

A Morally Defensible Mission for Schools in the 21st Century

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Social changes in the years since World War II have been enormous. We have seen changes in work patterns, in residential stability, in style of housing, in sexual habits, in dress, in manners, in language, in music, in entertainment, and perhaps most important of all, in family arrangements. Schools have not responded in an effective way to these changes. They have responded, albeit sluggishly, to technological changes with various additions to curriculum and narrowly prescribed methods of instruction, but they have largely ignored massive social change. When response has occurred, it has been piecemeal, designed to address isolated bits of the problem. Thus, recognizing that some children come to school hungry, schools provide meals for poor children. Alarmed by the increase in teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, schools provide courses on sex education. Many more examples could be offered, but no one of these, nor any collection of them, adequately meets the educational needs of today's students.

What do we want for our children? What do they need from education, and what does our society need? The popular response today is that students need more academic training, that the country needs more people with greater mathematical and scientific competence, that a more adequate academic preparation will save people from poverty, crime, and other evils of current society. Most of these claims are either false or, at best, only partly true. For example, we do not need more physicists and mathematicians; many people highly trained in these fields are unable to find work. Further, the vast majority of adults do not use algebra in their work, and forcing all students to study it is a simplistic response to the real issues of equity and mathematical literacy. And, clearly, more education will not save people from poverty unless a sufficient number of unfortunate people either reject that education or are squeezed out of it; that is, unless the society is willing to pay everyone a living wage. Much work that is now low paid but essential to our society will have to be done even if everyone is "well educated;" and no person who does honest, useful work--regardless of her educational attainments--should live in poverty. A society that permits this is not an educational failure; it is a moral failure.

Our society does not need to make its children first in the world in mathematics and science. It needs to care for its children--to reduce violence, to respect honest work of every kind, to reward excellence at every level (Gardner, 1961), to ensure a place for every child and emerging adult in the economic and social world, to produce people who can care competently for their own families and contribute effectively to their communities. In direct opposition to the current emphasis on academic standards, a national curriculum, and national testing, I have argued (Noddings, 1992) that our main educational aim should be to encourage the growth of competent, caring, loving, and lovable people. This is a morally defensible aim for education in the 21st century. I have argued (Noddings, 1992) that liberal education (defined as a set of traditional disciplines) is an outmoded and dangerous model of education for today's young. The popular slogan today is, "All children can learn!" The slogan is so generous and optimistic in its tone that one hesitates to attack it, but it really is virtually meaningless without an object for the verb "learn." What can all children learn? Anyone who has taught in the public schools knows that

children's talents and interests vary enormously. As a former high school mathematics teacher, I am convinced that many children -- even many who try very hard--cannot learn, for example, the intricacies of mathematical proof. Their inability to comprehend sophisticated mathematical material does not in any way reduce their human worth. Must we declare everyone equal in all things in order to cherish each child and nurture his growth? By trying so hard to pretend that all children are equal in all things, we destroy the very possibility of promoting their real, unique talents. John Dewey (1916) remarked on the attitude of the new education toward this tendency:

The general aim translates into the aim of regard for individual differences among children. Nobody can take the principle of consideration of native powers into account without being struck by the fact that these powers differ in different individuals. The difference applies not merely to their intensity, but even more to their quality and arrangement. As Rousseau said: "Each individual is born with a distinctive temperament.... We indiscriminately employ children of different bents on the same exercises; their education destroys the special bent and leaves a dull uniformity. Therefore after we have wasted our efforts in stunting the true gifts of nature we see the short-lived and illusory brilliance we have substituted die away, while the natural abilities we have crushed do not revive:" (p. 116)

Some colleagues in mathematics education grant part of my argument; they admit that many students do not grasp mathematical proof. But their solution is to reduce or even eliminate proof from the curriculum and to try to devise a curriculum at which all children can succeed. Clearly, this does an injustice to the mathematically talented.

To insist that all children should get the same dose of academic English, social studies, science, and mathematics invites an important question unaddressed by the sloganeers: Why should children learn what we insist they "can" learn? Is this the material people really need in order to live intelligently, morally, and happily? Or are arguments for traditional liberal education badly mistaken? Worse, are they perhaps mere political maneuverings?

