
WHY GO TO SCHOOL?

If the purpose of our schools is to prepare drones to keep the U.S. economy going, then the prevailing curricula and instructional methods are probably adequate. If, however, we want to help students become thoughtful, caring citizens who might be creative enough to figure out how to change the status quo rather than maintain it, we need to rethink schooling entirely. Mr. Wolk outlines what he considers to be the essential content for a new curriculum.

BY STEVEN WOLK

LAST YEAR my son's homework in second grade was 400 worksheets. The year before, in first grade, his homework was also 400 worksheets. Each day he brought home two worksheets, one for math and one for spelling. That was two worksheets a day, five days a week, 40 weeks a year.

The math was little more than addition or subtraction problems. The other worksheet was more insidious. My son had 15 spelling words each week. On some days his worksheets required him to unscramble the spelling words. On other days

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he had to write a sentence with each word. And on still other days he had to write each spelling word five times. The school was teaching my 7-year-old that the wonderful world of learning is about going home each day and filling in worksheets.

Actually, that was his “official” homework. We were given permission to give him alternative homework. In place of his spelling worksheet, we set up a writing workshop at home in which he was free to write something real, such as a letter, a poem, or a story. Unfortunately, this was often a struggle because Max wanted to do “school.” He learned at the ripe age of 7 that he could whip out those spelling sentences without a single thought, so that’s what he usually insisted on doing.

My son’s worksheets are a symptom of a far graver educational danger. More than the practice of a few teachers, they represent the dominant purposes of schooling and the choices of curriculum in our nation. We are engaged in fill-in-the-blank schooling. One of the most telling statistics about our schools has absolutely nothing to do with standardized test scores: on a typical day most Americans 16 years old and older never read a newspaper or a book.¹

My son’s experience of school is little different from my own when I was his age. My schooling was dominated by textbooks, teacher lectures, silent students, and those same worksheets. And it is identical to what my current teacher education students endured when they were in school and also to what they see today in their clinical experiences. My college students are, by their own admission, poster children for our factory-model 400-worksheet schools and their superficial and sanitized curricula.

We are living a schooling delusion. Do we really believe that our schools inspire our children to live a life of thoughtfulness, imagination, empathy, and social responsibility? Any regular visitor to schools will see firsthand that textbooks are the curriculum. A fifth-grader is expected to read about 2,500 textbook pages a year. For all 12 grades that student is expected to “learn” 30,000 pages of textbooks with a never-ending barrage of facts, most of which we know are forgotten by the time the student flips on his or her TV or iPod after school. Far more than reading to learn, our children are learning to hate reading. More than learning any of the content, they learn to hate learning.

Will those 30,000 pages of textbooks and years of sitting at a classroom desk inspire a child to be a lifelong reader and learner and thinker? Who are we kidding? I’m inside schools a lot, and I usually see what John Goodlad described a generation ago in his classic study, *A Place Called School*. After observing classrooms across the country and more than 27,000 students, he wrote, “I wonder about the impact of the flat, neutral emotional ambience of most of the classes

we studied. Boredom is a disease of epidemic proportions. . . . Why are our schools not places of joy?”² Our nation is afflicted with a dearth of educational imagination, a lack of pedagogical courage, and rampant anti-intellectualism. Our schools should be think tanks and fountains of creativity, but most of them are vacuum chambers. Nearly 70 years ago John Dewey wrote, “What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win the ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul?”³

Our textbook-driven curricula have become educational perpetual motion machines of intellectual, moral, and cre-

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ative mediocrity. We dumb down and sanitize the curriculum in the name of techno-rational efficiency and “American interests.” It is Frederick Winslow Taylor — the turn-of-the-century father of scientific management — run amok. For example, when some middle school teachers developed an inquiry-based social studies unit that required their students to actively participate in creating a curriculum that would make them think for themselves, the teachers were repeatedly confronted with the silent passivity of what they called “the glaze.” As one teacher commented:

The students are so used to having the teacher spoon-feed them what they’re supposed to know. . . . Students accustomed to efficient, predictable dissemination of knowledge were confused, silent, even hostile when told they must decide for themselves how to proceed on a project or when confronted with an ambiguous question such as, “What do you think?”⁴

When our children’s school experiences are primarily about filling in blanks on worksheets, regurgitating facts from textbooks, writing formulaic five-paragraph essays, taking multiple-choice tests, and making the occasional diorama — that is, when they are devoid of opportunities to create an original thought — we should expect the obvious outcome: children — and later adults — who are un-

able to think for themselves. None of this should surprise us. Passive schooling creates passive people. If we want people to think, learn, and care about the many dimensions of life, if we want neighbors who accept the responsibility of tending to the world and working to make it a better place, then we need schools and curricula that are actually about life and the world. Instead, we have schools that prepare children to think like a toaster.

