

Total Education

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John Dewey (1935) and Paulo Freire (1968) were champions of a revolution in educational thinking often described as developmental education. They believed that teachers should cater to the students' current educational levels and abilities instead of the expectations of teachers and society. This new philosophy of teaching promoted a total education in which the students and teachers are involved at all levels of planning and enacting the educational process as well as engaging the students in many different ways of learning. Dewey and Freire did not believe in rote memorization in a dreary, stern classroom. Fortunately, I did not have to experience this oppressive style of education in high school, but I know that many high school teachers are too focused on cramming data into their students' heads instead of catering to their students' needs as Dewey and Freire promoted. If I were principal of a high school, I would change the policy and curriculum to model the developmental education I received as a homeschooled student. While it would be difficult in our society for every student to be homeschooled, I would change the school's outlook to a developmental model, specifically by stressing the relevance of what was taught, providing actual in-the-field experiences through jobs and community interactions, and promoting a culture of critical thinking.

All too often students say, even in college, that a certain subject, such as history, is not relevant: "History is in the past, and I am in the present" is a common mantra. Math and other fields are similarly demeaned. To make the situation worse, these subjects are stuffed down students' throats, despite the students' lack of passion or interest. This attitude is not conducive for teaching with any expectation for good results. As Jeffrey Elmore (2011) stated,

“Education must have a relevant and immediate application.” For quite some time, when I was growing up, I despised and saw no relevance in math, especially algebra. Then after I entered middle and high school and began homeschooling, I took a practical math course, where I learned the importance of understanding mortgage payments and how they work, general financial management, and how to know which loan was best for a new car. Suddenly, after years of needing special assistance in math in elementary school, I fell in love with math. I began to realize all the venues in which math is relevant and important in daily life, and I became a much better student and actually committed to learning math. Despite disliking the subject and growing up in a family that was generally weak in math skills, by the time I entered college, I not only passed my required math course with ease—no small feat in my family—but I enjoyed it. Instead of simply forcing the information upon students, high school teachers should work with students and show them why subjects are relevant through practical applications. Then Elmore (2011) noted that when the need and interest are high, students will be willing to learn and apply their new knowledge to the world around them.

Once students understand the importance of the knowledge, it is then critical, but sadly uncommon in today’s high schools, that students be allowed and encouraged in opportunities to actually experience some of the many jobs in society where their new knowledge can be applied. Thus, as principal of a high school, I would implement a system of incorporating opportunities for students to be involved with the community and to learn more about jobs and life outside of academia. As Elmore (2011) noted, actual experience plays a valuable role in education. John Dewey (1935) concurred:

In what I have said I have taken for granted the soundness of the principle that education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience—which is always the actual life-experience of some individual. (p. 434)

The most beneficial education is through experiencing the real world. In my own homeschooling, my family connected with the community and provided me with opportunities to volunteer and to shadow various professionals. I assisted a local politician in his campaign for office, helping with everything from sealing and stamping letters to handing out candy at the local parade. While volunteering, I was able to attend the debates, see the politician behind the scenes, and understand many other factors in the political life, including long periods away from family, the high stress of explaining positions on controversial topics, and being verbally attacked for personal beliefs. I also shadowed a circuit court judge; I sat in on his office tasks as well as cases, ranging from the petty to the serious. These experiences, along with many others, allowed me to appreciate the opportunities that were available to me by furthering my education and my knowledge of each profession. I was able to experience the possibilities of life, and I am forever thankful for those chances. They spurred me to learn more and gave me an understanding of practical life beyond academics. After courses and subjects have been made relevant to high school students, they should then get opportunities to experience jobs firsthand. Though these in-field experiences are not easily provided on an individual basis for large numbers of students, school administrators who engage with the neighboring community can surely find a way. This approach is a critical change I would bring to a high school.

Freire (1968) noted the crucial role of a teacher in a student's education: "From the outset, his efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization" (p. 470). Critical thinking is difficult to teach and to inculcate in students. Nevertheless, it is crucial that critical thinking be stressed, as pointed out by Dr. Kendall Giles (2011) in reference to the widespread tendency to overreact to global warming statistics with either the "doomsayer" or the "denier" stereotype. Individuals who understand how to apply the scientific method and how to interpret statistics will become well informed and less easily-swayed members of society. On a more basic level, critical thinking is a vital part of education that is not stressed enough in our current systematic, facts-based educational system. In my homeschooled lessons on history, government, politics, sciences, philosophy, and even math, I was always asked questions such as "Why do you think this person did this?" or "Why is it done this way?" or "What do you think about this issue?" Inevitably, after I had pondered and finally answered the question "What do you think?" another one, such as a simple "Why?", would follow. I was made to think and think critically. Not only was I constantly made to rationalize, explore, and ponder subjects, but I was also challenged to think critically about my own opinions on them and why I thought what I did. I learned early to look for a variety of angles and explanations of what I learned, instead of accepting it as raw, cold data to be stored. I learned to challenge everything I read and heard, even scientists' reports on global warming, and to put it to the light of critical thinking and testing. Throughout all curricula, there must be a common thread of questioning, critical thinking, and reasoning. This mental engagement is part of developmental education as it challenges the student to be active in his or her own learning—to become involved in the educational process and not be passive. A

culture of critical thinking should begin far earlier than high school, but if it has not begun by the time students are fourteen years old, it must be encouraged and developed at this stage of life.

If I could be principal of a high school, I would instigate changes that reflect the developmental approach of Dewey (1935) and Freire (1968), which would mean setting up an educational system very similar to my experience as a homeschooler. By implementing more focus on and explanation of the relevance of subject matter to the students, promoting and providing opportunities to go out into “the real world,” and creating a culture of critical thinking, a better educational experience can be created to benefit both the individual students and society.

References

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