The Purpose of Education: What Should an American 21st Century Education Value?

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Abstract

A survey taken by 511 respondents dealt with such issues as past and current educational practice preparation, educational purposes in America, core class subjects, and soft skill teachings. Its results revealed a public opinion believing the primary goal of education as teaching students to adapt to any situation they find themselves in. Other results include a lack of preparation in current practices for life beyond education, although workforce preparation is adequate. Also, soft skills ought to see a curriculum of their own and taught explicitly to students in education instead of implicitly enforced, hoping parents alone taught these skills previously. The public also sees a need for technical skills and character building as important core subjects that students need to learn in their education, not just extracurricular options or decided on by individual school programs. These findings give policymakers, boards of education, administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders in education goals to strive for and starting points for objectives to meet these goals. Education no longer needs to prepare students for the mundane tasks and remedial jobs of our history's past; it needs to prepare students for whatever lies ahead in the future.

Introduction

Thousands of articles, TED talks, and books focus on the idea of education. Every person holds their own idea on how education should work. We hear phrases like, "Back in my day," and, "School does not teach you about the real world." Yet, education looks nearly the same as it did over 100 years ago. Many schools possess their own ideals on what education should prepare its students with. However, many argue what students should learn in school versus at home or through other activities. But while education remains similar to years past, the rest of the world looks dramatically different. America saw the civil rights movement, increased equality for all groups, technology, family structure alterations, increases in mental illness treatment, and several wars, just to name a few. Viewing Table 1 below, though, we see how some of these changes affect students. For instance, parents work more hours for less money and can afford less because of this and the fact that the cost of living (closely tied to the average cost of a home) has increased significantly. Divorce rates increased to an all-time high, putting pressures on students unlike those of the past. This dynamic shifts many responsibilities parents once had for teaching students onto schools and teachers.

Table 1
Statistical comparison of home life variables today versus 1950

Variable	1950s	Today
Divorce rate (arguably)	26%	40-50%
Amount of hours working (per adult)	38.7 (traditionally one parent working)	34.4 (traditionally both parents working)
Minimum wage (adjusted for inflation)	$7.81	$7.25
Average cost of a home (adjusted for inflation)	$76,585	$188,900
Average household income (adjusted for inflation)	$34,366	$51,017

Note: Sources include ("Comparing the inflated cost", 2014; DePaulo, 2017; Jones, n.d.; McGratten & Rogerson, 2004; Snyder, 1993).

While education has many stakeholders, who should possess the most say in educational policies? We as teachers need to follow the rules and guidelines set forth by lawmakers, but whose interests should lawmakers reflect? Students are often too young to realize what is best for them, many argue. Parents often look at the individual child instead of education as a whole; however, both are important to take into account. The needs of society can prove difficult to pin down, and workforce needs are hard to predict in advance. Plus student choice must always remain a freedom of their future. Because the reality for teachers, students, and community members is that our world is changing so rapidly *65%* of jobs our students will one day work in do not exist currently (Cahill, 2017). How do we prepare our youth for that?

Literature Review

Educational roots are found tens of thousands of years ago. Originally, there was no difference between work and play – all work was play, essentially. However, agricultural advancements altered this practice forever. What once required a plethora of knowledge about various animals and plants now only required remedial, mundane, repetitive tasks that children could accomplish. Families grew larger, and play times grew much shorter. Agricultural development also led to class developments, as well. Therefore, many children were expected to learn lessons of obedience and respect towards elders or even masters (Gray, 2008).

Unfortunately, this led to widespread corporal punishment of children in order to bend them to a master's will. Even after many countries' revolutions, this corporal punishment of children continued as an effective way to crush any desire to disobey (Gray, 2008). Child labor was in full swing and still exists in some areas of the world today.

The modern educational foundation traces back to the 16th through the 19th century. Labor became less desired as technology advanced to a higher level. Most of this revolved around the idea that all children should attend school, but many argued for this for religious reasons as a way to spread the Christian religion. However, on the other side of this argument lie employers looking for good workers. "To them, the most crucial lessons were punctuality, following directions, tolerance for long hours of tedious work, and a minimal ability to read and write... the duller the subjects taught in schools the better" (Gray, 2008, p. 1). Other purposes for education were to create substantial citizens and potential soldiers. Despite these goals, reformers saw education as a way to shelter children from a cruel home life, to challenge them to greater heights than the previous generation, and to give them their best chance at a successful life (Gray, 2008). As you can see, the debate about the goal of education has gone on for centuries.

Public schools shifted slightly into what we now know them as during the 19th and 20th century after separation of church and state, bans on corporal punishment, more subjects offered, longer time spent in school, and the requirement of education for many groups. However, the main ideas of obedience, conformity, and rudimentary learning are still present. Educational reforms attempted to change this, but again, what should we strive to change it to?