OFF TO SCHOOL WE GO

Each day millions of American children enter their classrooms. Why? What is the purpose of school? What *should* its purpose be? As our children leave our classes and graduate from our schools, how do we want them to be? Not just what do we want them to know, but *how* do we want them to *be*? What habits of mind? What attitudes? What character? What vision? What intellect? Yes, we want them to have acquired certain factual knowledge, such as the dates of the Civil War, how to work with fractions, how to write a letter, and at least an acquaintance with the miracle of photosynthesis. But what do we want them to *care* about? Do we want them to watch TV for three hours a day? Do we want them to look at trees with awe? Do we want them to read great books? Do we want them to wallow in political and cultural ignorance? Do we want them to vote? Do we want them to feel empathy for the poor and oppressed? Do we want them to appreciate the poetry of William Carlos Williams? Do we want them to define their self-identity by the walls of an office cubicle? What life do we want to inspire them to live?

Of course, my question, Why go to school? is not new; it has been vigorously debated for millennia. Plato, Thomas Jefferson, Rousseau, Leo Tolstoy, Dewey, Franklin Bobbitt, and Alfred North Whitehead, among countless others, have joined the debate about the aims of schooling. More recently, people from all over the political and pedagogical map, from E. D. Hirsch to Alfie Kohn to Maxine Greene to James Moffett to Carl Rogers, have argued for their vision of what and why our schools should be. And once each of us answers that question, we are morally bound to create curricula and classrooms that strive to fulfill those purposes. Otherwise our words and passions are nothing but empty rhetoric, just like so many school mission statements with their language of “global citizens” and “critical thinkers.” So we must publicly reinvigorate what Nel Noddings refers to as the “aims talk” of school.⁵ We must deeply question the schools and curricula we have; we must ask what it means to be educated and what it means to be human.

There is no neutral ground here; we have decisions to make. Either we remake our schools into vibrant workshops

for personal, social, and global transformation, or we must own up to our complicity in perpetuating a superficial, unthinking, and unjust world.

SCHOOLING FOR WORKERS

The real barometer of the aims of our schools today is what’s being said in our newspapers and our legislative assemblies. These mainstream voices and the proclamations emanating from the bully pulpit — be they newspaper editorials or speeches by the President — rule the public conversation and create our national school identity. And what do these powerful voices have to say? What is the “official” public discussion about the aims of our schools?

If aliens from outer space landed on Earth and read our newspapers, listened to our elected representatives talk about our “failing” schools, and observed inside our classrooms, what would they conclude are the aims of our schools? That’s easy. Our children go to school to learn to be workers. Going to school is largely preparation either to punch a time clock or to own the company with the time clock — depending on how lucky you are in the social-class sorting machine called school. Why else give kids 400 worksheets? Why else give children so little voice in what to learn? Why else teach children a curriculum that avoids controversy and debate and open inquiry? When the United States was building up to attack Iraq, some of my graduate students were forbidden by their school administrators to discuss the war with their students. Not talk about a war? How can a democracy silence its schools and teachers? What are we afraid of?

Virtually every newspaper article and editorial, every radio report and discussion, every political speech and government policy that I read or hear says, either implicitly or explicitly, that the aim of our schools is to prepare future workers. The specific language may differ, but the message is the same and crystal clear. Remember the opening paragraph of *A Nation at Risk*:

Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged pre-eminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility.⁶

And there we have the primary aim of our 400-worksheets-a-year schools: money. The United States is the richest and most powerful country on Earth, and our schools exist to keep it that way, even if our role as citizens should be to question those assumptions and the exercise of that

power. Here is a typical example from an article in the *New York Times* on the push to move away from so-called fuzzy math and teach more math “basics”:

The frenzy has been prompted in part by the growing awareness that, at a time of increasing globalization, the math skills of children in the United States simply do not measure up: American eighth-graders lag far behind those from Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and elsewhere.⁷

While the article does quote an advocate of “fuzzy” math, the assumption that adapting to globalization — that is, maintaining American economic dominance — should dictate our math curriculum goes completely unchallenged.