In suggesting that advocates of liberal (academic) education for all might be guilty of political maneuvering, I do not mean to create an educational conspiracy theory. On the contrary, I believe that most advocates honestly believe that their recommendations are in the best interests of children. However, I also believe that these recommendations and the elaborate plans laid for carrying them out do indeed act like political maneuvers; they distract us from the fundamental problems we should address. We cannot eliminate poverty by forcing academic requirements on all children. More reasonably, we might argue that eliminating poverty would improve education and reduce the need for coercion. Children whose lives are physically, materially, and emotionally secure are likely to respond with enthusiasm to literature, science, and history taught well in a relevant social context.

Thus, my argument against liberal education is not a complaint against literature, history, physical science, mathematics, or any other subject. It is an argument, first, against an ideology of control that forces all students to study a particular, narrowly prescribed curriculum devoid of content they might really care about. Second, it is an argument in favor of greater respect for a wonderful range of human capacities now largely ignored in schools. Third, it is an argument against the persistent undervaluing of skills, attitudes, and capacities traditionally associated with women. This last is an argument that has been eloquently made by Jane Roland Martin, whose chapter also appears in this volume.

Michael Apple (1993) has also expressed concerns about the movement toward standardization of curriculum. Implementing a system purporting to improve social conditions is worse than doing nothing if it both fails to change those conditions and, in its failed attempts, justifies the status quo. This is what Apple fears--that in the interests of national competitiveness and the privileged classes, children of the poor will be more rigidly ranked and more firmly stuck in their lower places than ever before:

The "same treatment" by sex, race and ethnicity, or class is not the same at all. A democratic curriculum and pedagogy must begin with a recognition of "the different social positionings and cultural repertoire in the classrooms, and the power relations between them." Thus, if we are concerned with "really equal treatment:' as I think we must be, we must base a curriculum on a recognition of those differences that empower and depower our students in identifiable ways. (p. 1)

I would go further and insist that the starting point has to be provision for individual interests as Rousseau and Dewey saw them. Education organized around a reasonable number of broad talents and interests, augmented and filled out by serious inquiry into common human problems, stands the best chance of achieving a meaningful equality. Such education, in which students are active co-creators of curriculum, is a truly liberal education for both personal and public life in a democracy.

GLIMPSES OF AN ALTERNATIVE

What do we want for our children? Most of us hope that our children will find someone to love, find useful work they enjoy or at least do not hate, establish a family, and maintain bonds with friends and relatives. These hopes are part of our interest in shaping an acceptable child (Ruddick, 1980). What kind of mates, parents, friends, and neighbors will our children be? I would hope that all of our children--both girls and boys--would be prepared to do the work of attentive love. This work must be done in every family situation, whether the family is conventionally or unconventionally constituted. Both men and women, if they choose to be parents, should participate in the joys and responsibilities of direct parenting, of acting as psychological parent. Too often, women have complained about bearing this responsibility almost entirely. When men volunteer to help with child care or help with housework, the very language suggests that the tasks are women's responsibilities. Men "help" in tasks they do not perceive as their own. That has to change.

In education today, there is great concern about women's participation in mathematics and science. Some researchers even refer to something called the "problem of women and mathematics." Women's lack of success or participation in fields long dominated by men is seen as a problem to be treated by educational means. But researchers do not seem to see a problem in men's lack of participation in nursing, elementary school teaching, or full-time parenting. Our society values activities traditionally associated with men above those traditionally associated with women. (For an extended and powerful argument on this problem, see Martin, 1985.)

The new education I envision puts a very high valuation on the traditional occupations of women. Care for children, the aged, and the ill must be shared by all capable adults, not just women, and everyone

should understand that these activities bring special rewards as well as burdens. Work with children can be especially rewarding and provides an opportunity to enjoy childhood vicariously. For example, I have often wondered why high school students are not more often invited to revisit the literature of childhood in their high school English classes. A careful study of fairy tales, augmented by essays on their psychology, might be more exciting and more generally useful than, for example, the study of Hamlet. When we consider the natural interest we have in ourselves--past, present, and future--literature that allows us to look both forward and backward is wonderful. Further, there are opportunities for lessons in geography, history, art, and music.