Methods

A survey was given with over 500 respondents in an initial attempt to understand what the public thinks education should focus on today. This survey was sent out via Facebook, Twitter, and several education forums available to anyone willing to take the survey. In less than a month's time, 511 people responded to the survey.

The survey began with demographic information in case trends appeared or correlations needed to be drawn. Approximately 85% of respondents were female and 15% were male. The majority, 36.7% , were 18-29 years old, followed by 33.3% falling into the 30-49 years old category, 26.8% 50-69 years old, and the remaining 3% either younger than 18 or older than 70. An overwhelming majority of 90.4% attended public school, giving the survey good credibility since public school policies are influenced by policy makers instead of private schools and homeschools. A wide variety of education levels responded with 44.3% earning a bachelor's, 22.2% earning a master's, 13.2% attending at least some college, 10.2% earning an associate's degree, 6.8% earning either a medical doctorate or PhD, 2.8% with a high school diploma or equivalent, and 0.4% having only completed grade school. 20.9% had children currently in grades K-12, and 41.4% had children previously in grades K-12. After demographic information, respondents were asked to rank various statements on a scale from 1-6, 1 being not at all and 6 being completely true. A bell curve was seen for each statement, described in the next section. Respondents were not only asked about their own education, but what they felt about current educational practices. The last portion of the survey dealt with the primary goal of education, core classes for students, and soft skills.

Results

When asked how well schooling prepared you for your current or last-held job, the majority of 37.7% ranked their education at 5 out of 6. When asked how well schooling prepared you for life, 29.5% ranked this as 4 out of 6. They ranked the statement regarding how well education is preparing students for the workforce currently also at a 4 (31.8%). But, 28.9% ranked education at

3 out of 6 for how well education is preparing students for life. The following table (Table 2) lists the various ideas for goals of education, ranked from most votes to least.

Table 2
Ranking of survey results regarding the primary goal of education

Rank	Goal	Percentage of votes
1	Adapting to any situations students find themselves in	21.6%
2	Preparing students for independent living	17.1%
3	Developing personal growth	15.1%
4	Encouraging students to solve current problems for a "better" future	11.7%
5- tie	Developing academic achievement	10.5%
5- tie	Preparing students for the workforce	10.5%
6	Passing on information, social mores, and morals regarding humanity and civilization	5.6%
7	Preparing students to live in their current environment	4.6%
8	Participating in the local and national community	3.4%

The next part of the survey focused on individual classes students should take to help prepare them for life. Respondents were asked to select the top seven classes out of a list of eighteen to select "core" subjects that students should focus on. Seven is an arbitrary average of classes that students can take in a semester, even though some classes are only taken once and some are taken throughout an educational career. Table 3 summarizes this ranking below.

Table 3
Ranking of survey results regarding most important subjects students should focus on

Rank	Class	Percentage of votes
1	Communication (including reading, writing, and speech)	94.9%
2	Mathematics	70.1%
3	Science & Engineering	66.5%
4	Technical skills (including agriculture, shop, computers, etc.)	63.8%
5	Character-building	50%
6	Social Studies (formerly known as History) & Geography	49.4%
7	Health & Nutrition	48.8%
8	Music & Arts	43.9%
9	Family & Consumer Science (formerly known as Home Economics)	39.6%
10	Economics	35.4%
11	Citizenship	32.7%
12	Independent Exploration	27.6%
13	Foreign Language	19.9%
14	Physical Education	18.3%
15- tie	Extracurricular (sports, clubs, etc.)	13.8%
15- tie	Psychology/Sociology	13.8%
16	Religion	4.3%
17	Marketing & Design	2.4%

Table 4 below gives the summary of respondents' answers regarding soft skills, defined as

"personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people." Respondents were asked how important it is for schools to explicitly teach these skills. 82% of respondents ranked this need as 5 out of 6 or higher.

Table 4
Ranking of survey results regarding soft skills everyone should possess

Rank	Skill	Percentage of votes
1	Communication	93.7%
2	Creativity & Problem Solving	68.9%
3	Self-Motivation	60.2%
4	Teamwork	54.5%
5	Time Management	50%
6	Decision Making	46.9%
7	Stress management	44.1%
8	Emotional Regulation	42.5%
9	Patience	29.1%
10	Leadership	17.1%

Discussion

Ideally, this survey would have more representation in other demographic areas like males and those with lower levels of education to give proper comparison. Also, a more clear description of what some of the soft skills referred to might be necessary, as upon further inspection some of these may have been misinterpreted due to the survey being given in a colloquial context rather than an educational vernacular. But, this does give a good starting point for current views and areas for further exploration.