A recent issue of *Time* bore the cover line “How to Build a Student for the 21st Century” (an unintentionally ironic title using a 19th-century metaphor of manufacturing). The authors of the cover story articulated their vision of the schools we need. In the entire article, they mentioned just one purpose for school: preparing our children to succeed in the “global economy.”⁸ That’s it. The bottom line.

These economic purposes of our schools are so entrenched that they have seeped into our children’s consciousness. Ask adolescents why they go to school, and you will almost universally hear a response solely concerned with their future employment. What does it say about a nation whose children define “education” as little more than preparation for work? Nel Noddings writes:

It is as though our society has simply decided that the purpose of schooling is economic — to improve the financial condition of individuals and to advance the prosperity of the nation. Hence students should do well on standardized tests, get into good colleges, obtain well-paying jobs, and buy lots of things. Surely there must be more to education than this?⁹

Adults like to tell children that they will be judged by their actions. The same is true for our schools. Here are the values of our schools based on their actions: kids don’t need to appreciate art to compete with South Koreans; they don’t need intellectual curiosity to sit at a desk and do tax returns; they don’t need creativity and imagination to plan a business meeting; they don’t need to be media literate to sell heating and cooling systems; they don’t need to promote peace to manage a grocery store; they don’t need to care for the environment to be a lawyer; and they don’t need to nurture a happy family to be a chemist. So the content that would foster these unnecessary dispositions gets little time in school. While a thoughtful democratic nation requires people who read widely, a nation of workers just needs people with the technical ability to read a manual or product distribution re-

port. A nation of workers does not need to vote, feel historical empathy, be informed of current events, act to end prejudice, question cultural assumptions, or care for people in other countries. Workers just need to produce and fulfill their role as consumers. In the end, the only educational data that really matter aren’t our children’s GPAs, they’re the GDP and the Dow Jones Industrial Average.

SCHOOLING FOR ANTI-CITIZENSHIP

While the preparation of “citizens” may be in every school mission statement, our performance in that area is dreadful. We barely get half of our citizens to vote, and our youngest voters — 18- to 24-year-olds right out of high school and college — continually shun the ballot box in the greatest numbers. In 2000, only 36% of that group cast a ballot for President; in 2004, only 47% voted; in our most recent 2006 midterm elections — with a war raging in Iraq — only 24% of 18- to 29-year-olds voted.¹⁰ In one survey less than 10% of American 17- to 24-year-olds reported they “follow public affairs.”¹¹ In another survey barely 13% of 18- to 24-year-olds agreed with the statement “I am interested in politics.”¹² In yet another survey almost twice as many Americans could name the Three Stooges (73%) as could name the three branches of government (42%).¹³

My college students know virtually nothing of current events. Even most of those who do vote admit they do so with little understanding of the issues and the candidates’ positions. I assign my social studies methods class to write an “ideology paper” setting forth their personal opinions on three controversial political issues. I tell them they cannot inspire their students to shape their ideologies if they are not actively shaping their own. My students fret about this assignment; they don’t know what to think. As one student blurted out in class, “But I was never taught how to do this!” And we wonder why so few Americans read a newspaper or understand foreign policy. It’s the schools, stupid.

Why are there no blazing headlines condemning our schools for failing to prepare an educated and active citizenry? Because, contrary to the political and educational rhetoric, civic engagement for “strong democracy” isn’t really an aim of our schools.¹⁴ If it were, then dramatically different things would be happening inside our classrooms. Rather than reading the Disney version of our democracy in a textbook, our students would be living the complex and “messy” realities of democracy in their classrooms. Rather than being places where students sit in silence as their teachers talk all day, our classrooms would be dynamic public spaces where the authentic and vibrant discourse of daily democracy would be an essential part of the school experience.¹⁵ Rather than providing all of the “answers” in

the form of textbooks, our schools would use critical and moral inquiry as a way to shape individual identity, build a better nation, and create a more caring world. Our schools would be helping students to ask the questions and then to seek out — as true communities of learners — the possibilities.

WHAT DOES SCHOOL NOT TEACH?

