

The Purpose of Education *Ask Principal Donna™*

Philosophers have undoubtedly attempted to articulate the purpose of education since the beginning of time, yet from a western perspective, especially when thinking was in vogue during the height of the Greek civilization. Socrates and his students, Plato and eventually Aristotle, engaged in dialogue that brought forth the development of thought within their students. The word education has its roots in the Greek word 'Educare' which means to draw forth. If we are to agree with the Greeks, then indeed the purpose of education is to develop thinking—to draw forth what lies as a seed within the developing human being. This seed is our potential.

It is my belief that it is the purpose of education to cultivate and facilitate the growth of children who will become human beings who are able to reason at high levels, to do what is right for themselves and their communities by putting their thoughts into action, and to have the ability to feel an appreciation for the arts and one another, as well as the beauty in the world around them. Education should cultivate the whole child—head, heart and hand. Rudolf Steiner (2004), in lectures given in 1924, thought that the purpose of education was to, "...educate human beings who are able, out of their own initiative, to give direction and purpose to their own lives." According to Noddings (2007), "Dewey insisted that the content of study is not nearly so important as the method of inquiry and the level of thought invoked in its pursuit."

Education's calling is for the general health of the each child given to our care. This means planning for the physical, emotional and intellectual realms. Rousseau believed that children are naturally good and that the job of the teacher was to preserve that goodness while facilitating growth. If a seed of potential lies within each child, an apt metaphor is to nourish the seed so that it can grow into a flourishing and productive plant. To accomplish this goal, we cannot force feed the plant or it will wither and die. Rather, we should artistically feed each child what it needs to prosper—cognizant of each one's gifts and challenges.

Howard Gardner made us aware of the multitude of learners within our classrooms. Education must take into consideration these gifts and challenges when planning for instruction. While philosophers of old did not always think of equal education for all, they often focused on the education of people according to the class in which they were born. This, of course, is not possible today, nor should it be. Our democratic society calls for equity and justice for all. Thus, we struggle with how to achieve this. One position to solve this problem is the notion that all students should receive the same education and reach the same high levels results in academia. The pressure is on! Of course we want all of our citizens to have meaningful work that contributes to the health and wealth of them as individuals and our society. However, I have great difficulty when we set the only acceptable standard for all to be graduation from an academic university. How elitist can we be? Does this mean then that janitorial services are not valued and respected in our society? How about those who build our hospitals and schools—are the developers more important than the construction workers whose sweat and brawn do the actual work of building?

Nodding (2007) states, "In order to accommodate the mass of students now forced to take college preparatory mathematics, textbooks and teachers have to present material that is, from an

epistemological perspective, inadequate.” I believe that all children have the right to pursue their interests and to succeed, feeling personal satisfaction and self worth in their accomplishments. Nodding (2007) goes on, “Therefore, it does not really matter whether people have this particular knowledge; what matters is that what they acquire is recognized as important.”

I am appalled at the amount of our minimum wage in this country. No one with a family can live on minimum wage without having two or three jobs, or both mother and father working, the result of which is often latchkey kids who aren’t supervised after school hours. Our society as a whole does not benefit from this practice. It is often these kids whose characters suffer and who end up in gangs, or engaged in criminal activities that hurt themselves and our communities. I think that for people who are willing to work, they should be able to make a living at that job, whether it be as a laborer or an academic.

I believe that each child holds the potential to live life well and to be a positive and contributing member of our society. It is the role of education to help children find within themselves this potential—these gifts—and cultivate them so that they can live a prosperous and healthy life. According to Noddings (2007), “...in the Deweyan tradition...education should be tailored as closely as possible to the interests and needs of individual children.” Dewey did not believe in labeling one educational program better than another, as is done now with our public view of vocational education. Each program had its value in society and for the individual. Plato thought it was just to prepare students for work consonant with their capacities. I believe that vocational education is valuable in preparing some young people for the real world in our society. What I am not in agreement with is if the system decides which path the child will take. If a low performing student wishes to attend college, we should support him/her in reaching that goal. If a student wishes to be an auto mechanic, we teach him/her the basic requirements through grade 8 and allow them to pursue mechanics in high school, while continuing a variety of other subjects so that they become well-rounded individuals.