Our children should learn something about life cycles and stages. When I was in high school, my Latin class read Cicero's essay "On Old Age." With all his talk of wisdom, of milk, honey, wine, and cheese, of meditating in the afternoon breeze, I was convinced that old age had its own romance. Looking at the present condition of many elderly, I see more than enough horror to balance whatever romance there may be. But studies of early childhood, adulthood, and old age (with or without Latin) seem central to education for real life. Further, active association with people of all ages should be encouraged. Again, one can see connections with standard subjects -- statistical studies in math; the history and sociology of welfare, medical care, and family life; geographical and cultural differences. We see also that the need for such studies is a result of the social changes discussed earlier. Home life does not provide the experience in these areas that it once did, and yet the need is greater than it has ever been.

Relations with intimate others are the beginning and one of the significant ends of moral life. If we regard our relations with intimate others as central in moral life, we must provide all our children with practice in caring. Children can work together formally and informally on a host of school projects and, as they get older, they can help younger children, contribute to the care of building and grounds, and eventually do volunteer work--carefully supervised--in the community. Looking at Howard Gardner's (1983) multiple intelligences, we see that children can contribute useful service in a wide variety of ways; some have artistic talents, some interpersonal gifts, some athletic or kinesthetic abilities, some spiritual gifts. A moral policy, a defensible mission, for education recognizes a multiplicity of human capacities and interests. Instead of preparing everyone for college in the name of democracy and equality, schools should instill in students a respect for all forms of honest work done well (Gardner, 1961). Preparation for the world of work, parenting, and civic responsibility is essential for all students. All of us must work, but few of us do the sort of work implied by preparation in algebra and geometry. Almost all of us enter into intimate relationships, but schools largely ignore the centrality of such interests in our lives. And although most of us become parents, evidence suggests that we are not very good at parenting, and again the schools largely ignore this huge human task.

When I suggest that a morally defensible mission for education necessarily focuses on matters of human caring, people sometimes agree but fear the loss of an intellectual mission for the schools. There are at least two powerful responses to this fear. First, anyone who supposes that the current drive for uniformity in standards, curriculum, and testing represents an intellectual agenda needs to reflect on the matter. Indeed, many thoughtful educators insist that such moves are truly anti-intellectual, discouraging critical thinking, creativity, and novelty. Further, in their emphasis on equality, they may lead to even grosser levels of mediocrity. Second, and more important from the perspective adopted here, a curriculum centered on themes of care can be as richly intellectual as we and our students want to make it. Those of us advocating genuine reform--better, transformation--will surely be accused of anti-intellectualism, just as John Dewey was in the middle of this century. But the accusation is false, and we should have the courage to face it down.

Let's consider a few possibilities. Themes that are especially important to young people include love and

friendship. Both can be studied in intellectual depth, but the crucial emphasis should be on relevance for self-understanding and growth. Friends are especially important to teenagers, and they need guidance in making and maintaining friendships.

Aristotle is one philosopher who wrote eloquently on friendship, and he assessed it as central in moral life. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (trans. 1985), Aristotle wrote that the main criterion of friendship is that a friend wishes a friend well for her own sake. When we befriend others, we want good things for them not because those things may enhance our welfare but because they are good for our friends. Aristotle organized friendships into various categories: those motivated by common business or political purposes, those maintained by common recreational interests, and those created by mutual admiration of the other's virtue. The last was, for Aristotle, the highest form of friendship and, of course, the one most likely to endure.

