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Freedom to Learn

Ideal Purposes of Schools: Readers Weigh In

Could schools serve the real needs of children and families?

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“Suppose you, magically, were part of a committee charged with developing, completely from scratch, a school system for our modern times. You and the other committee members realize that before designing the structure, you need a clear idea of the purpose of schools. And let’s suppose you are idealists enough to believe that the purpose should have something to do with education (as opposed, for example, to such purposes as providing employment for teachers or supporting the

textbook and testing industries). You are asked to come to the next meeting with a brief, written statement of what you think that purpose (or those purposes) should be.”

Those are the words I used in my [last post](#) to invite readers to create statements about the ideal purposes of schools and post them as comments. I’m delighted that approximately 170 readers took me up on that invitation, some with quite wonderful essays. Thank you all who responded. You gave me a lot to think about; maybe a little more than I bargained for. It took me a couple of solid days to read, re-read, and qualitatively analyze all those statements, so I could report back on the sum total of what people said.

I began the qualitative analysis by highlighting what I took to be the key terms, about schools’ purposes, in each comment. Then I grouped those terms that seemed to be similar in meaning together. This resulted in nine different lists, each representing a category of educational purposes that schools might serve. Then I grouped those lists into three super-categories, which represent three somewhat distinct but overlapping sets of needs that schools should be designed to meet: (1) children’s immediate, day-to-day needs; (2) children’s long-term, future needs; and (3) society’s long-term needs. In what follows I’ll devote a separate section to each of these super-categories.

Schools as Places for Meeting Children’s Immediate Needs

Most educators think of schools as preparing children for the future. Given this common view, I was initially surprised to see how many readers described their ideal schools as focusing on children’s immediate, present needs rather than needs they may have later in life. With reflection, I realized that I should not have been surprised. Most readers of this blog are not typical educators; they are, to a considerable degree, people who have rejected typical education.

One respondent wrote: *“Why have a ‘school’ unless it provides something that can’t be provided at home or in the existing community? Why think of life as being something that will happen in the future once you’ve ‘prepared for it’? Life is happening now! A ‘school’ only makes sense if it addresses those things ‘students’ are interested in doing right now, which can’t be done at home or elsewhere in the existing community.”*

where they have shelter and space to run around, where they can have stable relationships with people who like and love them, etc. Their human rights must be protected, especially given a society that gleefully celebrates the violation of children's human rights at every turn."

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I can imagine some reacting to this second quotation by thinking that these are things that should be provided at home. But, in truth, many homes can't provide all this, and some homes provide very little of it. This is a fascinating view of schools as serving a public obligation to provide for children's real, immediate needs.

In the total set of comments, I counted at least 107 allusions to the idea that schools should provide for children's immediate needs. In today's world, where both parents work or where there may only be one parent, children need care during the day. Many responses had to do with the quality of such care. Twenty-two responses indicated, in one way or another, that schools should be places where children feel safe, secure, and respected; 15 said that schools should be places where children can play, be happy, have fun, and get plenty of physical exercise; 11 emphasized the value of caring relationships at schools; 11 noted that schools should be places where children experience the meaning and joy of being part of a community larger than their family; and 3 mentioned good nutrition.

Other responses in this broad category focused on children's intrinsic needs to explore and learn. Contrary to the common educational view that children must be forced or coaxed by rewards and punishments to learn, for the sake of their future, these people saw exploration and learning as intrinsic, immediate strong drives for children and contended that schools should be places designed to allow children to fulfill those drives. In fact, I counted at least 45 claims that this should be a major function of schools. These responses, collectively, contended that schools should provide the time, freedom, equipment, examples, diversity of views, and competent others that children need in order to discover and pursue their own interests and find their places in the world.