Over 20 years ago Alex Molnar asked, “Are the issues studied in school the most important issues facing mankind?”¹⁶ He surveyed teachers and administrators and asked them to list the most important issues facing our world and to indicate whether they were studied in school. They listed nuclear disarmament, environmental destruction, poverty, racism, sexism, genetic engineering, and “alternatives to existing forms of U.S. political, social, and economic organization.” Overwhelmingly the respondents felt these topics should be an important part of school, but not many felt they were a significant part of any curriculum. Why not? How can a nation as “smart” as the United States ignore the knowledge and dispositions essential for creating a thoughtful, just, and joyful citizenry? How can adults allow such a superficial and damaging vision of what it means to be “educated” to persist?

To see the gaping holes in the curricula of most of our schools, we need to get specific. I’ll now offer a brief overview — quite assuredly incomplete — of what our schools choose not to teach because of their unquestioned devotion to preparing workers, rather than educating people. Of course, all across our nation there are heroic schools and teachers that make this neglected content a vital part of their students’ school experiences. Unfortunately, these are the exceptions to the rule, and they usually exist within a system of schooling that is hostile to those who question the status quo and the economic purposes of our schools. Creative and critical teachers are working more often in opposition to the system than with it.

There are several ideas common to all of the following suggestions for content schools should be teaching but aren’t. First is the idea of making school inquiry-based. A curriculum built around inquiry — that is, questioning, investigating, and analyzing our lives and the world in depth with authentic resources and projects — makes the inquiry process itself part of the content to be learned. By doing “inquiry” across the curriculum, children learn to ask questions, seek knowledge, understand multiple perspectives, and wonder about the world. Second, this content is not just for middle school or high school but should be an important part of every grade beginning in kindergarten. And third, we must honor our children’s uniqueness. There is not

just one way to learn anything. The fact that our schools take children who are very different and seek to force them into the same schooling and learning mold is just further evidence of their disrespect for children as individuals.

Self. Who are you? What defines you? If your entire being were turned into a list of ingredients, what would be listed first? Parent? Veteran? Poet? Pacifist? American? Artist? Friend? Or would it be Employee? I doubt many people would list their job first. While our jobs are important to many of us, they do not define who we are; they are just one part of our being. Yet our schools operate as if the only part of us worth educating is the part that will determine our future as an economic cog. When Johnny graduates, do we really know Johnny as a distinctive being? Did we appreciate his unique self? Have we helped Johnny to know Johnny at all?

Patrick Shannon writes that schools are in the “identity creation business.”¹⁷ We may think school is about math and history, but it’s equally about shaping who we will be and who we will *not* be. Ask Johnny what school is about, and he will list school subjects like math and reading, but what he will *never* say is that school is about *me*. The identities that our schools purposely shape are directed by the demands of American capitalism rather than the needs of human beings. School defines people by test scores, stanines, and GPAs. Johnny the fourth-grader is no longer Johnny; he is 4.3 and 3.9 and 5.2.

In contrast, schools could help children explore the questions “Who am I?” “How did I become me?” and “Who do I want to be?” Then the most important “subject” in school is no longer reading or science, but *Johnny*. Environmental educator David Orr writes, “We must remember that the goal of education is not mastery of knowledge, but the mastery of *self* through knowledge — a different thing altogether.”¹⁸ If school is not helping children to consciously shape their cultural, political, and moral identities, then we are failing to educate our children to reach their greatest potential.

A love for learning. Is it really possible to inspire people to live a life of learning and wonder, if throughout their schooling children are always told what to learn, when to learn, and how to learn? How will we ever own our learning — and even own our mind — outside of school if we are rarely allowed to own either inside our classrooms? If we’re serious about nurturing lifelong learners, then we must allow them some significant ownership of their learning. This means giving students some control over what they study and how they show their learning. Children should have regular opportunities across the curriculum to initiate learning, explore their own questions, and learn about their own interests. Choice and ownership can easily be made part of

every school day. We can allow children to choose what books to read for independent reading, what topic to research in a unit on South America, what genres to write in during writing workshop, and what project to create to show what they learned in their science unit on ocean ecosystems. And by allowing students some control over their learning, we are honoring their “intelligences” and respecting their unique strengths.

