"Why Do We Send Children to School?"

Doug Feldmann

Univeristy of Southern Mississippi

This question has been asked for centuries, in various ways, by students, teachers, taxpayers, historians, bureaucrats, and nearly everyone else. It is no less prominent today than when Plato detailed the famous conversation in ancient times between Socrates and Meno on the subject. For when one sifts through all of the political footballing of public education that occurs in the twenty-first century United States, this question is the inevitable ending point to discussion and debate on educational processes. Compulsory attendance laws have existed in nearly all states since 1918 (Rippa, 1992), requiring that young people before a certain age – typically, sixteen years – attend some manner of formal schooling. The purpose that these young people find in schooling is often dictated by local customs and mores, leading to a variety of reasons for having children sit in the classroom each morning.

When considering the larger purpose, sub-questions that typically follow include: Is it the role of the public and private schools of America to produce good citizens through an inundation of civic training? Is it the role of schools to impart knowledge through rigorous training in time-honored subjects, such as the humanities? Is it the role of the schools to transmit the cultural heritage? Or, is it the schools' role to allow for the development of the child in ways that are relatively untested, yet natural to children's interests and desires? To be certain, much time and energy is used to discuss and debate the true consensus on the purpose of schooling in the United States (see Gaffield, 1994; Monk, 1994). Much of this discussion tends to be rhetorical, however, as individuals outside of the school system – such as townspeople and politicians – often offer the most input on the issue. The question of the purpose of schooling, therefore, is perhaps most importantly asked of pre-service teachers, who are on the verge of heading into the field as a career choice.

Review of the Relevant Literature

Understandably, there is much disagreement among scholars as to the direct purpose of public education. Some, such as Edgar and his colleagues (2002) offer that the purpose of schooling should be determined through public deliberation within diverse communities, with many different voices taking part in the discourse in the formation of

purpose. Others believe that schools – and those working within them – should be willing change agents and social critics, always being ready to re-conceptualize the nature of schooling and its purpose for greater society (see Engle and Ochoa, 1988; Giroux, 1991; Kitano, 1991; Rich, 1990; Weller, 1998). Smith (1995) embraces a Deweyan view of the purpose of schooling, as he advocates that children are not being taught democracy in the classroom, but are actually functioning in an actual democracy as they attend school. Still others – perhaps honoring the Spencerian question, "What knowledge is of most worth?" – view technology as the preeminent purpose of schooling in modern times (Emory, 1995).

As part of the larger topic of the purpose of schooling, "Character Education" has become prominent in recent years, seen by some as an antidote to negative images portrayed to children in the modern media (Dobbs, 1997). And while not exclusively the case, Character Education programs often involve an influx of religion or religious values into the curriculum, with strong proponents and opponents on both sides of the issue (see Dickinson and Dolmage, 1996).

It is argued that in a broad, general sense throughout the course of history, it is evident that the transmission of culture – be it local, national, or humanistic – appears to be at the core of schooling, in the United States and beyond. This culture involves a mesh of academic, social, and moralistic expectations that are communicated to the younger generation.

Data Collection and Analysis

This exploratory study sought to examine the perceptions of pre-service elementary school teachers about the purpose of schooling. Eighty students in a junior-level elementary education course at a medium-sized university in the southeastern United States were given a questionnaire to complete, asking for their perspectives on the priority of certain topics in the purpose of public education (see Figure One). The instrument was developed from the compilation of several sources on elementary pedagogical methods. The university course in which the students completed the questionnaire was the "Social Studies Teaching Methods" component within a "block" setting, whereby all of the students were simultaneously enrolled in a "Literacy Teaching Methods" course and a "Mathematics Teaching Methods" course (course names are pseudonyms). The data was collected during the fall semester, 2003 and the spring semester, 2004. This "Elementary Block" of courses took place in the semester prior to the student teaching experience for all of the participants. During the semester of the completion of this questionnaire, the students were also in the process of completing their second extensive

field experience, visiting a local elementary school for an entire day once a week, while simultaneously fulfilling their block coursework on campus. The issues with which the respondents were presented, as well as the results, were as follows:

Figure One: Questionnaire Distributed to Undergraduate Pre-Service Elementary Teachers -- "The Purpose of Schooling" (n=80)