Do we want all children to be able to read, write and do math? Absolutely! However, narrowing the curriculum as a means to make all children proficient in basic skills is a huge mistake. It takes the joy out of learning. I have seen children sparkle when learning about levers and pulleys—and also when they are learning about chivalry during medieval times. To take this context away and leave only the bare bones of reading and writing shows that we do not have confidence in them to learn within a broader spectrum of interesting subjects. When children have learned about Western Expansion in U.S. history, they can become engaged in a writing assignment from the perspective of an Apache brave or a pioneer girl moving west. They have some background knowledge they can apply to the content of this assignment. Without this depth of engagement, they have little inspiration to practice their write at high levels.

Pestalozzi created a school that worked with poor children. According to Nodding (2007), “...he demonstrated that poor children, well cared for and skillfully taught, could learn as much as wealthier children.” I believe this. The problem with public education today is that it is being forced to narrow the curriculum with the goal of achieving equal outcomes for all children on standardized tests. I believe, like Rousseau, that success should be measured by the consequences of our education for each child. If children grow into adults who can provide

meaning and direction to their own lives, who are free, loving and responsible, we have educated them properly.

Education should prepare students for success in the 21st Century. In the article *Rigor Redefined*, Tony Wagner interviewed many corporate CEOs to find out what they are looking for in today's workforce. According to Wagner (2008), "Clay Parker, President of ...BOC Edwards....when I asked him about the skills he looks for when he hires young people, I was taken aback by his answer. 'First and foremost, I look for someone who asks good questions...We can teach them the technical stuff, but we can't teach them how to ask good questions—how to think.'" He went on to talk about the need to hire people who can work collaboratively in teams to discuss and come up with out of the box solutions for today's problems. Through a content rich curriculum, educators can pose problems for students to solve independently and in teams, based within the context of their subject of study. Once the students have some background knowledge in any content—be it history, ecology, or geography—creative teachers can come up with fabulous ways to cultivate student thinking which can lead to synthesizing and analyzing information that can lead to possible creative solutions to real or archetypal problems. This is what teaching must be about today. We must teach kids to think at high levels so they are able to apply their reasoning to problem-solving activities. The teacher becomes a facilitator of learning—a guide in cultivating healthy human beings who can feel successful because their own potential is being fostered.

Descarte's famous treatise, "I think, therefore I am," is a premise of existential thought. Sarte goes on to explain that the capacity to reflect, to plan, to choose and to become is the fundamental work of human existence. I believe that knowledge builds upon knowledge, and as Dewey stated, "Growth tends toward more growth." As educators we have to build a strong foundation upon which children can learn to reason and apply their good thinking to real life problems.

So that these decisions will support the good of our society, character development must be another role of education, in partnership with parents. Noddings (2007) shares Aristotle's beliefs in regards to goodness and virtue, "They should learn to respond ethically out of the habits of good character. In turn, this good character would furnish the ground upon which future reasoning might be safely conducted." Providing students with multiple learning opportunities within which we model and put such ethics into practice will help students learn the importance of good citizenship, as they work together to make the world a better place. Because the school setting dominates a child's day, this is the social environment within which they are doing their "work". The school is a microcosm of the bigger community and world in which we live. Therefore, the education that takes place within its walls must foster the foundation for how we must work in the world once we leave these halls.

Martin Buber, an existentialist philosopher who cared deeply about education, believed that teaching accomplishes whatever it does through relationship with peers and the teacher. He would have objected, as I do, to the standardized curriculum of recent school reform. He would want us to start with the importance of building environments that support strong relationships for learning. Postmodernist, Jacques Derrida, was highly critical of standardized education. According to Nodding (2007), "...an effort to force all children into the same course of study—

however well intended the attempt—is, from the perspective of the postmodernist, a totalizing move. It improperly assimilates all children to the model of an elite established by criteria constructed by an exclusive few.” I guess I am a postmodernist!

References

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