Schools must do more than teach a love for reading; they must reduce or eliminate practices that teach children that reading is a laborious “school thing.” I have never met a child who ran home to crack open *The Rise of the American Nation*.

We can also give children one hour each day to study topics of their own choosing. I did this as a teacher, and our “morning project time” was bustling with students pursuing their questions about the world. For example, at one time my fourth- and fifth-graders were studying cheetahs, the CIA, turtles, Georgia O’Keefe, becoming a teacher, the history of pencils, architecture, bats, dinosaurs, Beethoven, pandas, the court system, roof shingles, the space shuttle, the atomic bomb, dolphins, artificial intelligence, jaguars, the history of pizza, Native Americans of the Northwest, and endangered species of Africa.¹⁹ These projects were not done frivolously; I had high expectations for their work. The students initiated the topics and then, collaboratively with me, shaped them into meaningful and purposeful inquiry-based projects. There is little that is more important for our schools to teach children than to pursue their own intellectual curiosity about the world.

Any school aiming to nurture a love of learning must also aim for a love of reading. A lifelong reader is a lifelong learner. But schools must do more than teach a love for reading; they must reduce or eliminate practices that teach children that reading is a laborious “school thing.” I have never met a child who ran home to crack open *The Rise of the American Nation*. We know perfectly well that children hate reading textbooks, because we hated reading them too. Using textbooks should be the exception, not the rule; instead, students should be immersed in reading authentic, fascinating, interesting, critical, thoughtful, and relevant texts. And school must surround students with the astonishing children’s and young adult literature available today, which, besides including great stories and beautiful writing, is one

of the very best ways to teach the content advocated in this article.

Caring and empathy. Nel Noddings has written extensively and eloquently about the vital need to teach for caring in our classrooms. She writes that caring should be the foundation of our curriculum and that its study should include caring for self, family, friends, “strangers and distant others,” animals and plants, the Earth and its ecosystems, human-made objects, and ideas.²⁰ What can be more essential to the health of a democracy than caring citizens? Yet explicitly teaching “caring” rarely goes beyond kindergarten. In schools obsessed with teaching “technical” knowledge and questions with single correct answers, the idea of teaching children and young adults to care is seen as not being sufficiently “rigorous.” Rather than being applauded as essential to nurturing empathetic and thoughtful people, caring is considered a “touchy-feely” hindrance to preparing workers who can win the game of global competition.

Each day 30,000 children die from poverty. Half of our planet — that’s three billion people — lives on less than two dollars a day. Recently we celebrated our new millennium, yet the century we left behind was easily the bloodiest and most horrific in human history. We say we must teach about the Holocaust so that we never forget, yet since the defeat of the Nazis we have witnessed at least half a dozen more genocides. It certainly seems the more “civilized” we become as a species, the more brutal we become as people. What does the 21st century hold in store for us? Will we survive? What are schools doing to improve our chances?

Environmental literacy. In 2001 Ari Fleischer, President Bush’s press secretary at the time, held a White House press briefing on American energy issues that included the following exchange with a reporter:

Question: Is one of the problems with this, and the entire energy field, American lifestyles? Does the President believe that, given the amount of energy Americans consume per capita, how much it exceeds any other citizen in any other country in the world, does the President believe we need to correct our lifestyles to address the energy problem?

Mr. Fleischer: That’s a big no. The President believes that it’s an American way of life, and that it should be the goal of policy makers to protect the American way of life. The American way of life is a blessed one.²¹

If there is anything that should be ripe for critical inquiry inside our schools, it is the “American way of life” and its effect on the environment. School should be the primary place we engage children in a collective critique of how we live. There are serious global consequences to our “blessed” American way of life. Yet once again, rather than helping chil-

dren to analyze how we live, our schools actually perpetuate — even advocate — the unquestioned habits of our daily lives.

An honest study of the environment would address one of the gravest dangers to our planet: rampant consumerism. Rather than teaching consumerism as simply the good engine of economic growth, we should engage children in inquiry about how we spend and what we buy — both individually and collectively — and the moral and ecological implications of our actions.

Schools also must get kids outside. I don't mean just at recess. I mean that we must take children outside to experience nature. Schools should accept the responsibility of having their students walk through forests, look at clouds, feel the desert, wade through streams, canoe rivers, and witness our astonishing ecosystems. The best field trip I took my students on was to see the sunrise. My school was just a 20-minute walk away from Lake Michigan, and about a hundred of us — kids, teachers, some parents, a few dogs — gathered at school at 5:30 on a dark, crisp morning to walk to the beach. It was extraordinary watching the sun lift over the horizon.

