic citizenship responsibilities. But a student must do more than just think; he/she should think about something—and preferably something significant. In the disciplines, scholars determine what is important but it is up to educators to select the ideas most appropriate for a group of students and determine how these ideas can best be organized and presented.

Many significant ideas of various groups and the community-at-large have not found their way into the disciplines. Concerns such as ecology, consumer protection, ethnic pride, corruption in public office, the influence of popular culture as represented in the mass media, problems of

mass transit, and spiraling medical costs confront tomorrow's adults.

A student's personal problems can be handled to promote critical thinking helping facilitate more effective coping strategies. With some effort and imagination teachers can connect these problems to larger concerns. For instance, an adolescent self-consciously concerned about attractiveness to the opposite sex can be led to consider health practices, relations between the sexes, women's rights, and other topics.

3. *Programs should be given priority that involve the student emotionally as well as cognitively.* Perhaps one of the chief sources of maladjustment, social conflict, and personal unhappiness in our time lies in forms of schooling that neglect the emotions and the affective domain. With carefully designed programs, the cognitive and affective domains can be interrelated and enhance one another. We educate the emotions by bringing them under rational assessment and evaluating them in relation to worthwhile goals. Emotions should be viewed in relationship to thought and language, and the personal concerns of students are the place to begin.

4. *Programs at the secondary level that enable students to deal intelligently with the questions, "What experiences should I pursue?" and "What way of life should I choose to live?" should be given priority.*

A student's education is incomplete until he/she can take responsibility for choosing experiences worth pursuing. That ability is more likely to be developed when the three priorities mentioned earlier are implemented, and the student is afforded opportunities to make meaningful choices. The ability to assess situations, apply knowledge, and think reflectively are highly useful in choosing experiences wisely. Also useful is practice in examining values reflectively and resolving value conflicts.

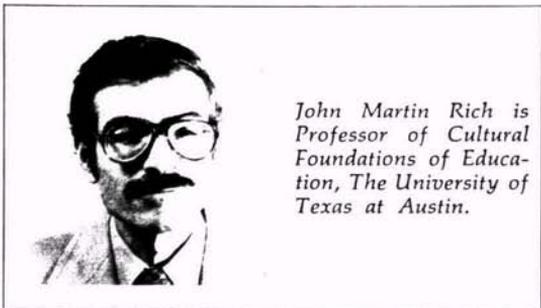
The chief value decision that each person must make is to choose a way of life best suited to his/her aims and aspirations. Most students give insufficient thought to this question and fall into a way of life that parents, friends, or admired figures approve. Since schools are best equipped to provide knowledge and encourage reflective thought to make this critical decision, they should

assume the rightful responsibility. Schools should provide students with knowledge about the different ways to live: fundamental assumptions, characteristics, rights, responsibilities, and abilities to live fruitfully within the chosen way. For instance, these different ways of life—Buddhist, Christian, Moslem, Stoic, Epicurean, socialist, anarchist, capitalist—are not static and take on different designs in different cultures. Additionally, some ways of life are discouraged in democratic societies and proscribed in totalitarian states. Since a person can choose a way of life, try it for a period of time, and find it unsuitable, the student is continually evaluating his/her own beliefs and aspirations.

A teacher, who is committed professionally to rationality and the full development of human abilities, definitely has an opinion about ways of life, but he/she is not free to proselyte. A teacher can only present the relative merits of each way as fairly and impartially as possible. The educator must recognize the basic rights of others to choose, which leads to the best use of the creative abilities needed to live more meaningfully in a postindustrial society.

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