When comparing to earlier goals of education, the goal "Developing academic achievement" most closely embodies previous and current education. Respondents could not rank them; they could only vote for which they thought was the most essential goal. All of these goals are important, but determining a primary goal, or at least the first few, helps shape what teachers, administrators, and students should focus on in school when a hierarchy of educational goals is necessary. Adapting to a new situation, preparing for independent living, and developing personal growth are all needs seen by the community and determined to be of great importance on at least some small scale. Imagine if we could do a large-scale survey like this with policy makers, board members, and administrators using that data when designing schools for students!

It was no surprise that communication had almost all respondents ranking that as a necessary class, shown in Table 3, as most education and life experiences place a high premium on being able to communicate with a fellow man in writing and speech. However, there were some surprises amidst these results. The first surprise for me was that technical skills ranked so high. Many schools are cutting their technical skills programs despite enthusiasm and encouragement from former President Obama for students to pursue these careers as they are in high demand. Clearly, those programs are of great value, and we should offer more opportunities for students to learn these skills, not less. Directly after the category technical skills is character-building, another seemingly peculiar choice given today's class options. But given that respondents feel that school is not doing a well enough job of preparing students for life in general, it makes sense that these would be choices to help meet that goal. In addition, I feel I must point out that it is possible that Physical Education ranked so low as most people probably felt as though a Health and Nutrition

class could cover this although in the education world these are two different entities. Again, all of these subjects are of value, it just comes down to when and where they are valuable in a student's education and how time should be spent in school when compared with other needs.

Soft skills has become a topic of debate amongst teachers, some believing that this should be left up to parents to educate their children on. They are defined by Google as, "personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people." However, the other side of the debate believes that these are skills all people should obtain and the reality is that many parents are not teaching this to their children for one reason or another; therefore, teachers just take that role upon themselves to give these students their best chance. Looking back at Table 1 above with parents working more, earning less, and having more marital and relational issues, it may not remain any wonder that they cannot take the proper time and patience it takes to teach these skills. Therefore, the question, "How important do you believe it is to explicitly teach students soft skills?" remained of great importance. As it was, 82% of respondents ranked this as either a 5 or 6 out of 6, meaning it has great importance for those looking at education from the outside in.

Everything discussed so far, coupled with this information leads us to need objectives for this goal, as well. There are many soft skills – in fact, you can find articles listing hundreds of them! However, similar ones kept appearing on lists I would sift through and decided to choose ten that I felt embodied the general qualities soft skills can provide. Table 4 ranked these qualities as respondents chose them in the survey. All of these qualities are important, but it just depends on what we should spend our valuable time on if we need to make those decisions.

Communication ranking first in the soft skills question came as no surprise. But I was surprised at leadership ranking so low. Perhaps people thought that the other soft skills would lend themselves towards good leadership. But in a world, especially the millennial generation, believing that we are all capable of achieving leadership in our respective rights it is surprising to me that this particular quality was ranked so low. But, this gives us a great starting point when determining which of the many soft skills to focus on. Perhaps, over time, teachers and schools can focus on more as time allows.

Conclusion

Some limitations of this survey included the population reached, the lack of definitions for some terms, and the lack of analysis done on the survey by people other than myself. This survey was only put out to people on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and teacher forums. Therefore, only a certain type of person was taking this survey which tended to be females with higher educations. To be truly indicative of the population as a whole, more people of various backgrounds need to take the survey. Some terms could use more defining as some may have misunderstood what the question or response was trying to get at, especially for some of the specific types of soft skills like leadership and character building, and the line between physical education and health and nutrition for core class subjects. And as the author, I see what I want to see in these results. By having someone from the outside take an objective look at these results and draw their own conclusions, the survey data can only be strengthened.

Based on the survey results, schools could shift their focus to curriculum that teaches students how to adapt to any situation they may find themselves in. Core subjects could also include technical skills and character building. And schools may choose to focus on explicitly teaching soft skills starting with communication, creativity, problem solving, and self-motivation. How to go about this is up to schools' teachers and administrators, but individual teachers can begin including curriculum to help meet these objectives within their own classroom as best they can.

My classroom will certainly see a slight shift in focus towards these objectives for helping students earn the most out of their education.

From here, I would like to design another survey that spells out each option more simply so as to not rely on my educational jargon-biased descriptions in hopes that others may understand it. I would also like to put this survey out to more people in a broader area. Perhaps if schools were to send this survey out to parents and community members, we could get a more accurate reading on the needs of the community as a whole. Middle and high school level students should take this survey, too. Obviously, we cannot rely solely on their opinion, but theirs is an opinion that should be heard in this matter. As it stands, however, I feel as though this preliminary data gives us a good starting point and reasonable data to begin effecting change and having more pointed conversations about the direction education should be moving in the 21st century.

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