Multicultural community. It is essential for our schools to accept their role in healing our cultural divides. Race,

culture, and economic class are some of the most dominant themes in the story of our nation, and they fuel violence, perpetuate inequality, and tear our social fabric.

Across our country there are schools that make multicultural education a priority. But what makes a curriculum multicultural? We must move far beyond simplistic notions of teaching about holidays and food. Teaching children to appreciate cultural differences is important, but that alone will never help us to embrace diversity. Any curriculum that does not study prejudice in all its forms — at the individual, systemic, national, and global levels — and that does not explicitly teach to end intolerance is not a multicultural curriculum.

Social responsibility. Sheldon Berman defines social responsibility as “the personal investment in the well-being of others and the planet.”²² This notion is connected to teaching caring and empathy. To accept stewardship of the planet and its ecosystems, as well as a personal responsibility toward all peoples of the planet, we must live for the common good over our individual gain. Needless to say, this orientation is usually the opposite of the American way of life, which is dominated by this axiom: Who dies with the most toys wins. Social responsibility means understanding that a democracy is not just about our rights but equally about our responsibilities.

While teaching social responsibility is the job of all teachers, it is the direct duty of social studies teachers. Unfortunately, perhaps more than any other school subject, the social studies are dominated by textbooks, which do an outstanding job of teaching students that studying history, democracy, citizenship, our Constitution, and the world and its peoples is boring and irrelevant.

Nearly half a century ago Shirley Engle published his seminal article, “Decision Making: The Heart of Social Studies Instruction,” which condemned textbook- and rote-memorization-driven social studies and advocated a curriculum that prepares children to participate in the everyday decision making necessary to a healthy democracy.²³ Little has changed in our schools in the intervening years.

From the day we are born, we learn to conform to social norms. We are inundated with conscious and subconscious expectations for how we should behave and what we should believe. Certainly, some of these expectations are necessary to live in a civilized society. But many become unquestioned truths, dictating what is “normal” and “correct.” School should be the place where all citizens are helped to question assumptions. Teaching for social responsibility is about providing children with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions to critique today's society and to work for a better world. But how can we inspire students to work for a better world without schools that help children to honestly

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investigate the world and the country we have?

Peace and nonviolence. Violence is as American as apple pie. In 2005 there were nearly 1.4 million violent crimes in our nation, including 16,700 murders, 863,000 aggravated assaults, 417,000 robberies, 94,000 reported rapes, and 64,000 acts of arson.²⁴ The U.S. has more than two million of its citizens in prison, a much higher percentage than in any other democracy. There is no democracy in the world as violent as ours. Yet our curricula pretend we live in Shangri-la. Open an eighth-grade social studies textbook, and you will not see one word about crime, violence, or our criminal justice crisis. A more peaceful nation will not happen by magic. If we want caring and less violent communities, then our schools must teach for caring and nonviolence.

Our planet is ravaged by war. And though it can seem that we are powerless to alleviate this condition, our schools can do a great deal. By awakening children's consciousness to the brutal realities and psychologies of war, we can encourage them to make more peaceful decisions, arouse their compassion for the victims of war, and help them to make connections between personal actions and world violence. We can also help them to understand propaganda and hypocrisy. Yet once again our social studies textbooks are silent. In the 956-page eighth-grade textbook *Creating America*,

"war" is mentioned throughout the index, yet the word "peace" is entirely absent, and "pacifist" is listed just once — in reference to the Quakers during the American Revolution.²⁵ We will never create a more harmonious world by ignoring the realities of violence and war and silencing those who have worked for peace throughout history.

Media literacy. The typical American 8- to 18-year-old interacts with media for six hours 21 minutes per day. For a quarter of that time, he or she is media multitasking (e.g., on the Internet while listening to music), which increases the daily media time to eight hours 33 minutes. Of that time, about three hours is spent watching TV, which increases to four hours a day when DVDs, videos, and recorded shows are included. The typical American youth spends an average of one hour 44 minutes listening to the radio, CDs, tapes, and MP3 players and is on a computer for a little more than an hour (not including schoolwork). He or she plays video games for about 50 minutes a day. American children spend more time each week with media than they do in school.²⁶ In one year an American child will see 20,000 television commercials. By the time American children are 18 years old, they will have seen 200,000 acts of violence on TV, including 16,000 murders. By the time they are 70, they will have spent seven to 10 years watching television.²⁷ American

adults watch nearly three hours of television a day and get the majority of their “news” from TV.

