

Education? Why?

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Each year at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, I teach a course titled Principles of Education. This course is not about teaching music, it is a class about education in general. “Principles” class covers the historical, cultural, economic, legal, and philosophical underpinnings of educational institutions (K-12) in the United States. In the first class meeting each semester, I spend time stirring students up a bit, by asking them to state their thoughts on the purposes of education, especially the mandatory K-12 public education in the United States.

What *is* the purpose of education? Have you considered this question for yourselves? What would your answer be? Of course, there is a substantial difference between education and schooling. But for the purposes of this essay, I will be using the vernacular meaning of education as being synonymous with schooling.

If we distilled all the values of education into just *one* with which we could all agree, what would that one purpose be? Now, ask yourselves, does this commonly accepted purpose that you have chosen warrant 12 years of mandatory schooling?

Historically and regionally, purposes of education have varied: spreading religion, promulgating democracy, promoting a literate society, providing workers for industry, developing scholars and leaders, establishing cultural literacy, and competing for the claim of global superiority, to name a few. *Never has there been a time in history when universal agreement existed regarding the purpose of education for our children.*

I always ask the college and conservatory students in Principles class if they think all parents desire to have their children making straight As in school: is academic success universally desired? Nearly all of these very committed and high-achieving students say, “Yes, parents want their kids to be the best students they can be.” I then challenge them to think about the parents and students who have no desire or intention to go to college, to study literature, or to learn about the sciences in-depth. This is when the discussion gets very interesting.

Do you know of families for whom in-depth, high-achieving, standards-based education is neither valued nor desired? Do you interpret that lack of desire as lack of caring about education? Lack of investment in their children’s futures? Lack of sophistication in understanding how the world works? What if all of these interpretations are wrong? What if the opinions of these parents are as solidly grounded and beneficial to the quality of life for their children as any other, more academically-minded opinions?

I know plenty of people who need only a portion of what schools offer in order to be happy, healthy, and caring members of their families and communities. So what then *is* (or should be) the purpose of education for these families and individuals? Please know that I am not speaking here of families who are anti-schools and anti-education, but those for whom advanced, in-depth learning holds little attraction.

Recently, I was re-introduced to the writings of Nel Noddings, an author that I would like to introduce you to in this column. Nel is a retired professor of mathematics education from Stanford University. She is still active as a writer and speaker, and I had the pleasure of meeting and speaking with her last May at a conference in Virginia. Nel has written a slew of books with intriguing titles that seem to rile the standard views and purposes of education. Some of those titles are:

- (2007) When School Reform Goes Wrong
- (2006) Critical Lessons: What Our Schools Should Teach
- (2005) The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education
- (2005) Educating Citizens for Global Awareness

- (2003) Happiness and Education
- (2002) Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education
- (1999) Justice and Caring: The Search for Common Ground in Education
- (1993) Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief

Happiness

If I were to guess what all parents have in common as a goal for their children, it is simply . . . happiness. “I just want my child to be happy.” “I just want my child to lead a happy life.” If happiness is the most universal goal of parents for their children, is it reasonable to believe that it could also be a goal for education?

Does “happiness” as a purpose and goal of education feel a bit squishy to you? In this climate of high-stakes testing, competitive test scores, pressure to achieve, and academic one-ups-man-ship, how could such a “soft” idea be acceptable to any of us?

Well, “happiness” as a goal of education may not be acceptable to you, but reading Nel Noddings’ words about it can certainly prompt us to wonder how schooling might change if her ideas became the norm.

“Happiness should be an aim of education, and a good education should contribute significantly to personal and collective happiness.” (Noddings, 2003, 27-29)

“Through more than five decades of teaching and mothering, I have noticed that children (and adults, too) learn best when they are happy. This is not to say that harsh methods are never effective in producing rote learning, nor does it mean that intermittent vexation and occasional failure are absent from a happy student life. On the contrary, challenge and struggle are part of the quest for knowledge and competence. However, struggle is an inevitable aspect of learning; we educators do not have to invent struggles for our students, and students who are generally happy with their studies are better able to bring meaning to difficult periods and get through them with some satisfaction.” (Noddings, 2003, 34-38)

“Closely related to the observation that happy students learn better than unhappy ones is something I judge to be even more important. Happy people are rarely mean, violent, or cruel.” (Noddings, 2003, 35-40)

“Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence.” Aristotle

For Noddings, the concepts of “house” and “home” represent a key metaphor and a reality for grounding happiness. How can we be happy if our home is in literal or figurative disarray, dysfunction, and disrepair?