Students need to understand, as Aristotle did, that friendship can be genuine and yet depend on mutual interests that may be transient. Some friendships do not extend beyond football season, army service, or common work in the same company. They may still be characterized by wishing the best for one's friend. The kind of friendship that grows out of mutual admiration and likability is rare and beautiful and brings with it a special moral obligation. Among the good things we want for our friends is moral growth, an increase in virtue. Although Aristotle did not employ the word virtue in our modern sense, it still makes sense to say that we want our friends to grow both in requisite excellences and in virtue construed as moral virtue. This means that true friends will protect each other not only from external evil but also from evil that arises internally. When we care, as we must about a friend, we continually support the quest for a better self.

How do friendships occur? What draws people together? Here students should have opportunities to see how far Aristotle's description will carry them. They should hear about Damon and Pythias, of course. But they should also examine some incongruous friendships: Huckleberry Finn and the slave, Jim; Miss Celie and Shug in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*; Lenny and George in *Of Mice and Men*; Jane and Maudie in Doris Lessing's *The Diaries of Jane Somers*. What do each of these characters give to the friendship? Can friendship be part of a personal quest for fulfillment? When does a personal objective go too far and negate Aristotle's basic criterion?

Students should be encouraged to examine the concept of loyalty. Is there such a thing as unconditional friendship--staying friends no matter what? One aspect of this question concerns exploitation and requires a careful analysis of equal relations and what makes them equal. We can rarely browbeat others into carrying their share of obligation, and if caring relations are important to us, we can find better approaches. But we need to attend to this set of problems. Young women especially need guidance on how to maintain relationships without contributing to their own exploitation.

Another aspect is perhaps even more troubling for most of us. When should moral principles outweigh the demands of friendship? The question is often cast this way, even though many of us find the wording misleading. What the questioner wants us to consider is whether we should protect friends who have done something morally wrong. A few years ago, there was a terrifying example of this problem in a town close to my own. A teenage boy killed a girl and bragged about it to his friends. His friends, in what they interpreted as an act of loyalty, did not even report the murder.

From the perspective of caring, there is no inherent conflict between moral requirements and friendship, because we have a primary obligation to promote our friends' moral growth. But lots of concrete conflicts can arise when we have to consider exactly what to do. Instead of juggling principles as we

might when we say, "Friendship is more important than a little theft" or "Murder is more important than friendship!" we begin by asking ourselves whether our friends have committed caring acts. If they have not, something has to be done. In the case of something as horrible as murder, the act must

be reported. But true friends would also go beyond initial judgment and action to ask how they can follow through with appropriate help for the murderer. When we adopt caring as an ethical approach, our moral work just begins where other approaches pronounce Q.E.D. Caring requires staying with, or what Ruddick (1980) has called "holding." We do not let our friends fall if we can help it, and if they do, we hold on and pull them back up.

Friendship, as an equal relation, makes demands on both parties. Young people should understand that it is sometimes necessary to break off a relationship in which they are exploited, abused, or pushed to do things they regard as harmful or wrong. Quitting such a relationship is not "breaking a friendship" because, in actuality, there is no friendship without mutual acceptance of the main criterion.

Gender differences in friendship patterns should also be discussed. It may be harder for males to reject relations in which they are pushed to do socially unacceptable acts because those acts are often used as tests of manhood. Females, in contrast, find it more difficult to separate themselves from abusive relations. In both cases, young people have to learn not only to take appropriate responsibility for the moral growth of others but also to insist that others accept responsibility for their own behavior. It is often a fine line, and since there are no formulas to assist us, we remain vulnerable in all our moral relations.

With much more space, we could explore many themes of care for both their relevance to real lives and their intellectual richness. (For some suggestions on how to teach such themes, see Noddings, 1992, 1995.)

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

A transformation of the sort envisioned here requires organizational and structural changes to support those in curriculum and instruction. It requires a move away from the ideology of control, from the mistaken notion that iron-fisted accountability will ensure the products we set out as desirable. It just won't happen. We should have learned by now that both children and adults can accomplish wonderful things in an atmosphere of love and trust and that they will (if they are healthy) resist--sometimes to their own detriment--in environments of coercion.

The traditional organization of schooling is intellectually and morally inadequate for contemporary society. We live in an age troubled by social problems that force us to reconsider what we do in schools. Too many of us think that we can improve education merely by designing a better curriculum, finding and implementing a better form of instruction, or instituting a better form of classroom management. These things won't work.

