

Schools need to think seriously about why they are doing what they are doing.

The purposes of schooling

by John Martin Rich

Charles Silberman concluded in his national study of American education that the central problem of schools is "mindlessness": "it simply never occurs to more than a handful to ask **why** they are doing what they are doing—to think seriously or deeply about the purposes of consequences of education."¹ I want to pick up on this vital observation but treat it in a much different way.

Once the notion of **purpose** is placed in a central position in schooling, it can be used to untangle some difficult problems. Our discussion of purpose will tie into life plans or ways of life. Schooling, it will be argued, should play an important role in assessing life plans. By introducing professional plans (as part of a life plan), I hope to show how the choice of a life plan would affect teacher education.

Purposeful activities

Thus I want to talk about the purposes of schooling rather than education. This is a significant difference because in speaking about education it is proper to discuss both formal and informal provisions; and education may also be discussed in ideal terms, which may be inspirational but not always applicable to schooling. Additionally, education could be viewed universally, but schooling needs to be considered in relation to the community and various social and political forces. By school is meant "a deliberate arrangement persisting over a period of time that involves teachers and students for the purpose of promoting learning."²

All social institutions need purposes to function effectively. This is especially true of schools since they are designed to bring about certain results. An individual is purposeful when he/she is guided by a definite aim, when he/she keeps an end or an aim-in-view which is thought to be worthwhile. Purpose is tied to action because the worthwhileness of the purpose motivates the individual and action is needed to achieve the end sought.

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Those who argue that the importance of **meaning** and **purpose** has been overestimated and we should instead get on with the business of teaching and learning rather than waste time with such silly speculations engage in a self-defeating argument. The critic wants others to understand what he says and therefore wants it to be meaningful to those whom he seeks to influence and for whom he has a purpose in seeking to dissuade. In fact, all school activities need a purpose in order to make sense to the participants; consequently, it is appropriate for students and school personnel to ask: "Why are we involved in this activity?"; "What is it designed to accomplish?"; "How does it relate to accepted principles and policies?"

Whenever purposes cannot be discerned, an obligation for engaging in an activity needs reassessment. Insisting that this is the way something has always been done is an insufficient reason, as it is in order to ask: "Why was it originally done that way and are the reasons still valid?" Thus a conscious effort must be made to state the goals or objectives for all activities.

When students perceive classroom activities as meaningful, it enhances their interest and motivation. As students develop, they can be expected to assume increasing responsibility for their own learning and study activities; yet for them to be able to do so means that their teachers have modeled purposive behavior and provided sufficient supervision and guidance.

But what is the upshot of these different purposes? Each student ultimately needs an overall direction to his/her life. Some tendency is provided to the extent that each activity is purposeful; however, the activities themselves need coordination and integration so that they contribute to a general direction in life based upon some overall perspective; otherwise no basic plan or overarching connection among the numerous activities would exist.

Schools and life plans

This general direction and overall connection is found in a life plan: a system organized around basic values which prescribes the good life. A life plan, in one sense, could be thought of as an image, model or a sketch. Each person becomes his own artist by making several sketches of various types of life plans, then trying to put oneself in the picture, adding some details to create realism, envisioning how one would fit into such a scene, and then either accepting or rejecting it. Or, if one had warranted reasons, one could accept a ready-made life plan or combine aspects of more than one ready-made plan (so long as they are consistent with one another).

Thus if schools expect students to make connections and integrate their various activities into a meaningful whole, students will be helped to become sufficiently knowledgeable to choose or formulate a life plan wisely. Moreover, it would be inconsistent for schools to try to make all of their activities and policies purposeful and then refuse to give students assistance in making connections in their lives. Yet it might be agreed that this is a vital decision—the chief value decision that each person will make—but that institutions and agencies other than schools should provide the needed assistance. It would appear, however, that schools are better equipped to handle this function than most families, religious institutions, and the media, because schools can be more objective and impartial in handling various life plans; less in need to indoctrinate or use sanctions to ensure precon-

ceived outcomes; and can offer a greater knowledge base, learning resources, and teaching skills. This is not to say that fostering the study and choice of life plans is the **only** purpose of schooling, since a study of rationales for liberal outcomes will turn up other purposes.³ It is, however, one of the more important and neglected purposes.

