

PARENTS LEAGUE OF NEW YORK

Review 2013

Essential Articles on Parenting and Education

Why Do We Educate?

VINCENT TOMPKINS, *Head of School*
Saint Ann's School

In *Nature's Metropolis*, his compelling history of Chicago and its relationship to the American West, William Cronon tells the story of Chicago's rise to a position of dominance of the grain trade of the Midwest in the latter half of the 19th century. One of the fundamental changes that Cronon describes is the transition in the market for wheat from a trading system based on individual sacks of grain that remained intact from the farmer's field to the grist mill, to an automated system of grain elevators in which wheat was sorted, graded, stripped of its individual characteristics and readied for sale through an increasingly impersonal and distant system. In the older method, nothing adulterated the individual sack of grain's "characteristic weight, bulk, cleanliness, purity, and flavor that marked it as the product of a particular tract of land and a particular farmer's labor."¹ In the new system, the focus was on the smooth and efficient transport of a predictable, tradable commodity to market, in larger and larger quantities, but with any remnants of its particular origins and characteristics entirely erased.

I begin with this reference because something similar, though perhaps not so extreme, has occurred in the way we think about education in the United States. Partly this is the result of one of the better things to have happened over the past century and a half, namely, the dramatic expansion of access to education, first at the elementary and secondary school level in the early years of the 20th century, and particularly since the end of the Second World War, in higher education as well. Access to education on

the basis of merit, talent and ambition rather than as a birthright has come to be seen as something fundamental to our success as a fluid and democratic society.

Did College Accessibility Lead to Automation?

Yet something meaningful has been lost in this process as well. We all ought to applaud the erosion of a system in which a handful of elite preparatory schools provided the majority of students to the nation's most selective colleges and universities (a system that prevailed into the middle decades of the 20th century); and we surely all welcome the growth in the number and quality of colleges and universities in the U.S. and the access they afford. But the effort to identify among the millions of high school students who graduate each year those who will have the opportunity to pursue higher education, and where exactly they will be able to pursue that opportunity has lent to the educational enterprise some of the characteristics of an industrial model. The clearest sign of this is the proliferation of standardized tests, which developed out of World War I era intelligence testing (and whose cousins were put to use in the service of the eugenics movement). Despite a substantial body of evidence suggesting their limitations, standardized tests loom ever larger as a measure of educational purpose and value. "Teaching to the test" is a term that no longer requires any explanation because it is so much the norm. In the name of rigor and accountability, tests and grades are omnipresent, even in independent schools, which could presumably make different choices on behalf of their students and their missions. Knowing that part of their ranking in the well-known and widely decried *US News & World Report* college ranking is derived from average test scores, from the number of applications received, and the yield on offers of admission, selective colleges and universities have done too little to resist the growing frenzy of the admissions process or the displacement of more individual assessments of accomplishment, promise, and joy derived from learning.

Beyond GDP

The urge to measure and quantify and pass judgment on the quality of education in the United States has been fed in part by the link—both implied and explicit—between education and economic prosperity. Quite often, when the educational achievement of American students is evaluated in a comparative, international context, the standard measure is one or another of various international tests that measure aptitude in math, science and reading. And many commentators seem inclined to assess the value and success of our education system based solely on the narrow question of its contribution to present and future GDP. Cries of alarm have been

What seems missing
is the idea that one
reason we offer
education in the arts is
that students might want
to become ... artists.

raised over the past decade in the National Academies and elsewhere that we are failing to produce adequate numbers of qualified engineers and scientists, suggesting that this is a fundamental threat to the national well-being. It may be so. But shouldn't as much concern and attention be devoted to asking about the kind of people our students become, and whether our schools are producing poets, painters, and scholars of all stripes in adequate measure?

In the report on higher education commissioned by former U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, the link between educational outcomes and the needs of the economy was made explicit: "In tomorrow's world a nation's wealth will derive from its capacity to educate, attract, and retain citizens who are to able to work smarter and learn faster—making educational achievement ever more important both for individuals and for society writ large."² From the Commission's perspective, the decline in literacy among college graduates was a significant concern. Why?

