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Giving Purpose and Cohesion To Learning Through Service

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COMMENTARY

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Michael Gibbs

Giving Purpose and Cohesion To Learning Through Service

By Audrey C. Cohen

The future of our country depends very much on schools' teaching children today that they can be the rejuvenating forces of tomorrow. Learning this lesson is all too peripheral to the agendas of most schools. But it is a lesson that can be taught—and is being taught in seven schools in New York City and Florida that have adopted a new design for learning.

Let me briefly describe two children in these programs, who are very different from most 10- and 12-year-olds today. They are children who are taking responsibility for their lives and making a positive difference in the lives of others.

Maria Sanchez was a 4th grader last year in a school in the Bronx. She and her classmates spent an entire semester studying all areas of knowledge—from mathematics and science to English and social studies—from one perspective: How would it help them improve the health of their community?

Like her classmates, Maria started with herself. She explored nutrients and how they affect the human body. Then she looked at her own diet, evaluated the foods she ate, and made plans for a healthier lifestyle for herself. She and her classmates obtained a sampling of food products from the supermarket. Then, using her knowledge of decimals and percentages, Maria analyzed the nutritional contents of those foods. She also compared our culture's foods to those from Europe and the Far East. She studied historical figures like Florence Nightingale, who devoted her life to protecting the health and welfare of others. She read and wrote poems about the body. She interviewed her parents and other chil-

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dren about their eating habits.

Finally, to draw all their knowledge into a constructive action, Maria and her classmates ended the semester by putting on a giant health fair for the community. They measured and designed booths, and created games relating to health. They wrote a newsletter with health tips for the fair; displayed large-scale drawings of the body and its functions; performed their own songs about health; provided information about local agencies involved in health care; and guided visitors through basic steps in nutritional self-help. They used what they learned to make a difference.

In a junior high school in New York City's upper Manhattan, Greg Thomas and his fellow 7th graders had a different goal. They were working at "internship sites," learning about the field of education in kindergarten, elementary, and day-care settings. And they were intent on finding ways to improve services there.

Greg interned at a 1st-grade class in a neighborhood public school once a week. He adopted a special group of children in the class. He researched, planned, and wrote a book that he used to help these children. He used his own studies of math and science to give the children elementary instruction in these areas. He illustrated each of his book lessons with drawings. He found out what his children's interests were and then wrote stories that reflected those interests.

To expand his own awareness, Greg studied the social environment of the children, and compared this with the childhood environments of other times and cultures. He learned about child development, and used what he learned to help his children. He drew sociograms of the children. And he evaluated their progress, week by week, with the help of the supervising teacher at the internship site. He used his own learning to make a difference in the lives of others.

These children are in the process of becoming the kind of citizens we admire and respect in our society. They are also learning from an early age to develop the skills that will be essential to a productive life in a global economy focused more and more on service.

The question they lead us to ask is this: How can we build an education system that will enable all children to become rejuvenating forces for tomorrow's society? The question can be answered by addressing a few very basic issues, the first of which is the problem of fragmentation in learning.

We assume that it makes no difference if we chop up the world in school and never put it back together. We seem to think that a natural assimilating process which redresses artificial segmentation will occur within the human brain, unaided by the educational environment. But how can we expect children to see the connections between ideas, and to use knowledge from different areas to meet challenges, if we continue to fragment knowledge

and feed it to them in unrelated pieces? This problem is so serious that even simple relations of cause and effect begin to be beyond the grasp of some children's minds.

There is only one solution to the problem, and that is to bring coherence back into learning by giving each semester a *purpose*. That "purpose" should unify all the different areas of knowledge children study. But what kind of purpose could this be? To answer that, we should look at the second basic issue facing educators, the problem of connecting life and learning.

If our children must be the rejuvenating force of the future, does it make sense to lock them up every day in classrooms to learn? Shouldn't they be learning from the very start to apply what they learn to meeting real challenges in life?

Shouldn't children also be learning to address issues in the institutions they will be working in as adults: in businesses, nonprofit organizations, government, and cultural institutions? Shouldn't they be learning, with the help of these institutions, to develop and apply the information skills and sophisticated service abilities they will need as adults? Shouldn't they learn, from an early age and for at least several hours a week, to connect what they study to meeting needs in the institutions that form their society? And shouldn't those institutions willingly open their doors to young students, to prepare them for the future? I think so.

For this reason, the purpose that

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provides the unifying framework for each semester's learning should ask children to apply what they learn in school to solving real-life problems in society. And as soon as this is clear, something else becomes clear as well. It does not make sense to fragment knowledge by disciplines when knowledge is focused around a purpose. Instead, we should reorganize learning around the dimensions that affect our ability to use what we learn to make a difference in the world.

We should look at all knowledge from the perspective of how it can teach us about human values, about the complex systems that make up our society, about the interaction of self and others, and about the skills that we need to reach our goals as participants in a modern economy. Reorganizing learning in this way helps children see the meaning of the specific fields of knowledge they study, and to apply that knowledge to reaching a goal.

What kind of issues should children address? And how should they address them? This brings us to the third major issue: School should involve children in making a difference.

We need to teach children from the outset that they can make a positive difference. They can, for example, help a younger child learn to read. They can also help a group of people become healthier. These are just two examples of ways children can learn to make a difference. And they can do this as an integral and central part of their learning experience.

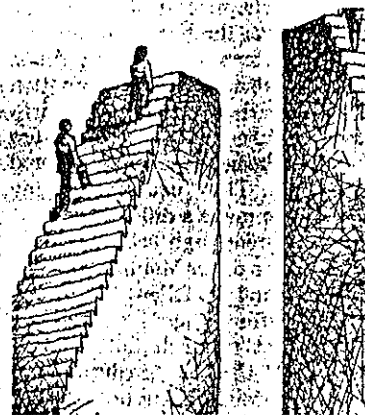
We have to treat children as responsible people who can make a contribution. As people with an ethical orientation. As people who value others, and see their own benefit in helping others. We should ask children to focus their learning each semester around carrying out a purpose that makes a difference. In this way, we will guarantee their moral and social development. And we will solve the extraordinary neglect of ethical issues by our schools.

We have to treat children as responsible people who can make a contribution. As people who value others, and see their own benefit in helping others.

Teaching children to apply their learning to making a difference means that we will be changing the way we assess learning. And this is the fourth and last issue to be dealt with: the issue of assessment.

We have an archaic system of assessment in our schools. Schools rarely measure what counts—the ability to put what we learn to productive use in society. But surely, this is the crux of real learning: learning how to apply knowledge to changing the world for the better. And this should be the basis for student assessment.

The principles I have outlined describe a paradigm for education that integrates children's learning around a purpose by having them use what they learn to carry out a constructive action to improve the world. This paradigm is not utopian. It is working today. In addition to the seven schools in New York City and Florida that employ the design, other schools in Mississippi, Texas, and California are in the early stages of implementing it.



Michael Gibbs

The accomplishments of children in these schools have shown that it makes sense to challenge some of the basic assumptions of traditional education: the fragmentation of learning, the isolation of learning from action, the failure to emphasize constructive change as the goal of learning, and the failure to reward children for making a difference. We must be willing to challenge our basic assumptions. We will do this successfully when we give children from an early age the right to act as the rejuvenating forces of the future.