“If it [making a home] is one of the great personal and collective works of art that all human beings spend their lives attempting to raise up and to keep from falling down, then the art of creating homes, still has a long way to go, and still remains within the province of magic. Instinct or imitation are [sic] not enough to make a home.” (Noddings, 2003, 376-79)

Some of us remember the junior high school and high school courses called Home Economics, HomeEc. At the time I was taking this girls-only class, I had no idea what “Home Ec” meant. Now, however, I think the ideals of the class may have been exactly what Noddings was talking about in the quote above, the economy of making a home.

Not only HomeEc kinds of courses been widely squeezed out of the curriculum, but as Noddings ventures, what is offered instead is a theoretical projection away from “home.” In her opinion, education is often a vision of the future and the world that uproots children from that which can be a grounding for their happiness, their home:

“Beyond the house and its everyday objects and activities is a region, and again we find it odd that the love of place so celebrated in art and so often a factor in both child and adult happiness is neglected in schools. In the United States, our emphasis is on educating for a global economy; it is an education proudly (and stupidly) designed to transcend place.” (Noddings, 2003, 419-22)

Lest we think that an education of happiness produces visions of everyone dancing around in a euphoric state, Noddings suggests that we cannot embrace happiness unless we also see, hear, and feel the unhappiness around us:

“True happiness requires a capacity to share unhappiness; that is, to be truly happy, we must be moved to alleviate the misery around us.” (Noddings, 2003, 59-62)

According to Noddings, at the base of alleviating suffering, is the practice of caring.

Caring

Relationships, according to Noddings, are both the “singlemost important source of happiness . . . and also an important source of misery.” Yet, it is in those relationships that Noddings believes the idea of “home” can be built, nurtured, and stabilized. To “grow” a culture of caring is key to successful education and success in life in Noddings’ view.

To build the ideological foundations of “an education of caring,” Noddings posits that every interaction involves two people, the carer and the cared for, and both roles contribute to a moral life. She speaks of “care ethics” as being “relational ethics,” that it is the relationship, the connection with another that causes us to have a “motivational displacement” in which we willingly, temporarily shift our focus to another’s needs. Even at times when we disapprove of those needs, we can respond in a way that maintains the relationship.

Imagine what would change for all constituents of schools if the purpose of education were to develop *an attitude of caring* with our children. Can you imagine it? How could the priority of caring shape the ways in which we speak to children? How would it shape our interactions with parents? How might it give us courage to address difficult situations or uncomfortable encounters? And, how might an attitude of caring color the environments that we create in our schools hour-by-hour, day-by-day?

If we were able to make a “culture of caring” our educational priority, how do we reconcile that educational focus with the academic achievement and career preparation that is predominant in U.S. education?

Notice right at the start that public schools in liberal democracies pay very little attention to preparation for personal life. Most of our attention goes to preparation for higher forms of education, and thus for the world of paid work. (Noddings, 2003, 371-74)

In Noddings’ view, “an education of caring” could grow people who feel satisfied in the roles and places they have chosen for themselves in their families and communities. This satisfaction may then result in happiness. So, rather than happiness being a goal toward which we should all strive in education, Noddings seems to suggest that it is the “ethics of caring” that ultimately produces happiness, that happiness is a by-product, a side-effect of caring. As George Orwell once commented, “Men can only be happy when they do not assume that the object of life is happiness.”

Would such an emphasis on caring compromise the current emphasis on high standards measurable achievement? Would we be giving up the rigors of intellectual development and the dream of global competitiveness if we adopted these more “squishy” educational goals? And, what about the financial gain that we are promised if we get “a good education?”

..we do our students (and our society) a significant disservice when we define happiness entirely in terms of financial success. (Noddings, 2003, 278-82)

Fun

Remember, as you read the following quote, that Noddings spent a long career in mathematics education. Imagine how unpopular her ideas may have been with her colleagues!

In today's school, we insist that all children study algebra and geometry but, in fact, relatively few will use what they learn there in later life. Indeed, some years ago, the comedian Fran Leibowitz urged high school students "to remain unconscious in algebra class. I assure you," she said, "in real life, there is no such thing as algebra." Of course, she exaggerated some. Algebra and other forms of mathematics are enormously important for some purposes and for some people. But the majority could get by well with knowledge of only a few topics in academic mathematics. In contrast, all of us face the tasks of making a home and finding companionship, and most of us become parents. (Noddings, 2003, 433-35)

Could the same be said of other subjects studied in school: that a few topics known and understood in a subject would suffice for most of us? That extensive study and mastery learning should be reserved for those who want them? Are we living in a time of educational over-kill? I actually find it fun to wonder about all these things!