Very Unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very Important
To prepare workers to compete successfully in a technological world economy				
0	0	4	20	56
0%	0%	5%	25%	70%
To transmit the nation's cultural heritage, preserving past accomplishments and insights				
0	0	8	40	32
0%	0%	10%	50%	40%
To encourage students to question current practices and institutions; to promote social change				
2	3	22	25	28
3%	4%	27%	31%	35%
To develop healthy citizens aware of nutrition, exercise, and good health habits				
0	0	8	36	36
0%	0%	10%	45%	45%
To lead the world in creating a peaceful global society, including an understanding of other cultures and languages				
1	1	8	41	29
1%	1%	10%	51%	37%
To provide a challenging education for America's brightest students				
4	1	15	28	32
5%	1%	19%	35%	40%
To develop strong self-concept and self-esteem in students				
15	6	19	30	10
18%	8%	24%	38%	12%
To nurture creative students in developing art, music, and writing; to encourage creative cultural achievement				
0	0	1	36	43
0%	0%	1%	45%	54%

Very Unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very Important

To educate students in avoiding cultural pitfalls: unwanted pregnancy, AIDS, drugs, alcoholism

0	1	7	50	22
0%	1%	9%	63%	27%

To unite citizens from diverse backgrounds (national origin, race, ethnicity) as a single nation with a unified culture

5	3	8	20	44
6%	4%	10%	25%	55%

To provide support to families through after-school child care, nutritional supplements, medical treatment, and so on

14	11	16	17	22
18%	14%	20%	21%	27%

To encourage loyal students committed to the United States; to instill patriotism

0	0	9	27	44
0%	0%	11%	34%	55%

To teach students our nation's work ethic; punctuality, responsibility, cooperation, self-control, neatness, and so on

0	0	7	21	52
0%	0%	9%	26%	65%

To develop academic skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and science

0	0	3	12	65
0%	0%	4%	15%	81%

To provide a dynamic vehicle for social and economic mobility, a way for the poor to reach their potential

0	0	0	31	49
0%	0%	0%	39%	61%

To prepare educated citizens who can undertake actions that spark change

0	7	1	28	44
0%	9%	1%	35%	55%

To ensure the cultural richness and diversity of the United States

0	4	7	27	42
0%	5%	9%	34%	52%

To help eliminate racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and all forms of discrimination from society

0	0	3	20	57
0%	0%	4%	25%	71%

Very Unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very Important
To prepare as many students as possible for college and/or well-paid careers				
0	0	9	28	43
0%	0%	11%	35%	54%
To provide child care for the nation's children and to free parents to work and/or pursue their interests and activities				
8	25	24	12	11
10%	31%	30%	15%	14%

The fact that very few students indicated any of the items listed as being "Very Unimportant" speaks to the breadth with which they view the current state of their profession; certainly, in contemporary times, it is granted that public school teachers are expected to perform many roles, either in an official or unofficial capacity. The students' responses suggested that they at least understand the need for these roles, if they are not readily embracing them. Furthermore, nearly half of the issues presented on the questionnaire (nine, or 45%) had no responses that cited it as "Very Unimportant" or "Unimportant." This is quite telling, as it suggests that new teachers heading into the profession are well aware of the extremely broad definition that "successful teaching" exudes today; for as shown, no longer does it simply involve the drilling of reading, writing, and arithmetic; it involves, perhaps more than ever (and perhaps first illustrated for high school teachers decades ago by Clarence Kingsley's treatise for the National Education Association, "The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education"), social skills as part of the untaught curriculum, more generally defined as the "hidden" curriculum by some scholars (Beyer and Apple, 1998).