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Respondents who emphasized that schools should focus on satisfying children's immediate needs and desires indicated, implicitly if not explicitly, that if these needs and desires are met, then children will grow as healthy, competent individuals and will, largely through their own efforts, be well prepared for their futures. This assumption leads to a clear overlap between this first large purpose of school and the next.

such that the students are passive recipients of the education that school personnel “give them” (or, I might say, “inflict upon them”). A few of the respondents in this survey used that sort of language, but the great majority did not. Most used language consistent with the premises of Self-Directed Education. They spoke of ideal schools as environments in which children’s own chosen activities, with help from adults when they asked for it, would lead them to learn and develop in ways conducive to a healthy, happy lives.

Taken all together, the respondents generated a very long list of skills, realms of knowledge, attitudes, and character traits that schools should be set up to help children acquire. In my qualitative analysis, I grouped the individual items in that list into six categories.

The largest category is one that I labeled ***character traits and self-understanding***. I counted 82 total mentions relevant to this category. Like Socrates (or Plato’s version of Socrates), many respondents suggested that a prime goal of education is to “know thyself.” At least 25 mentioned self-knowledge as a goal, including knowledge of one’s own talents, interests, and self-defined purposes in life. Other goals in this category included personal responsibility and self-direction (21 mentions); zest for life, or living life to the fullest (18); resilience, including ability to cope with setbacks and ambiguity (11); humility (3); trustworthiness (2), and playfulness (2).

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The second largest subcategory here is in a realm I labeled as ***thinking and reasoning***, for which I counted 63 total mentions. A breakdown of this included creative thinking (19 mentions), critical thinking (13), independent thinking (10), ability to identify and solve problems (11), intelligence and wisdom (3), understanding empirical, scientific method (3), decision-making ability (2), and ability to design and follow through on projects (2).

The third category was one I labeled ***social skills***, with 51 mentions. A breakdown here includes general social skills (15 mentions); ability to cooperate or collaborate with others (13), conflict-resolution skills (9), communication skills (7), capacity to sustain healthy relationships or friendships (5), and ability to ask for others’ support (2). The social skills category would be larger if I included, also, the mentions of social skills, such as empathy, that contribute especially to the wellbeing of others, but I chose to put them into the super-category having to do with society’s needs.

The fourth subcategory was one I labeled ***continued drive to learn***, where I counted 41 mentions. Included here are love of (or thirst for) learning (19); curiosity (14); and independent learning ability (8).

Interestingly, the fifth subcategory, labeled ***typical school subjects***, had relatively few mentions—26 in all. Only 14 mentioned reading, writing, and/or math as skills to be acquired; and 16 mentioned other common school subjects, such as history, geography, civics, languages, and literature. My guess is that the relatively infrequent mentions of these had more to do with respondents’ perceptions that schools currently spend too much time on these subjects and make them unnecessarily burdensome and difficult. I think most recognized that children in a healthy environment, which represents the culture, will become literate and numerate quite naturally and will, in their own ways, develop interests in various other subject realms traditionally considered to be “school subjects.”

