

## *The Moral and Spiritual Miseducation of America's Children*

Svi Shapiro

A colleague of mine, now retired, liked to ask his students—teachers or school administrators in a graduate class, two questions; what they considered some of the most serious issues facing human beings today?; and to what extent students in their schools were being prepared to understand or address such concerns? The first question elicited quick responses (typical answers included violence, the materialistic culture, an inequitable distribution of wealth and opportunity, the sense of powerlessness among ordinary people, the emphasis on celebrity, fame and exploitation of sexuality in every part of our society, and the environmental crisis). The second question initially produced blank stares then the collective acknowledgement that the schools they worked in offered little to young people as preparation for their roles as prospective citizens who would be called upon to know about, or be engaged in, the critical decisions that face us all in this century.

While liberals still like to argue that schools ought to be places that provide a value-neutral space for young people where no moral agenda holds sway, conservatives have—correctly I believe—recognized that education is always a place where both hearts and minds are shaped. Schools are indeed places that transmit a powerful agenda of values to our children that influences attitudes about their world and the meaning of their lives. These views remain deeply imprinted in our identities long after we have forgotten how to solve quadratic equations, the words of a poem or the dates of a battle. Where conservatives go wrong is in what they identify as these enduring values. What schools actually teach (and relentlessly so) is a belief in the importance of personal success, individual achievement, the competitive race for recognition, the inequitable distribution of human worth, the belief that only things that ‘can be counted count’ and that education’s true importance is as a vehicle to sort and select winners and losers. Students also learn that intellectual conformity and timidity is the necessary trade off to gain academic success.

Recent state and federal reforms of education, most notably *No Child Left Behind*, have certainly done

their part in reinforcing these values. The classroom has become a place in which learning’s only value is instrumental and calculative. It’s all about the test. How did your performance, your class or your school, compare to others. Far from students *not* being left behind what schools do more and more of is compete, compare and search for winners and losers. Education becomes more rote and increasingly shallow, less interesting and more predictable, and less about thinking and more about memorizing. What matters is the well-rehearsed performance on the test, not about the curiosity awakened or the joy of discovery released. Most worryingly for our democratic future the mindless and banal regimen of standardized tests is destroying the opportunity for engaging and challenging the images and assumptions that suffuse the everyday world of young people. A shallow and instrumental conformism is substituted for a willingness to think imaginatively and to question boldly and critically.

While politicians vie for what passes as new forms of accountability (read standardized test) or rigorous curriculum (dull drills or ‘covering’ ludicrously excessive amounts of material), the real crisis of education is the withering of our children’s souls inside our classrooms. Put aside the divisive banner of religion for a moment. It is surely a spiritual crisis when education offers young people little that might direct them towards a meaningful or purposeful life. Schools increasingly fail to contribute to a moral vision of a worthwhile existence beyond grubbing for better grades and playing the grade-point average game. The zeal and energy of the young are more and more directed into how to outperform your neighbor and puff up your academic record for college admissions—and by any means available. It’s not surprising that cheating and cutting corners are so pervasive among our most ‘successful’ students as they learn to work the system to their best advantage. No one can afford to be left behind in the race for individual success. The fruit of our quest for educational ‘excellence’ are schools that breed a cynical indifference to anything but survival or personal advantage.

Do we need an alternative moral and spiritual vision for the way we educate our young. The answer is blowing in the wind. The prophetic impulse that is found in our great religious teachings might be a good place to start. We need human beings who learn to see all human beings as made in the image of the divine; human worth is intrinsic to us and not something that depends on our success in the marketplace or in how much we can impress others. An authentic existence is found in our service to others and in the improvement of our world not in consumerism and materialism. A full human life means both agency and responsibility—the capacity to think about and question needless suffering, indignity and injustice, and the commitment to make change where it is needed. And beyond the debates on evolution and intelligent design we surely can agree that Creation—the earth and life in all its forms—is a source of awe and wonder. In acquiring this reverence for creation we ensure the next generation's concern with a planet that can sustain and nourish the extraordinary chain of existence.

To talk about education and moral or spiritual matters in the same breath is a risky undertaking. Yet to suggest that we can separate our children's education from matters of ultimate vision is to deny the fact that values come with the territory of what we teach the young. Education inevitably conveys some version of what is worthwhile or valuable. The question is not whether we offer a neutral education—this is simply a way of denying what is already there. Our challenge is to ask ourselves what *kind* of vision we want schools to offer our children. Of course in our culturally divided society this no easy task. Yet we in spite of all our apprehensions and suspicions there is one thing that stands out; we as a society are increasingly aware of the shallowness and shabbiness of our dominant culture. There is growing alarm at the degrading and callous egotism that shapes our kids world and whether we call it spirituality, religion, morality or wisdom—there is increasing recognition that our children need and deserve an education that awakens them to a life of greater purpose and meaning than the one schools currently offer.

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