Stating that "it is possible to exercise the intellect *and* have fun. Not everything needs a specific learning objective," Noddings wants educators to lighten up a bit and pay attention to children as people.

"...it doesn't hurt to pause now and then and ask children and ourselves: How much fun are you having?" (Noddings, 2003, 486-89)

"Plan a lesson, but don't follow it; hope something wonderful happens, then follow it."

If we could adopt caring and happiness as educational purposes, my main concern would be the seemingly inevitable systematization of these goals into a "program." My experience and observation have made me more than a little wary of marketed programs designed for widespread adoption. Too often, meaningful aspects of human behavior are wrenched into a program that "teaches" children to perform those virtuous behaviors. Unfortunately, the resulting "program," in my view, trivializes those virtues to the point of making them trite. Rather than developing the habit of caring, children learn that if they perform the specified behaviors, they will gain adult approval and often rewards. Students hear teachers repeat scripted phrases so frequently that they tune out to the automated dictums that also surround them on bulletin boards in rooms and hallways. Have you, too, seen examples of programs that corrode good intent?

Education for All

Has it ever concerned you that, by touting the importance of education (and "higher" education) for "getting ahead in the world," we may be prompting children to reject their parents' chosen occupations?

The Principles of Education class discussion on the purpose of education that I described in the beginning of this column eventually flows into considering diversity and variability in choices, desires, lifestyles, and occupations of the populace. Being fiercely protective of equity and justice, our Oberlin students seem to have spent little time questioning the justice of mandatory curricula for students and families who have no interest or desire for such depth and expansiveness (for 12 years) of knowledge, skills, and understandings.

So, again, the question is reiterated, "What is the purpose of education and whom should the purpose of education serve?" Can "education for all" elevate those who can and want to achieve academically without debasing those who cannot or want not to achieve academically?

While we give all children opportunities to learn so that they can be happy in Aristotle's image (or yours and mine?), we should take care not to cause them to think less of the lives their parents have led and of those many of them will also lead. (Noddings, 2003, 417-20)

As I listen to legislators, school leaders, and education advocates speak about the importance of our schools, I wonder if they are willing to accept that their messages can imply that *all* students should aspire to attend college, to gain financial success, to pursue a professional career, to develop prowess in business. What messages do children receive about themselves and their families when such oft-touted goals do not describe *them*?

In today's education, occupational (economic) life is the focus of our attention. We want every child to succeed, and this has come to mean that every child should be prepared for college and the sort of work that required a college education. What of all the children who will become bus and truck drivers, retail sales clerks, appliance repair people, construction workers, materials handlers, heavy equipment operators, railway engineers and conductors, house painters, plumbers, bakers, farm workers, beauticians, postal workers, cooks, waiters, hotel clerks, house and office cleaners, auto mechanics and sales people, dog and horse groomers, telephone/electric line workers, prison guards, hospital attendants, grounds keepers, maintenance workers, managers of Laundromats and dry cleaning shops, installers of burglar alarms, carpet layers, window washers, steel workers, fishermen, sailors, caterers, cashiers, chimney sweeps, roofers, makers of china and glassware, decorators, musicians, florists, entertainers, moving men . . . and what would happen to our society if no one were willing to do this work? Do these people represent failures of schooling, or do we fail them when we lead them to believe that only economic success *is* success? (Noddings, 2003, 453-56)

Do you feel a bit stirred up by these ideas and questions? If so, good! I'm not sure how I feel about all these ideas, but I do enjoy weighing the possibilities that they may offer.

Nel Noddings has placed herself in a position that is crosswise with many of her colleagues in university Schools of Education. Yet, through the many books she has written and years she has taught, she has courageously continued to ask questions that many would consider "against the wind." Throughout her cumulative works, Noddings reminds us and encourages us to look through the *erudite* purposes of education in order to see the more *ecumenical*, universal desires to live fulfilling, caring, and happy lives.

Education, by its very nature, should help people to develop their best selves—to become people with pleasing talents, useful and satisfying occupations, self-understanding, sound character, a host of appreciations, and a commitment to continuous learning. (Noddings, 2003, 282-85)

Reference

Noddings, Nel (2003). *Happiness and education*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.