

EDUCATION OVERVIEW

Definitions of education describe a process whereby knowledge or systematic information is received (acquired) or given (imparted) especially in schools or universities. Secondly, education refers to theories and practice of instruction. Finally, we often speak of a learning experience as being “an education.”

In the broader sense, education is enculturation or socialization. It is that process whereby we learn to act in a human, rather than infantile or animalistic fashion. Through this process we gain a cultural—as part of our personal—identity. Education goes beyond the classroom. As this site’s School Resource Center points out, infants are educated by parents and caretakers, by television and the media, by the surrounding community and by peers. They may also receive religious education in churches, temples and mosques.

So basic and vital is education, it’s good to note its limitations.

After all, what is education but a process by which a person begins to learn how to learn?
(Peter Ustinov, *Dear Me*, 1977)

Never let school interfere with your education. (Mark Twain)

We learned more from a three-minute track (of rock music) than we learned all day in school. (Bruce Springsteen)

Some animals are able to instruct their young and one another to some small extent. But animals live mostly by instinct; humans act out of instinct in part but also out of learned behavior. Education, then, is a human activity accomplished in different ways throughout history. Education imparts, not only ideas and knowledge, but principles, values and skills important to a particular culture. Our societies might be judged by what and how we teach our children.

Education is a life-long process of behavior modification taking place in and beyond schools. It should be growth-producing, should contribute to our ability to become human and good citizens, ought to prepare us to make a living and provide for ourselves and families. Public schools and curriculum cannot be planned or evaluated in isolation from economics and politics.

There are many types of schools: public and private, technical schools, charter schools, home schools, special needs and special interest schools, alternative schools, faith-based and more.

The public school system exists in relationship to other social systems: the family and community, business and government, and the larger cultural scene. Only as students, teachers, administrators, parents, government and business leaders (and often union leaders) come together can education be adequately evaluated, critiqued and improved.

The challenges of education in developing countries are different from those in the more developed countries. Children in poorer countries may not have school fees, may need to work at a young age, teachers may be ill-prepared or lured into other work even during school hours, text books and school supplies may be scarce, and the government may be forced to attend to other priorities. The absence of jobs at the end of education may de-motivate students. Globalization

and the media bring heightened expectations often without possible fulfillment. Still, education is, for the most part, improving and illiteracy rates are being clearly lowered around the world.

The influence, and critiques of, the ideas of Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1972) and the gradual evolution of development education (DE) should be noted. Though there are many strands of DE it is usually considered a process of raising consciousness (conscientization), gaining participation, using a method of action, reflection, application/action, etc., gaining a knowledge of links among the world's people, understanding economic, environmental, social, and political processes, developing skills that enable people to bring about change, and working for a more just and sustainable world.

Educational issues in the more developed world are also complex and challenging. They include:

- agreement upon a philosophy of education
- curriculum, quality control; evaluation and the role of testing
- the role of informational technology: key or distraction to excellence?
- funding: tax reduction vs. school funding and disparity between wealthy and poorer communities
- urban education: immigrants, English as second language, teachers from another culture, truancy and drop-outs
- differences regarding values to be taught and place of faith-based values
- involvement of parents in the learning process
- rewards for teaching excellence; pruning of poor teachers; role of unions

Good education takes students from wherever they are to a common goal. Personal relationships are crucial in this process—with teachers and with classmates. Role models are vital in any person's education—parents first and then teachers (coaches and administrators). In many situations, a good many students feel dumber every day; we should make sure they all feel smarter at the end of every school day. While the ability to learn is paramount, content is also necessary. Testing is important but is not the whole story. Someone has said, "You can't fatten a pig by weighing it." In self-centered societies where wishes become needs and are instantly gratified, we must teach the disciplines of learning, push students to go beyond their comfort zones, confront their weaknesses and reward their honest attempts and successes.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How do you define and describe good education—and explain its importance?
2. What in the above article do you find most helpful and least helpful? What suggestions do you have?
3. How would you prioritize education, economics, fine arts, entertainment (pop culture), military defense for your country?

4. What do you see as the main issues or problems with education in your situation? Do you have any ideas as to how they might be resolved?
5. How must educational improvement or reform proceed from the top of any nation, through its bureaucracies, communities and families to children and youth?
6. What do you see as important alternatives for regular, public (as called in the U.S.) schools?
7. How should faith education relate to public education in a secular society?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Education is our best investment in the future.
2. The best minds of a society are needed to lead politically, further science and technology, provide medical and social services, and educate the next generation of leaders and adults.
3. Education, at local and national levels, is often located at the low end of a nation's priorities.
4. Education must be a collaborative enterprise among social systems.

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