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## House Without a Foundation: Why Well-Being Matters (Especially in Education...)

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# House without a Foundation: Why Well-Being Matters (Especially in Education...)

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## **Introduction: The Influence of the Media, Politicians, and Corporations on Education**

If you take the time to look at the portrayal of education in popular media, you will be immediately struck by the dire nature of the situation in schools. We read harrowing reports of the sad state of affairs in schools ravaged by violence, ignorance, and mediocrity. The message is clear. Public schools are horrible places full of inadequate teachers and dangerous and depressed kids, and something needs to be done to reform them. The cover story of *Business Week* magazine in March of 2001 epitomizes the tone and tenor of current recommendations for reform. The title: “How to Fix America’s Schools: Here are 7 ideas that work.” “What were those 7 ideas?” you are asking? The list reads like this:

1. Pay Teachers for Performance (Merit Pay)
2. Make Schools Smaller
3. Hold Educators Accountable
4. Offer More Variety (i.e. Charter Schools and Public Alternatives)
5. Provide Adequate Funding
6. Increase Time in School
7. Use Technology Effectively

You have undoubtedly heard similar recommendations. These suggestions are the consequence of a crusade that began 30 years ago with *A Nation at Risk*, a 1983 report written by the department of Education and commissioned by the Reagan Administration. A touchstone for all the rhetoric that has followed, *A Nation at Risk* sought to address the “rising tide of mediocrity [that] threatens our very future as a nation.” What is at stake here is our economic competitiveness in the global economy. The vast majority of the public has since swallowed whole the rhetoric created by this crusade. The story goes something like this:

Schools are not doing a good job, and we are no longer the great economic power we once were. We are still a great country, but our schools are not up to snuff. Therefore, we must reform our schools. We must apply the practices and philosophies of business to education because the tender-minded educationalists and teachers are failing to get the job done and ruining our country in the process. We must grade the teachers and schools. We must hold teachers and principals accountable. We need to downsize the schools. We need to increase efficiency. We need more capital. We need the latest technologies. We need to maintain healthy competition in the market and create a variety of choices. We must establish a baseline and measure our performance toward our goal. Our goal is economic competitiveness and the creation of a technologically literate global workforce.

Despite the fact that this rhetoric is fairly transparent, school districts and local governments have fervently applied these business practices. The sad fact is that business strategies are wholly inadequate to the task. Children are not products, and schools are not businesses. Schools are humanistic by their very nature. To change this fact would be to extinguish the flame that inspired public education and democracy itself. In some measure, I fear this is exactly what we are doing. This is a subject I will return to later. Let me state clearly that despite my criticisms of these reform efforts I do believe it would be irresponsible to ignore the economic repercussions of public schooling in America. I do not criticize politicians and policymakers for thinking of the economic implications of schooling, nor would I welcome a lack of discourse in the commons on the subject, but I am deeply concerned about policy makers and politicians who focus *exclusively* on economic considerations to the detriment of the well-being of children and teachers—and consequently, society as a whole. This is the argument I hope to make here today.

There is an elephant in the boardroom, and no one is speaking about it. For the good of society, we must look more deeply at our policy decisions. Is economic competitiveness in the global economy really the only major consideration? Obviously not, but what else is of most concern? Should parents or teachers be the ones to help policy makers and politicians to determine what questions are most important? What role should universities play? What role should business owners and corporations play in our schools? What is the goal of education? What does a good education look like? Is education more than job training? Consideration of such questions gives us our best chance at educating our children well. There is

much more at stake than our economic competitiveness. We have neglected critical issues pertaining to the development of children and their well-being, and have hyper-focused on old policy debates that have left politicians, scholars, policymakers, and parents, polarized and exhausted.

### The Nature of Humans and Schools

The education we offer children depends in no small part on our views of human potential, psychology, and the purposes of learning. Philosophers have considered these views for centuries. Is a child's mind a *tabula rasa*, or are children possessed of a rich innate endowment (i.e., constructivism)? Are humans by nature violent savages (i.e., Hobbes), or are they knowledgeable and respectable citizens capable of participating in their own government (i.e., Lamartine)? Despite this rich cultural legacy, little if any consideration is given to what views of human nature, psychology, and learning are guiding our schools. [1-5] The only outcome measures we use are achievement scores, which reflect our implicit views on the purposes of education.