It is also interesting to note that building academic skills in **the** core subject areas – namely reading, writing, mathematics, and science – received the most marks for "Very Important" in the minds of the pre-service teachers. While this notion may not be surprising, it nonetheless reaffirms historical precedents in the domination of subject matter as the central purpose in schooling. In 1828, a collection of scholars issued the Yale Faculty Report, which sought to "defend" the traditional humanistic curriculum against intrusions from more practical subjects that had emerged from the Deists and the Age of Enlightenment. The Yale Faculty Report was subsequently re-affirmed by the meeting of the Committee of Ten in 1892 and 1893, in which the famous "Five Windows to the Soul" (grammar, art and literature, mathematics,

geography, and history) of the influential William Torrey Harris were once again trumpeted (Kliebard, 1995). And near the end of the Twentieth Century, the "Back to Basics" push of the Essentialist curriculum once again forwarded the concept of a subject-centered curriculum (Ornstein and Hunkins, 1998). Thus, as products of this very same educational system, the pre-service teachers maintained their institutionalized focus on the subject-centered curriculum, viewing its components as the single-most important aspect within the purpose of schooling. Furthermore, two additional goals – preparing students for the expected technological world economy of the future, and the pursuit of the elimination of ethnic and gender discrimination – received the most overall tallies of "Important" or "Very Important," emphasizing these areas as paramount in the minds of new teachers as well.

Conclusions and Questions for the Future

It may be argued that teaching in public schools today is as challenging as ever before; conversely, it may be argued that teaching is also as rewarding as ever before, with educators impacting the lives of children in degrees not previously witnessed. In any event, it is generally accepted that the roles that contemporary teachers are undertaking – be they specific or nebulous – are increasing, possibly resembling wooden logs hurled onto a bonfire; while more are added, none are taken off the pile of responsibility. Thus, in addition to those listed above, another question for the pre-service teachers might be, "Which roles do you think truly belong to the teacher?"

It may be claimed by some that the students' preponderance of listing most items as "Very Important" or "Important" suggested their inexperience in the profession. Often times in the careers of teachers, the first year of work is humorously referred to as the "Yes Year," in which the novice teacher agrees to most every role or duty assigned to him or her; consequently, as a result of being overloaded with duties, the second year becomes the "No Year," in which the teacher feels more comfortable in denying requests for their time from administrators, community members, and others.

It should also be noted that new teachers "inherit," to varying degrees, the formal curriculum and overarching aims of the school at which they become employed. Over time, however, the curriculum and aims shift within the building, with the school assuming the collective nature of the faculty body that it possesses. With the great influx of new teachers arriving in the coming decade (with its impact not just numeric, but also substantive), it is critical to understand their perspectives on the reasons behind the purpose of schooling in the United States.

References

Beyer, L., & Apple, M. (eds.) (1998). *The curriculum: Problem, prospects, and possibilities*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Dickinson, G., & Dolmage, R. (1996). Education, religion, and the courts in Ontario. *Canadian Journal of Education, 21 (4)*, 363-383.

Dobbs, D. (1997). Character education as a key component of school reform. *Social Studies Review, 37* (1), 54-55.

Edgar, E., & others (2002). Democratic dispositions and cultural competency: Ingredients for school renewal. *Remedial and Special Education, 23 (4)*, 231-241.

Emory, S. (1995). The future of technology in education: A "multimedia today" roundtable discussion. *Multimedia Today, 3 (4)*, 12-21.

Engle, S., & Ochoa, A. (1988). *Education for democratic citizenship*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Gaffield, C. (1994). Children's lives and academic achievement in Canada and the United States. *Comparative Education Review, 38 (1)*, 36-64.

Giroux, H. (1991). Curriculum planning, public schooling, and democratic struggle. *NASSP Bulletin, 75 (532)*, 12-25.

Kitano, M. (1991). A multicultural education perspective on serving the culturally diverse gifted. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 15 (1)*, 4-19.

Kliebard, H. (1995). *The struggle for the American curriculum*. New York: Routledge.

Monk, D. (1994). Policy challenges surrounding the shift toward outcome-oriented school finance equity standards. *Educational Policy, 8 (4)*, 471-488.

Ornstein, A., & Hunkins, F. (1998). *Curriculum: Foundations, principles, and issues*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Rich, Y. (1990). Ideological impediments to instructional innovation: The case of cooperative learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 6 (1)*, 81-91.

Rippa, A. (1992). *Education in a free society: An American history*. New York: Longman.

Smith, H. (1995). It's education for, not about, democracy. *Educational Horizons, 73 (2)*, 62-69.

Weller, D. (1998). Unlocking the culture for quality schools: Reengineering. *International Journal of Educational Management, 12 (6)*, 250-259.