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Freedom to Learn

Can You Measure an Education? Can You Define Life's Meaning?

It's time to step back and think deeply about the purpose of education.

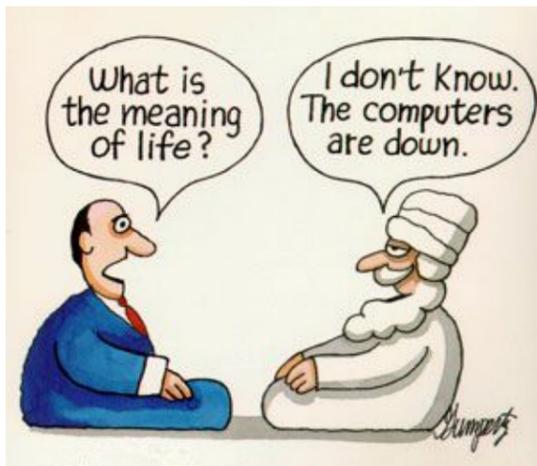
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Source:

We, in America and many other modern nations, are obsessed with measurement. Our motto seems to be, "If you can't count it, it doesn't count." We're especially obsessed with measuring children's education, and, with No Child Left Behind, we've run amok with that obsession. Our children have become pawns in contests that pit parent against parent, teacher against teacher, school against school, and nation against nation in the struggle to see who can squeeze the highest test scores out of their kids. We are depriving our children of sleep, depriving them of freedom to play and explore—in other words depriving them of childhood—in order to increase their test scores. It's time that we as a people step back, draw a few deep breaths, and come to our senses. What, really, is education? What is its purpose? In the light of our answers to those questions, is education measurable, and if it is measurable does it make sense that the same measures would apply to everyone?

Schools as we know them today have their roots in the Protestant Reformation (see elaboration [here](#)). Those reformers believed it was Christian duty to teach children to read so they could read the Bible. They also believed it was Christian duty to inculcate children with certain beliefs—mostly about the value of obedience and the hellfire that awaits those who are naughty. The purpose of schooling then was clear; it was to drive original sin out of children, create in them a proper fear of authorities, and make them memorize Bible quotations and moralistic passages designed to instill fear and obedience. Given that purpose of schooling, it was pretty clear how to measure success. If children obeyed and did their lessons in exactly the way that the teacher (who then was called "master") prescribed, and never talked back to adults, then they were scored as a success. It didn't matter much what the lessons were (as long as they didn't contradict the Bible); what mattered is that the children did them dutifully and obediently. If they rebelled and insisted on following their own will despite repeated beating and shaming, then, for them, schooling had failed. There was no pretense in the early days that schooling was all of education. People would learn the kinds of skills that allowed them to get jobs and to get along socially in the world through their real world activities. School, awful as it was, occupied only a small portion of the child's life.

Over time, after schools were taken over by governments, the required hours and days in school gradually expanded and the list of subjects taught increased. Schooling became equated in many people's minds with all of education. With the industrial revolution, schools began to model themselves increasingly after factories. Students were sent along an assembly line, from one grade to the next. At each stop, a new teacher would add

education, then it is pretty clear how to measure it. We measure it by testing each student, at each stop along the conveyor belt, to see if he or she has acquired the very specific “facts” and skills that were taught and is ready to go on to the next stop.

For a long time, however, there was slippage in this factory system. Top-down control of what individual teachers did or how they measured students’ progress was not absolute, and some teachers believed that children differ naturally from one another and that children deserve the right to spend a good part of each day playing and exploring freely and developing their own interests and passions. There was inconsistency from school to school and classroom to classroom in the criteria for being passed along. So, along came No Child Left Behind (NCLB), hell bent on doing away with that inconsistency. Now, every product had to meet specified standards, regardless of differences in the raw material, regardless of any out-of-school influences on children’s lives, and certainly regardless of children’s individual desires about what they wanted to do or learn. NCLB was nothing more nor less than the logical consequence of taking the factory model seriously, so as to produce a more consistent and standardized product. With NCLB, teachers’ jobs are on the line if their students don’t do well on the standardized tests, so, of course, pressure became strong to teach to the tests. Since the standardized tests focus on math, reading, and to a lesser degree science (defined very narrowly), other subjects have been relegated to back burner so as to teach what counts.

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But now, as I urged before, let’s step back from this frenzy, take some deep breaths, and try to think rationally about education. My wife thinks a little yoga would help.

Even if we were to define education merely as the learning of reading and math, we are going about it in the wrong way. Kids learn to read easily when they really want to read, and they learn math easily, too, when they want to (see my posts on these topics, [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). The key word here is WANT. We make kids hate reading and math when we break these skills down into mind-numbing, forced, assembly-line steps. Nobody wants to read just to read, or do math just to do math. They want to read for information or to enjoy stories, and they want to do math to solve interesting real problems that depend on math. This is how people learn in real life and how kids learn in [democratic schools](#) and in [unschooling](#) families, where they are in charge of their own education.

But now, let’s get our heads beyond reading and math to more important things. What, really, should be the purpose of education? Or, put otherwise, what are our goals for our children’s development? Most of us today don’t want our children to become unquestioning followers of authority figures. We have seen the evil that can happen from that orientation. And I don’t think most of us see the proper goal of education as that of performing well on the television show, “Are You Smarter than a Fifth Grader?” We know that the trivia fifth graders (or any other graders) are supposed to know has little to do with life success. But what do we want? Or, maybe I should put it this way: What do YOU want, and what do I want? It is quite possible that you and I have different views of the meaning of life and hope for different things for our children.

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Here's what I would want for my children, if I had young children today. I would want them to grow up feeling in charge of their own lives. I would want them to be happy but also to care about the happiness of others. I would want them to be emotionally resilient, so they could bounce back from life's inevitable stresses and disappointments. I would want them to feel confident in their ability to learn throughout life and to adapt to a world that is changing faster from year to year than it ever has before. I would want them to have goals—goals that they feel some passion about. I would want them to be able to think critically and make rational decisions that help them achieve their goals. I would want them to have moral values that help give meaning and structure to their lives, and I would hope that these would be human values—values having to do with human rights and obligations not to tread on those rights.

Now here's the rub. None of these things can be taught as school lessons. All of these things have to be discovered and created by the active, growing child; and to do that each child needs lots of time to play, explore, discover. The best we can do is provide good models ourselves and a healthy, stimulating, moral environment that allows our children to find what they are looking for and to learn to see from others' viewpoints as well as their own. Ultimately, the purpose of education is that of finding meaning in life, and each person has to do that for himself or herself.

So, can you measure an education? Can you define life's meaning? Perhaps individuals, in a way that makes sense to themselves, can measure their own education by marking their progress toward finding meaning in their own life, establishing their own goals, and moving toward those goals. But, surely, none of us can measure another person's education.

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About the Author



Peter Gray, Ph.D., is a research professor at Boston College and author of the newly published book *Free to Learn* (Basic Books) and *Psychology*.

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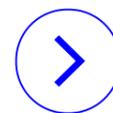
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