

Some Questions about Traditional Schooling

Wayne Jennings

We hear constantly about achieving rigorous academic standards. Everyone nods. Let's have some discussion about that.

How about a Martha Graham or Baryshnikov? Do their extraordinary achievements in dance have the same value structure as rigorous academic standards? Would these not graduate with their extraordinary talents if their writing skills or history knowledge was weak?

Do we not also value social knowledge and skills, leadership knowledge and skills and all the other human traits necessary in a complex adult world?

Gifted people populate many fields: mechanics, physicians, furniture makers, potters, farmers, writers. What gives educators the right to narrowly define what school rewards come only to a narrow slice of human abilities: that of the ability to extract concepts from words or manipulate abstract symbols?

What is meant by academic? Does it not encompass the other intelligences so well described by Howard Gardner?

Is not the purpose of school to help children achieve their potential and prepare students for their various life roles: citizen, learner, worker, family member, etc.? If so, doesn't learning integrity, compassion, participation count? Are these important? Are these academic traits?

Are we interested in determining how talents are developing? Why is it, article after article on standards and assessment speak in the highest tones about academic (especially using the word "rigorous") and intellectual without definition? Doesn't this by default imply knowledge and skills in the usual school subjects?

It isn't that academic subjects are not important, but rather that they absolutely rule the roost in most schools, particularly at the secondary level. We spend too much time on Rip Van Winkle, Whiskey Rebellion, eight parts of speech, defining terms in science, etc.

The daily structure of segmented periods, silos of subject matter and specialist teachers makes systemic change nearly impossible. We spend too little on preparing youth for the type of skills and knowledge outlined in the SCANS report, too little on 21st century skills, too little on thinking and responsibility, too little on the issues of the day, too little on coming to terms with their own character and ethics, too little on family education, and we give too little time to developing talents.

I don't get what the people ranting about academics over and over like ancient druids around fire in the forest have in mind for addressing personal dignity, meaning and community -- in short preparing all students as lifelong learners in a rapidly changing democracy. The traditional approach is failing with most students. Most students find school irrelevant and boring.

How about qualities of caring, empathy, openness, flexibility, responsibility, character, understanding, concern, initiative, social skills, self-regarding attitudes? Are these OK? Are these academic? Do they constitute rigor? Where do they fit in education? Left to chance?

We have to leave behind 20th century thinking and recognize the qualities, skills and knowledge we admire in people and design schools to achieve these. The result will be remarkable people that continue learning of all types (including traditional academic) during their life span.