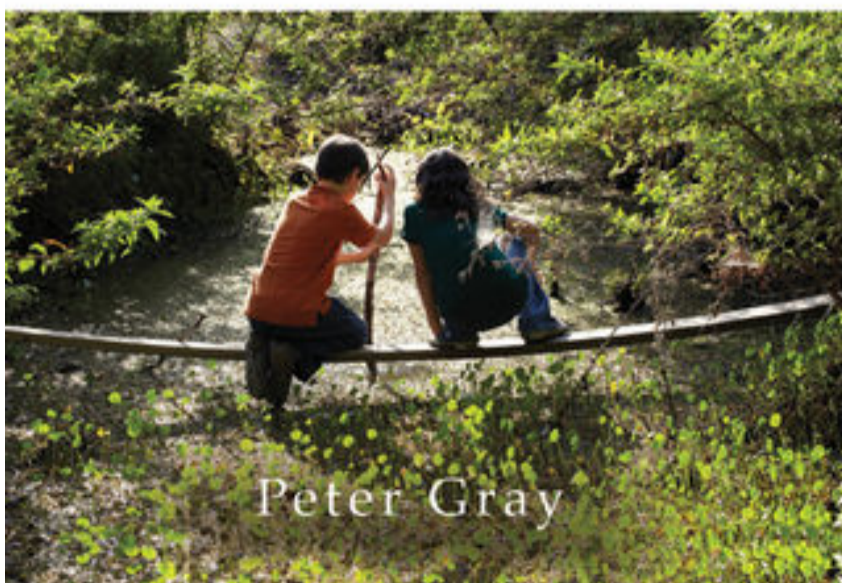
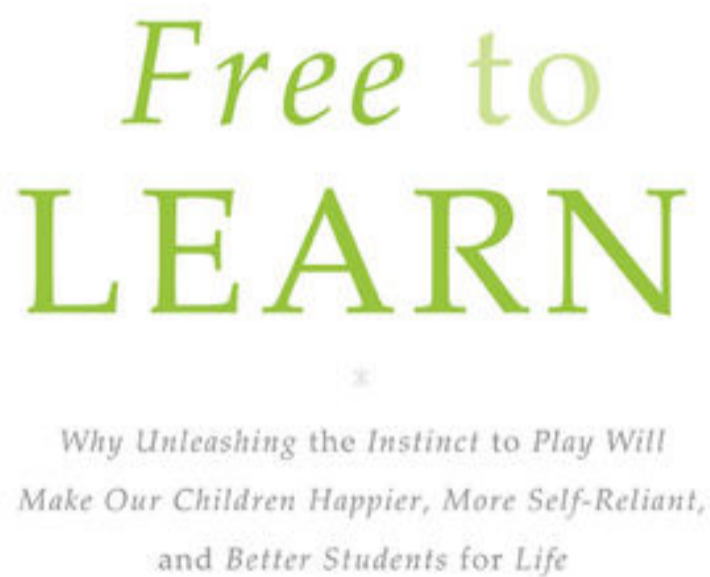
skills. One or two suggested that apprenticeships should be available as part of the schooling experience, as a way of exploring job possibilities and gaining job skills.

Schools as Places for Meeting Society's Long-Term Needs

Traditional educators often speak of schools as serving not just the needs of individuals, but also those of society at large. In an earlier time, educational theorists spoke openly about the roles of schools in producing non-rebellious citizens, good factory workers, and patriots ready to fight for their country. When I was a middle school student (in the Sputnik era), much of the talk was of the role of schools in producing engineers and physicists who could match or beat the Soviets in the production of weapons. Today the talk even among traditional teachers is more often about the role of schools in providing citizens who will, in various ways, work to make life better for everyone around them, help promote world peace, and be good stewards of the earth's ecosystems. Not surprisingly, these ideas emerged also in the responses to this survey.

In all, I identified 63 responses that fell into the realm I labeled as meeting society's needs. More than half of these (33) were general mentions of the value of becoming a good citizen. Other responses including respect for others' rights and views (11); living in sustainable ways, caring for the planet, and/or promoting democracy and peace (10); empathy and care for others (7); and ethical living (2).

Wow. If we take all this together, that's a lot to expect of schools. If we think of schools as we usually do, it's way too much. But it may not be too much if we design schools entirely differently from the way most are designed today. More on that in my next post!



Source: Basic Books with permission

What is your reaction this summary of schooling purposes that readers of the last post created? Here's another chance to express your view of what schools should do, or your view of whether schools should exist at all. This blog is a forum for discussion, and your ideas, comments, questions, and disagreements are valued and treated with respect by me and other readers. As always, I prefer if you post your thoughts and questions here rather than send them to me by private email. By putting them here, you share with other readers, not just with me. I read all comments and try to respond to all serious questions, if I feel I have something useful to say.

See also Free to Learn, self-directed.org (to find out about the Alliance for Self-Directed Education), and follow me on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/petergray) (please "follow" rather than "friend," as I am at the limit of friends that [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/petergray) allows).

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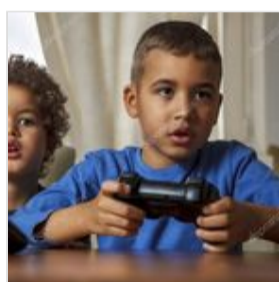
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