Different life plans or ways of life can sometimes be found among various racial and ethnic groups; these plans are also represented in the world's major religions. Such sources do not exhaust possible ways of life. There are philosophical models—Epicureanism, Stoicism, Utilitarianism, Humanism, Scientific Naturalism and others; historical models based on ideals of earlier ages; literary models that could start with such figures in mythology as Dionysius and Apollo; and political models based on such systems as communism, anarchism, communitarianism and others. Information about actual preferences was gathered by Morris in an empirical cross-cultural study of preferences as to 13 different ways to live.⁴

But is the student's choice of any life plan acceptable or are there grounds for preferring some life plans to other? Rawls says that a maximal class of plans can be created where each member of the class is superior to those not included in it, but each included in the maximal class is on an equal level with one another.⁵ To determine what life plans will be admitted to the maximal class, it is necessary to apply principles of rationality: first, the plan should be consistent with principles of rational choice when these principles are applied to the plan; second, the person choosing the plan should be fully aware of relevant facts and carefully considered the consequences. A person's aims and interests are rational, according to Rawls, when they are promoted by the plan that is rational for him. A rational plan is not a detailed blueprint but a hierarchy of plans with subplans added during the course of one's life.

Rawls introduces the Aristotelian Principle as an additional selection device.⁶ The principle states that human beings enjoy using their abilities (innate or trained), and their satisfaction grows the more their abilities are developed, or the greater the complexity of the material to which they are applied. Agreed that one may likely enjoy an activity more as proficiency increases (although this is not necessarily true in noncompetitive situations), it is the second part of the principle that is controversial—that of two activities people do equally well, they prefer the one that involves more intricate and complex discriminations. Someone who can do both generally prefers algebra to arithmetic and chess to checkers. The reasons for such preferences are that complex activities call for ingenuity and invention and satisfy novelty and variety.

Rawls' does not give evidence to support the Aristotelian Principle as an empirical generalization. Moreover, it may not fit everyday observable practices where some persons who are proficient at complex tasks choose, for whatever reason, simpler activities. Perhaps Rawls exaggerates the boredom found in simple activities and leading a relatively simple life. Or perhaps schools should promote complex activities because at least some people will find them more satisfying or because they make a greater cultural contribution than simpler activities; however, Rawls does not actually make these claims. In any case, although many complex tasks need to be fulfilled in advanced industrial societies, it is unlikely, with-

out more definitive evidence, that the Aristotelian Principle could be applied universally as a criterion to help determine what criteria will be admitted into the maximal class. All that could be said is that persons who exhibit good powers of concentration, self-discipline, divergent thinking and abstract reasoning would be wise to employ the Aristotelian Principle in helping to choose a life plan.

In addition to the principles of rationality and modified use of the Aristotelian Principle, it would seem that educators would also encourage students to evaluate life plans in terms of the extent to which the plans encourage continued education (whether formal or informal) throughout the life cycle. And any life plan that denies certain persons or groups the opportunity to choose a life plan should not be admitted to the maximal class. The burden of proof to cite relevant reasons for so denying other individuals or groups should be on those who advocate doing so.

Schools need to provide students with knowledge about different life plans, their characteristics and what they entail, and an understanding of the requisite abilities to live fruitfully within the chosen way. Once a student has gained the necessary background, he can critically evaluate the different life plans using the criteria enumerated and the consequences of living each plan in terms of his own temperament and aspirations. The choice itself will determine what general and specific abilities need to be developed; the school can provide opportunities for acquiring the general abilities; the specific abilities will need to be gained as a result of study and experience in participating in the life plan.

Professional plans

But how does all of this apply to teacher education? Within each life plan are subplans which are personal, social and professional. The personal plan pertains to the individual's own desires, abilities and aspirations. For instance, an individual may desire to live a life of extensive travel and adventure. Or another individual may choose a holy life devoted to the search for religious truths. The social plan concerns one's citizenship responsibilities and responsibilities to others within the plan chosen. A social plan, for example, may involve a duty to take care of parents in their old age. A professional plan constitutes one's formulation of career aspirations and, in more complete plans, provides general guidelines for attaining these aspirations.