Our schools operate as if none of the above were happening. Though media have overwhelming power in every aspect of our lives (including our obesity epidemic), I rarely meet a child or an adolescent who has participated in any in-depth study of media in school.

Media literacy gives us the skills and knowledge we need to critique what we see and hear. To ignore the media in our schools is to perpetuate an ignorant and disempowered citizenry.

By helping children develop social imagination, we give them the skills, civic courage, and boldness to envision a better world. If we want better communities — from the local to the global — then we must help children to imagine a better world so that we can act together to make that world a reality.

Global awareness. How much do Americans know about the rest of the world? How much do Americans care about the rest of the world? Here’s an example from my son’s school district. Out of the 13 years of the Chicago Public Schools’ required K-12 social studies curriculum, only *two* years have any focus on global knowledge. And in one of those years (sixth grade), that global knowledge is limited almost entirely to ancient history.²⁸ That leaves just one year of high school — 180 days out of 13 years in school — for my son to explore the life and people and problems in the entire rest of the world. Should we be surprised that in a recent study 63% of Americans aged 18 to 24 could not find Iraq on a map, and this was after three years of war and 2,400 American soldiers killed?²⁹ There is only one solution to this crime of rampant educational nationalism. Every school year in every grade should have a global curriculum.

How can our citizens possibly make decisions on American foreign policies — from economic aid to human rights, from such health crises as AIDS in Africa to the most serious decision of all, going to war — if they have so little understanding of the world? The United States is seen as the “leader of the free world,” wielding a mighty military presence and controlling unimaginable wealth. With that power comes responsibility for us, “the people,” to be involved. And of course, our daily decisions — the cars we drive, the

food we eat, the stuff we buy — have a direct impact on the health and well-being of complete strangers across the oceans.

Creativity and imagination. Our schools do a negligible job in the visual, musical, and dramatic arts. But creativity and imagination are not just about art and aesthetics. For Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, “Creativity” (with a “big C”) is about using innovative thinking that nurtures cultural change. While some schools encourage their students to “be creative,” most schools do little, if anything at all, to help children *think* creatively. Based on his interviews with people who are considered to have some of the best minds, Csikszentmihalyi writes:

It is quite strange how little effect school — even high school — seems to have had on the lives of creative people. Often one senses that, if anything, school threatened to extinguish the interest and curiosity that the child had discovered outside its walls.³⁰

Elliot Eisner, one of our grand advocates for the arts in school, connects the arts to inquiry and lifelong learning:

The sense of vitality and the surge of emotion we feel when touched by one of the arts can also be secured in the ideas we explore with students, in the challenges we encounter in doing critical inquiry, and in the appetite for learning we stimulate. In the long run, these are the satisfactions that matter most because they are the only ones that ensure, if it can be ensured at all, that what we teach students will want to pursue voluntarily after the artificial incentives so ubiquitous in our schools are long forgotten.³¹

Maxine Greene sees the arts as encouraging schools to teach social imagination, which she defines as “the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society, on the streets where we live, and in our schools.”³² By helping children develop social imagination, we give them the skills, civic courage, and boldness to envision a better world. If we want better communities — from the local to the global — then we must help children to imagine a better world so that we can act together to make that world a reality.

Money, family, food, and happiness. There are few things more central to our daily lives than money, family, and food. Yet our schools pretty much ignore all of them. Nel Noddings writes, “Why do we insist on teaching all children algebra and teach them almost nothing about what it means to make a home?”³³ Sure, units on “family” and “money” are taught in the early grades, but when do children study any of them in depth? When do they investigate them from critical and

moral perspectives? To truly educate children on these issues would require exploring such questions as: Why do some people and countries have so much money and others have so little? Do those with a lot of money have any responsibility to those in poverty? What is life like for the poor? How much money will make me happy? What does “family” mean? Why do the people we love often cause us frustration? Where does our food come from? Why does our country eat so much unhealthy food? How has industrial farming changed our nation?