How long has this been the case? I turn to history. Let me read you an excerpt on the subject of school reform:

Consider the wave by which a new study is introduced into the curriculum. **Someone feels that the school system of his town is falling behind the times.** There are rumors of great progress in education making elsewhere. Something new and important has been introduced; education is being revolutionized by it; the school superintendent, or members of the board of education, become somewhat uneasy; the matter is taken up by individuals or clubs; pressure is brought to bear on the managers of the school system; letters are written to the newspapers; **the editor himself is appealed to use his great power** to advance the cause of progress; editorials appear; finally the school board ordains that on and after a certain date the particular new branch—be it nature study, industrial drawing, cooking, manual training, or whatever—shall be taught in the public schools. The victory is won, and everybody—unless it be some already overburdened and distracted teacher—congratulates everybody else that such advanced steps are taking. The next year, or possibly the next month, there comes **an outcry that children do not write or spell or figure as well as they used to**; that they cannot do the necessary work in the upper grades, or in the high school, because of

lack of ready command of the necessary tools of study. **We are told that they are not prepared for business**, because their spelling is so poor, their work in addition and multiplication so slow and inaccurate, their handwriting so fearfully and wonderfully made. Some zealous soul on the school board takes up this matter; the newspapers are again heard from; investigations are set on foot; and **the edict goes forth that there must be more drill in the fundamentals of writing, spelling, and number** (emphasis mine).

This description of school reform is very familiar. What year do you think it was written? John Dewey, the philosopher and educator, wrote this in 1904. [6] It could have been written yesterday. This leads to yet another question: how have schools been portrayed in the media for the last hundred years? With the little time at my disposal, I cannot answer this question exhaustively. Instead, let me show you some of the headlines pertaining to education in the *New York Times* since 1950:

- **May 25, 1950:** 3 R's Are Still Being Taught in Public Schools, U.S. Commissioner of Education Declares (Response to criticism that social studies was undermining education.)
- **September 17, 1950:** Report Points Up Magnitude of the Financial Problems Facing Nation's Public Schools Haphazard Financing Variation in State Allotments Citizen Support Uneven Educational System
- **September 20, 1970:** Study Calls Public Schools 'Oppressive' and 'Joyless'; Report, Commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation, Finds That Children Receive Inadequate Education Study Calls Public Schools 'Grim' and 'Joyless'
- **August 4, 1980:** For First Time in 7 Years, Survey Finds More People Endorsing U.S. Public Education. Misconduct Ranked Top Problem. 'Report Card' Scale Used

As you can see, there has been little cheer for our public schools over the last fifty years. There was this brief period of time in 1980 where people were warming on public education, but it was short-lived once the Reagan administration published *A Nation at Risk* in 1983.

Throughout this time, some brave researchers have attempted to question the *status quo*.

- **April 8, 1992:** Renegade Researchers Offer Rebuttal: U.S. Schools Are Better Than Many Say
  - "Most schools in America are better than they were in 1981," said Harold Hodgkinson, director of the Center for Demographic Policy, a research organization in Washington.
  - **"What this debate reveals is how few answers there are to the important questions—how well are schools and students doing compared with other nations, and how will Americans know when their schools are good enough?"** (emphasis mine).
- **March 24, 1996:** Can the Schools Stand or Deliver?
  - "Americans have always had very utopian expectations of what the schools can do," said David Tyack, a professor of education at Stanford University. "That can be a very positive way of recreating democracy. The problem comes when you promise too much and people get cynical. The danger with the utopian view of education policy is that it's a short jump from seeing education as the Ark of the Covenant to becoming cynical and disappointed enough to see schools as failures that don't matter at all."

As these researchers found out, it is difficult to change public perceptions about schools. Cynicism about our schools has captured the public imagination, and like a truck moving downhill, the momentum is too strong. Clearly, many of the concerns and fears represented in the *Business Week* article are not new in the history of public education. In fact, many of the calls for educational reforms made during the 1980s simply preyed upon public fears that already existed. David Berliner and Bruce Biddle suggested in their book *The Manufactured Crisis* that politicians and policymakers have taken advantage of public perceptions and use the media to propagate a myth of deep-seated crisis.[7] Wherever you stand on these issues, suffice it to say that while there are problems in schools, they may not be what you think they are.

### On What Should School Reform Focus?

The need for reform in schools goes well beyond tinkering with techniques and standards in math, science, or any other subject. We need to work towards the cultivation of the whole person, which is far more than a technique. It involves the cultivation of a different climate in the schools, one that values the expression of the whole person and the nature of human potential. Our misplaced focus on abstract knowledge has led us away from asking harder questions about the fundamental purpose of education. Abstract knowledge is not an end in and of itself. We must do more if we want our children to face the challenges of modern civilization.

