

What is the critical subject matter of education?

Ask Principal Donna™

According to John McPeck (1981), “The whole point of school subject-knowledge is to enlighten people about their everyday life.” He thought it essential for teachers to teach the disciplines well so that the context within which they could learn to think would be stimulating and real.

Students are being raised up as members of our society. They will choose to participate in different ways. Our schools provide a place where learning can lead to a stronger society or a weaker one. Within our democratic system, children will grow up to be free to pursue their self appointed goals. In order for students to be able to pursue these goals, they must be able to function successfully in our world. What then is critical for us to teach in schools? A foundation for learning is essential—teaching students to be able to access information in the new world of technological tools. I’ve always said that there are three different types of students when it comes to learning how to read. One type learns to read on their own, by easily figuring out how to decode. Type two need explicit reading instruction to read well. Type three will find reading a struggle throughout their lifetimes and interventions of a serious nature are required. This brings to the fore some of the different types of learners we have in our classrooms.

We must teach the basics of reading, writing and math, so that students are able to function in our world. Second, we must teach student to think. This can be done within the context of history, science, civics, economics or geography. Children need to learn about the world they live in and their place in it. It is not the sheer amount of information that matters in educating children. It is the quality of the educational experience that will influence the child’s ability to think about the world. The subject matter of education should focus on the development of thinking so that students learn to solve problems in positive ways.

I agree with Noddings (2007) who states, “Because it is the right thing to do, we should provide all children with safe, healthful, and intellectually rich environments...they must have choices...she or he should be able to choose any course of study the school offers with pride and confidence...make vocational courses as rich and respectable as academic courses.”

I support the belief that educational content should be taught with the development of the child in mind. Rousseau believed that the timing in education is crucial. Rudolf Steiner agreed, along with Piaget. Piagetians say that each stage of development is accompanied by a distinct cognitive structure. Teachers should learn about human development and how thinking is developed in human beings to be able to meet the needs of their students.

So often educators teach students in absolutes. I fear that this is because they themselves have not learned at high levels, so that they do not recognize a theory from a fact. According to Noddings (2007) Kosimer and Dewey agreed, “...teachers should make students aware of various possibilities.” Teacher education programs should require that teachers understand this responsibility as one of our strongest ethics. When we teach something as fact, we undermine our students’ ability to think flexibly. According to Noddings (2007), “Popper’s basic idea is that we can never be fully justified in accepting a particular scientific belief—not if by *justified* we

mean that a belief is totally confirmed by the evidence.” A true teacher, in my opinion, teaches the world in theories so that students’ minds remain open to other possibilities. This is how we foster thinkers for tomorrow who are able to challenge old theories and come up with new and better ones.

I believe strongly that it not the place of education to influence the political views of students. Rather, it is our responsibility as educators to teach children to think while leaving them free to develop their own beliefs based on their knowledge of various arguments and perspectives. We should feel a responsibility to foster students who Rudolf Steiner would call our most creative thinkers—our scientists. When teachers ask questions of students, it is damaging to allow only one answer. It is much better to ask students to explain their thinking—even if it is not the answer you were looking for. Educators should be much more interested in fostering thinking than in students’ parroting information. Teaching this flexibility of thinking is the gift we can give our students, so that they are free to find new solutions to the world’s problems. Noddings refers to this as ‘pedagogical neutrality.’

I love Ghandi’s idea of education being set in real community life. Joy Palmer (2001) quotes him, “We must not rest content with our present achievements. We must penetrate the homes of the children...educate their parents. Basic education must become literally the education for life...It has become clear to me that the scope of basic education has to be extended...A basic school teacher must consider himself a universal teacher...His village is his universe.”

I have not addressed the use of standards as a means of focusing instruction. I am not adverse to standards because I find that many provide wonderful ideas that we would like for students to understand. However, I am more concerned that we teach students to think so that they can apply these skills to different situations. The pressure of teaching all of the standards is unrealistic and just too much! This feeling of overwhelm can cause teachers to teach a lot of things but none very well. I believe we can accomplish more if we would only focus on teaching students to think. Requiring teaching of standards has arisen out of a mistrust of teachers who have not met the needs of their students. Some of this is deserved, while some is due to changes in demographics and an unwillingness to change to meet the needs of 21st Century children. Just like so many of our antiquated systems, we need to bring ourselves up to date to meet this generation of learners and prepare them for the world in which they will live and work.

References

McPeck, John. (1981) *Critical Thinking and Education*. Oxford: Martin Robinson.

Noddings, Nel. (2007) *Philosophy of Education*, Second Edition. Boulder, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.