



Education? Why?

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Music EdVentures Newsletter, January 2010

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-upsmanship, how could such a “soft” idea be acceptable to any of us?