Education has been instrumental in seeing us through difficult times in our history and is essential for our survival as a species. [8-10] In the face of the many difficult challenges in our times (e.g., globalization, ecological crisis, climate change, economic troubles) we must once again reconsider the function of schools and more broadly, the function of education in society. Make no mistake: I am arguing that the fundamental goal of education should be the well-being of the children and society. [11-15]

The problem is that when I say the word “well-being,” you think Whole Foods. I don’t have to tell you that the term “well-being” conjures images of spas, health food co-ops, new-age bookstores, and yogis. For this reason, the concept of “well-being” has image problems among serious researchers in all fields of study. Here, I employ the word in much the same way that it is currently used in the field of medicine. The World Health Organization (2006) defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” At the very core of the concept is the notion that everything is interconnected; the well-being of society is linked to the well-being of the individual. Personal well-being is connected with a person’s position in society, culture, and relationships with others. We can not bury our heads in the sand because our own well-being is tied up with that of society as a whole. Well-being is a state of happiness and prosperity that is not simply a question of physical health or material success but also of “character” development and “complete” health, which is not merely the absence of disease.

Despite the fact that we know that well-being has not increased as a result of our material and technological advances [16-18], there is an implicit assumption that the best way to prepare our children for the world is to prepare them to get and keep a job. Certainly this is an important ingredient of a good education, but it is not sufficient in and of itself. While our global economy and systems of communication have become increasingly complex (e.g., globalization, TV, and the internet), the resulting explosion of information has led us to lose sight of the fundamental purpose of

the transmission of knowledge, which is to equip a person with the knowledge and necessary tools to help her live well.

Helping our children to learn how to live well through pedagogy is not a new idea; in fact it is as old as education itself. Scientists studying human origins point out that cultural transmission by means of pedagogy is one of the defining features of *Homo sapiens*. [8] From the very dawn of humanity, the tools necessary to live have been transmitted from one generation to the next through pedagogy. The use of language, the creation of tools, and even social understanding itself has been created and then transmitted to human progeny. [16-20] Premack and Premack point out that while the rudiments of pedagogy are present in other species, they differ in kind and complexity. [8]

In the information age, there has been a dramatic increase in the amount of knowledge and our access to it. *Today*, the problem is understanding *what is worth transmitting*. Currently, when children attend schools, they do not feel they are learning about well-being. [1, 3, 21-26] This is not a new problem. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Michel de Montaigne spoke about the relationship between knowledge, study, and well-being:

The son of the house is seeking book-learning not to make money (for so abject an end is unworthy of the grace and favour of the Muses and anyway has other aims and depends on others) nor for external advantages, but rather for those which are truly his own, those which inwardly enrich and adorn him. Since I would prefer that he turned out to be an able man not an erudite one, I would wish you to be careful to select as guide for him a tutor with a well-formed rather than a well-filled brain. Let both be looked for, but place character and intelligence before knowledge; and let him carry out his responsibilities in a new way. [27]

As Montaigne stated eloquently, education frequently fails to make connections between knowledge and the tools and dispositions that can lead one to greater well-being. One can study a great deal and still be incapable of living well. We need to provide children with such tools and understanding in all the domains of human experience—sexual, material, emotional, cultural, and spiritual. Preparing students for the global economy may provide some tools at a material level, but ignores every other level. Any learning at the other levels is incidental—not necessarily rejected, but not deliberately included.

### **The Dialectic of Well-Being and Education**



It is unfortunate that schools have lost sight of this aim in education, but it is not the first time that we have lost sight of the connection between well-being and education (and I fear it will not be the last!). History can be instructive, therefore, in helping us to identify the processes and mechanisms necessary to reintegrate learning and well-being.

In turning to the history of Western civilization, there are two major points I'd like to impress upon you today. First of all, throughout history there have been individuals and theories that have helped remind our civilization of the importance of well-being. The essence of the transmission of knowledge, namely well-being, has been forgotten, rediscovered, and then forgotten again only to be rediscovered at a later time. In education, we can point out that at each major period of rapid expansion of human knowledge, well-being is often brought out of neglect. Individuals and theoretical perspectives evolve in order to face the challenge and remind us of the importance of well-being in cultural advancement [16]. This pattern can be easily identified by perusing surveys of Western civilization. [28-30]

Secondly, at each major sociological and historical shift in human history there has been a corresponding shift in the social sciences and philosophy. In particular, our views of human nature, psychology, and the purposes of education have changed. Due to a fundamental sociological shift in our day—the global economy, the rise of the information age, and the transformation of communications systems—the social sciences will, and indeed must, adapt, so that children can be “well-formed,” not simply “well-filled,” and as a result, in a state of well-being. This is not simply a question of adding computers; we need to focus on educating a child about her full potential.

These conclusions are based on the study of two periods of rapid expansion of knowledge, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. In each of these periods, there was a cultural focus on humanism. It was a renewed vision of human potential, a change in the “state of mind” in the culture. The flourishing in science, art, and philosophy was symptomatic of a deeper shift in consciousness. As Whitehead states, “The new mentality is more important even than the new science and the new technology. It has altered the metaphysical presuppositions and the imaginative contents of our minds; so that now the old stimuli provoke a new response.”