“According to the most recent National Assessment of Adult Literacy, for instance, the percentage of college graduates deemed

**The role of education
in a democratic society
is reduced solely to an
economic imperative at
our great peril.**

proficient in prose literacy has actually declined from 40 to 31 percent in the past decade. These shortcomings have real-world consequences. Employers report repeatedly that many new graduates they hire are not prepared to work, lacking

the critical thinking, writing and problem-solving skills needed in today’s workplaces.”³

Although the Obama administration has adopted a broader view, similar arguments seem to prevail, or at least seem necessary when defending a concept of education that is less narrowly utilitarian. This spring, in a speech at Miner Elementary School in D.C., Secretary of Education Arne Duncan reflected on the current state of arts education in public schools and offered these reasons why a robust arts program was important:

For a host of reasons, high-quality arts education is absolutely critical to providing all students with a world-class education. The study of the arts can significantly boost student achievement, reduce discipline problems, and increase the odds that students will go on to graduate from college. Arts education is also essential to stimulating the creativity and innovation that will prove critical to young Americans competing in a knowledge-based, global economy. And the arts are valuable for their own sake. They empower students to create and appreciate aesthetic works. Creating by doing is a uniquely powerful way to learn. I want

to add that last, but not least, the arts are also fun. They give students a reason to look forward to coming to school. They give them the chance to be excited about Glee Club.

What seems missing is the idea that one reason we offer education in the arts is that students might want to become ... artists.

Not for Glory, and Least of All for Profit

There is no gainsaying the argument that a better-educated citizenry is a major avenue of social mobility for individuals and families, and a contributor to national prosperity. Nor is there anything abhorrent about a view of education that recognizes this as one of the ways in which education benefits society. But is that the purpose of education in a democratic society? I would suggest that much more is at stake. If all that is required of schools is to produce useful workers with a prescribed set of skills, then the entire underlying premise of a liberal education is called into

Giving students a shared body of knowledge is worthwhile, but the merits of any particular content should be constantly debated and revisited.

question, and the more directed and prescriptive systems that prevail in many other countries, systems that steer young students towards certain highly specific forms of training, might better meet the need.

If we are not to witness the erosion of liberal education and of the ideals that inform it, educators at every level—teachers, principals and headmasters, university presidents—need consistently to articulate and defend a broader set of principles that should guide us. Many of us, in our mission statements and elsewhere, already do this. Those in positions of leadership in

independent schools have a particular responsibility and opportunity to do so. No doubt each of us would meet this challenge in his or her own way, but I would suggest the following principles as a place to begin:

That education is worthwhile for its own sake, and therefore worth doing as well as it possibly can be.

That children's innate curiosity, their capacity for learning and for divergent thinking, are precious resources not to be squandered.

That children should never be underestimated. Assumptions about what children are or are not ready for too often leads us

Assumptions about what children are ready for leads us to delay their encounter with the most important works humanity has produced.

to delay their encounter with some of the most important works that humanity has produced. Why shouldn't a second grader read or be read to from *Hamlet* or *The Odyssey*, instead of from a "reader" or a "work-book," and go on to shape their own creative work—individually or as a group—inspired by that interaction?

That in the absence of inspired, dedicated teaching, little is possible; and that inspired and dedicated teaching is most likely to occur when the curriculum guides rather than constricts a teacher's imagination and ability to respond to the passions, interests, and inclinations of his or her students.

That giving students a shared body of knowledge is worthwhile, perhaps even noble, but the merits of any particular content or canon should be constantly debated and revisited.

That the means by which we most often measure and grade student aspirations and achievements all have their flaws, and seldom meet a test of true objectivity, and that we ought to demand of ourselves ways of reflecting on the work that students do that call out the best from them and that recognize them as individuals.

That if we do not have the courage to embrace the study and creation of art, literature, music, poetry, dance and theater as both necessary and good in their own right, then we have squandered a legacy of over two millennia of human endeavor.

That the role of education in a democratic society is reduced solely to an economic imperative at our great peril. If we fail to produce literate, articulate, numerate, critical thinkers who see skepticism towards received wisdom as the necessary posture of an educated person, we further imperil a vibrant civic culture and the institutions on which it depends.

That our mission as educators is like the work of the novelist, as William Faulkner described it in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1950: “a life’s work in the agony and sweat of the human spirit, not for glory and least of all for profit, but to create out of the materials of the human spirit something which did not exist before.”

Notes

1. William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1991), p. 107.
2. *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2006), p. xii.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Vincent Tompkins is the Head of School at Saint Ann’s School in Brooklyn, New York.