Why don’t our schools engage children in investigating and debating questions about our present and future well-being? Imagine a teacher first having her students write about and debate such questions and then having them interview senior citizens or genocide survivors or war veterans on these same issues. Jonathan Cohen writes that an essential factor in our well-being and happiness is “finding a sense of meaning and purpose in life.”³⁴ An aim our schools should embrace is to help our children articulate the meanings of their lives.

SCHOOLING FOR HUMAN BEINGS

It can be overwhelming to see how much indispensable knowledge is not part of going to school for the vast majority of American children. Yet my list is far from complete. There is much that we can add to it.

Today schools present an even greater insult to our children. Many of our schools do not allow children to play. All across our country, recess has become endangered. This happens far more often in our urban schools. Only 18% of Chicago Public Schools have daily scheduled recess, and only 6% of those schools have recess for at least 20 minutes.³⁵ Why, in a six- to seven-hour day, do so many schools deny children a chance to relax and play? Because there is no play in the world of work!

As I look at our schools today, I don’t think we have any right to call what goes on there “education.” If we were honest, it would be called “work training.” If we want the right to claim that we are educating children, then we must honor them as unique people and make dramatic changes to our curricula.

I am not naive about the political realities of actually teaching much of the content I advocate here. Many people — including some of my education students — say we can’t teach this content because it’s “too political” or because “schools can’t teach morals.” But our current school curricula are not somehow magically apolitical and morally neutral. How can a nationwide system of education that unquestioningly adopts economic purposes for schooling not be up to its neck in political and moral beliefs?

All knowledge inherently has moral and political dimensions because someone has to *choose* what will be official school knowledge. The moment a teacher, school board, or textbook publisher chooses knowledge to teach and to test, a political and moral decision has been made. Having eighth-graders debate genetic engineering or gay marriage is no more value-laden than having a spelling bee — because by choosing to have a spelling bee, we are choosing *not* to use that time to teach about peace or global poverty.

Given that our schools have a finite amount of time and that our teachers are already stressed with overstuffed curricula, how are we supposed to find the time to teach the content I’m advocating? There are at least three ways to make this content an important part of school. First, teachers can teach this knowledge through the content and disciplines they are already teaching. By teaching about cultural understanding in social studies and global awareness through young adult literature, we will not only bring greater and more authentic purposes to those disciplines, but we will be making them infinitely more interesting to students. For example, when students learn to make graphs, they could graph real data about crime and the U.S. prison system, read multiple texts, engage in debate, and perhaps take some form of civic action. By combining disciplines into integrated inquiry-based units, we can help children make dynamic connections across the curriculum.

Second, this content can be taught as separate inquiry-

based units. This means making choices. It means eliminating some of the existing curriculum. This wouldn't be difficult; there is plenty filling our children's school day that is superficial, damaging to the human spirit, and simply unnecessary. By opening up just one hour a day, we can rotate through teacher-created inquiry units on the environment, media, peace, multicultural community, and so on. Imagine entire schools having exhibitions and presentations at the end of each quarter to share their students' intellectual and creative work on such important issues.

And third, schools can create entirely new classes to teach this content. Why do schools almost universally limit classes to the standardized math and history and language arts? Surely we can be more creative. How about classes called "What Is Justice?" or "Who Am I?" or "Media and Power"? And how about having electives throughout K-12 schooling? Schools could give students choices among a variety of electives each quarter, such as yoga or documentary photography. Of course, some schools already have classes such as these, but they usually are after school when they should be school. As Stephen Thornton writes, "If we take seriously the claim that education is supposed to prepare each young person to realize his or her own potentiality, given their different interests, aptitudes, and aspirations, how can a standardized curriculum be justified?"³⁶

So why go to school? We can no longer tinker with a broken and inhuman paradigm of schooling. We must stop schooling our children as if they were products and reclaim our schools as sacred places for human beings. We must rethink our classrooms as vibrant spaces that awaken consciousness to the world, open minds to the problems of our human condition, inspire wonder, and help people to lead personally fulfilling lives. If our democracy is to thrive, our schools must change into these exciting spaces. Otherwise, we will not be a democracy "of the people," but a corporate nation of workers, TV viewers, and shoppers. As professional educators, it is our responsibility to challenge our curricula and to create schools that are personally and socially transformative. That's why we should go to school.

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