Individuals like Petrarch and Voltaire were luminary figures who helped to catalyze movements in a variety of sectors and fields. Their work was more than strictly “academic.” It was a way of life and a potent quest for self-understanding and well-being.

They had active philosophies, which they felt needed to be directed towards the service of humanity. Their lives exemplified the spirit that guided their times. The *studia humanitatis*—more commonly referred to as the humanities—was not an abstract exercise

disconnected from the lives of people. It was a vehicle for the development of our humanity put to service for the good of society as a whole.

Unfortunately, the last time there was a clear emphasis on this universal spirit of well-being in education was during the Enlightenment. It was considered self-evident to the prominent theorists of the Enlightenment that the best education would be that which led to happiness and well-being. “A SOUND mind in a sound body, is a short but full description of a happy state in this world: he that has these two, has little more to wish for; and he that wants either of them, will be but little the better for anything else.”[31] That said, I am not arguing that content does not matter, but my argument should not be read to require the use of the classics in instruction either. Clearly there are some works from classical times or traditional education that may be more or less suited to cultivating well-being. But far beyond simple content considerations, *we need to ensure that the information that is ingested or studied can help lead us toward well-being.* In other words, the pedagogy, the institutional approach, as well as the awareness of the teachers and students are paramount to fostering well-being.

One need not look very deeply into the history of American education to understand that it has rarely if ever been explicitly focused on our well-being. [19, 32-34] Our schools have adapted to the Information Age by placing different forms of technologies in schools; they have tried to prepare children to work in the global marketplace, but they have not considered how to adapt our education to bring well-being and happiness to a new generation of humanity: a generation that is consumer-driven and consumption-oriented and spends most of the day basking in the light of the TV or their computer.

As theorists in curriculum studies are well aware, the power of the global economic considerations have tended to trump the importance and power of theoreticians and social scientists in making decisions about our educational system. That is, in our day, the intellectual has been relegated to the backseat or confined to an “ivory tower.” Unlike the intellectuals of Petrarch and Voltaire’s day who were actively engaged in social decisions, the intellectuals of our time have been shut out and drowned out by the deafening noise of those who think that shouting is the best and only way to win an argument. At this moment in time, the stakes are too high to let this noise guide our social and educational policies.

### **Conclusion: The Way of Truth and Love**

Discussions of schools these days draw heavily on war analogies. Teachers are in the “trenches;” they are the “front line;” the “troops have lost their morale.” There is a sense of war in our schools these days. We must be careful with such analogies as they shape our

perceptions of schools. As a remedy to this perception, one can reflect on the dramatic irony that the two world wars were waged on French and Italian soil. The battlegrounds of the potent forces of obscurantism (i.e. Nationalism, Fascism, and Nazism) are coincidentally the places where the last two great expansions of knowledge took place in Western Civilization. More than cultural traditions and a sense of human heritage were lost as a result of the two world wars. What has also been lost—in the wake of the unprecedented horrors of the Holocaust and the world wars—is a sense that collectively, we as humanity can progress toward a better, brighter future. Along with this loss of faith in our common humanity, we have ceased our attempts to understand the goodness of our being and the universe. What has been lost is not technological, nor is it something that can be addressed in schools by encouraging the studies of the humanities or ensuring that children perform better on standardized tests. What has been lost is a sense of our place in the universe and our self-awareness.

Although it is difficult to distinguish, we live at the end of a period of obscurantism. That is, unlike the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, which were periods of rapid expansion, we find ourselves awakening to a darkness that had been unknown to us. But take heart, because the beginning of a period of rapid expansion is also the end of a period of obscurantism. Decadence, materialism, cynicism, war, calamity, and corruption: these are all signs of the obscurity in which we have lived. However, this is not the gravest threat to our pursuit of the good life. As Friedrich Nietzsche said, “The essential element in the black art of obscurantism is not that it wants to darken individual understanding, but that it wants to blacken our picture of the world, and darken our idea of existence.” This is one reason why ideas of well-being sound so Pollyannaish in our times. We find ourselves coming out of obscurity and into the light. But sometimes, in order to find a new balance, things can seem to get worse before they get better. Like each step we take, we move from balance to imbalance only to find a new balance again, and so on and so forth. To move out of this period of obscurantism and into the burgeoning period of rapid expansion of human knowledge, we must struggle to find a new balance in happiness and well-being. It is not only our best chance of *survival*; it will enable us to *live* well despite the challenges ahead of us. Survival is not enough. We can not lose hope that well-being is worth pursuing. We can not, as Nietzsche said, keep a “darkened” view of the individual or a dark “idea of existence.” Instead we would do well to remember the words of Gandhi when he said that, “When I despair, I remember that all throughout history the way of truth and love has always won. There may be tyrants and assassins, and for a time they may seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it, always. And when you think that it is not God’s way, the way the world was meant to be, think of that and try to do it his way.”

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