Let us say that in the future most schools begin to prepare students to study and evaluate life plans. This would then mean that students would enter teacher education with the broad outlines of a professional plan; however, since such students would likely have thought more carefully than today's students about their career aspirations and the procedures for realizing them, they would come to college armed with greater knowledge of what they want and would be more selective in identifying the teacher education program which is most congruent with their aspirations. Ultimately this would result in a better fit between the individual and the program and contribute to a lower attrition rate.

But teacher education programs themselves would change to meet these new demands. An enlarged framework for teacher education would be able to fit professional plans to the program and make programs sufficiently flexible to accommodate more than one type of

professional plan. For instance, some plans may expect to use teaching skills in industry, museums, research institutes or educational television rather than in more conventional teaching situations. Some teacher education programs would be able to accommodate such diverse plans and others would not. The latter group would need to counsel students to seek more appropriate programs elsewhere.

This does not mean that because professional plans can be diverse and unique that teacher education would necessarily have to continue to expand to be all things to all people. For one thing not all professional plans are realistic in terms of student abilities and the available programs; other plans feature aspects which contradict sound educational principles and therefore would need modification. For instance, a plan based on using rote learning as the principle learning device would need to be altered.

Those programs most likely to be able to meet the diversity in plans would be those which seek to identify the basic principles and common understandings that tie together this diversity and render it more intelligible and meaningful. This common base of knowledge and principles drawn from educational research and the foundations of education would serve as a source of unity as students

acquire specialized skills and supervised practice related to their plan.

As Nietzsche said, "If we have our own **why** of life, we shall get along with almost any **how**." The **why** of life lies in the life plan. Schools respond to that **why** by early help in understanding and choosing a life plan, and teacher education responds further in satisfying the **why** by helping to fulfill the professional plan.

Footnotes

¹Charles E. Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p. 1.

²See my article, "What is a School?" *Journal of Educational Thought*, 10, No. 1 (1976), 119-25.

³In my article, "A Rationale for the Liberal Education of Educators," *Journal of Teacher Education*, 31, No. 3 (1980), 27-30.

⁴Charles W. Morris, *Varieties of Human Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

⁵John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass: Howard University Press, 1971), pp. 407-16.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 424-33.

Review

Bloom for the lay reader

All Our Children Learning: A Primer for Parents, Teachers, and Other Educators. by Benjamin S. Bloom, New York: McGraw Hill, paperback edition, 1982. 275 pp. \$6.95

The purpose of *All Our Children Learning* is, according to Bloom, to communicate his ideas and research to a wide audience. For this purpose, Bloom has chosen 13 papers which were "originally given as presentations to large and varied audiences for some special occasion" (p. vii).

Within the education community Bloom is a fertile and productive thinker, gifted in producing conceptual frameworks like the taxonomy of educational objectives. He has more recently clarified and stated pragmatically important concepts such as "formative and summative evaluation" and "mastery learning" in ways that educators have adopted and adapted. After notable success and a long career in education as a popularizer of ideas (if not an originator), Bloom understandably wishes to spread these ideas to a wider audience.

In his introduction titled "New Directions in Educational Research and Educational Practice," he states that contemporary research in education is moving from the study of "fixed or static variables to variables which are alterable either before the teaching-learning processes or as part of these processes" (p. 1). He presents the following five fixed versus alterable variables:

Fixed	Alterable
Time Available for Learning	Time the Student is Engaged in Learning
Intelligence	Cognitive Entry (Behavior)
Summative (Evaluation)	Formative Testing
Teacher Characteristics	Qualities of Teaching
Parent Status	Home Environment Processes (pp. 2-12)

Emphasis on alterable variables is characteristic of Bloom's pragmatism. He maintains that the shift to alterable variables "enables researchers and educators to move from an emphasis on prediction and the classification of students to a concern for causality and the relations between means and ends in teaching and learning" (p. 1).

The thirteen papers in *All Our Children Learning* are presented in four sections, "Overviews of Education," "Home and School," "Instruction and Curriculum Development" and "Evaluation." Three papers make up each of the sections except "Instructions and Curriculum Development" which contains four. Within each section the papers are arranged from the more recent to the earlier papers.

"Innocence in Education," the first paper in section one, "Overviews of Education," presents a paradox: Professional educators have very little definite knowledge of educational processes to act upon while "journalists, reformers and faddists" have panaceas. Bloom advocates