

Howard Gardner - III. Being human, 14

14) Reconsidering aims of education: the concepts of 'wellbeing', 'happiness', human 'flourishing' in the role of aims and their implications for the modern mentality. What are the alternatives?

Howard Gardner. Notes on Collective Well Being

(prepared for OECD 2030 Project - September 2018)

The challenge to education today, as it has always been, is twofold: 1) to build on the most important goals and the most powerful approaches that have been developed over the millennia; 2) to prepare students for a future which is unknown and could be quite different from the present. From the vantage point of 2018, the future appears especially volatile; and that volatility places educators (and other policy makers) in a challenging position.

As in earlier times, it is essential that all young persons become literate, and that literacy now includes computational literacy; that they be exposed to the major disciplines and ways of thinking that human beings have developed over the centuries and have practice in thinking in disciplined ways; that they are able to work together with others on common pursuits; and that they become participating citizens in their communities. Skilled educators have evolved methods for inculcating these goals and it would be irrational to eliminate them.

At the same time, new techniques and technologies have emerged and these should certainly be drawn upon. But the technologies should never determine the goals. Rather the goals and values of a society should determine which technologies are relevant and how best to deploy them—while retaining the right to rethink these approaches, and to make further adjustments as warranted.

As an educator for well over fifty years, I consider the following changes and challenges to be most daunting: 1) to prepare students for citizenship not only in their own community but in the wider, now global world; 2) to provide the human values and models that were once powerful in many neighborhoods but are now far less visible and for less compelling; 3) to help all young people develop that sense of agency, of change-making, that was once restricted to elites; 4) to make sure that a heightened sense of personal agency and purpose, is wedded to goals that are appropriate to the broader society and can be publicly justified; 5) to help young people become comfortable with new technologies, while guiding them to use these technologies in ways that are appropriate and ethical; 6) of special importance and of great challenge, to provide the tools and the guidance so that all individuals can continue to learn throughout their lives—again cherishing what is of value in the past and present while being prepared to take on new and unexpected challenges.

In the past, because of economic considerations, only those with considerable means could have an education that is individualized, personalized, taking into account their own strengths as well as areas that needed special support. Alexander the Great could have Aristotle as a tutor, a mentor! But today, as we understand better the differences that exist across individuals, and as have available technologies that can be personalized as much as we'd like, it is possible to provide powerful educational supports that are available for the full spectrum of human beings. And should this educational dream be realized, we will be in the unique position of being able to help each person, each human being, to achieve his or her full potential.

But preparing each person for lifelong learning and for a sense of purpose is only one half of the equation: unless human beings can learn to live together, peacefully and cooperatively, the world will be an undesirable place, and, indeed, there may not be a world at all. And that is why I consider Gandhi to be the most important role model of the second millennium: Gandhi understood that there was no place in our world for violence and that conflicts must be settled peacefully. And that teaching (and Gandhi was a valued educator) was carried forward by his remarkable followers, including Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela.

Speaking of the wisdom of the ages, it is fitting to close with a famous remark attributed to Rabbi Hillel who lived over 2000 years ago:

“If I am not for myself, who will be? But if only for myself, who am I? And if not now, when?”

Ethics of the Fathers 1:14

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