We need to give up the notion of an ideal of the educated person and replace it with a multiplicity of models designed to accommodate the multiple capacities and interests of students. We need to recognize multiple identities. For example, an eleventh grader may be a Black, a woman, a teenager, a Smith, an American, a New Yorker, a Methodist, a person who loves math, and so on. As she exercises these

identities, she may use different languages, adopt different postures, and relate differently to those around her. But whoever she is at a given moment, whatever she is engaged in, she needs--as we all do--to be cared for. Her need for care may require formal respect, informal interaction, expert advice, just a flicker of recognition, or sustained affection. To give the care she needs requires a set of capacities in each of us to which schools give too little attention.

I have argued that education should be organized around themes of care rather than the traditional disciplines. All students should be engaged in a general education that guides them in caring for self, intimate others, global others, plants, animals and the environment, objects and instruments, and ideas. Moral life so defined should be frankly embraced as the main goal of education. Such an aim does not work against intellectual development or academic achievement. On the contrary, it supplies a firm foundation for both.

How can we begin? Here is what I think we must do:

First, be clear and unapologetic about our goal. The main aim of education should be to produce competent, caring, loving, and lovable people. Stating such an aim does not standardize either the curriculum or a mode of pedagogy. It opens the way to continuous dialogue and debate: What do we mean by competence? What does it mean to care? What can we (as parents and teachers) do to develop children who are loving and lovable?

Second, take care of affiliative needs. There are many things we can do with little cost to meet these needs. We can keep teachers and students together (by mutual consent) for several years instead of the traditional (and arbitrary) one year. We can keep students together and in one building for considerable periods of time -- long enough for them to think of the physical place as their own. Administrators and policymakers can support teachers in their efforts to care and legitimize time spent on building relations of care and trust.

Third, relax the impulse to control. This is a hard recommendation to make and an even harder one to follow in an era reeking of distrust and filled with demands for accountability. But, surely, if we value a truly democratic way of life, we must give teachers, students, and parents greater opportunities to participate and exercise judgment. We need responsible experimentation, not a petrification of current mediocrity. Indeed, it is odd that, in a liberal democracy that prides itself on independence and resistance to governmental interference, so many well-meaning people should be pressing for more and tighter control of what goes on in schools. We should take the time to know what is actually going on in our schools, but we need not (and should not, I would say) prescribe beforehand everything that they must do. Study and appraise their outcomes both critically and appreciatively, but do not prescribe outcomes! We can learn from responsible experimentation.

Fourth, get rid of program hierarchies. This will take time, but we must begin now to provide excellent programs for all our children. Programs for the non-college-bound should be just as rich, desirable, and rigorous as those for the college-bound. What a student wants to do or to study should guide what is required by way of preparation. Here we should not worry greatly about students "changing their minds." Right now we are so afraid that if students prepare for something particular, they may change their minds and all that preparation will be wasted. Therefore, we busily prepare them uniformly for nothing. We forget that when people have a goal in mind, they learn well, and that even if they change their minds, they may well have acquired the skills and habits of mind they will need for further learning. In addition to preparation for work or future study, we must also give all students what all students need--genuine opportunities to explore the questions central to human life.

Fifth, give at least part of every day to themes of care. If we want to decrease violence and increase responsibility, we simply must spend time in dialogue with our children about the full range of existential questions, including both moral and spiritual matters. In all classes, opportunities can be found to discuss common human predicaments, outstanding acts of compassion, examples of towering genius, and the great joys potential in everyday life. We can give students practice in caring and time to reflect on and discuss their efforts. To nurture caring in our children, we have to show, first, that we care for them. This means listening as well as talking, following their legitimate interests as well as guiding them away from dangerous and undesirable interests.

Finally, we must teach them, and show by our example, that caring in every domain implies competence. When we care, we accept the responsibility to work continuously on our competence so that the recipient of our care--person, animal, object, or idea--is enhanced. There is nothing mushy about caring. It is the strong, resilient backbone of human life.

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