

Critical Thinking

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If I were to ask parents, teachers, and community members to explain the purpose and mission of our schools, I would get many different responses. Some would say teachers must prepare children to be good citizens and to contribute to society, while others would say schools should cultivate a skilled workforce, equip graduates for specific careers, or prepare them to compete in a global marketplace. Still others would probably respond that students should move on from school equipped with the hard skills required to earn a good living and the soft skills necessary to get along well with others. Others may say schools should do all of this and more.

All of us probably agree the ultimate goal of the school is to prepare each student for a successful future. The problem lies in the fact that what is required for a successful future is yet to be determined. Many of the jobs that will be available in ten years do not exist today. Much of the equipment and machinery our students will be asked to run has not been invented yet. We can only imagine the technology that will be available in ten years and how it will change lives.

The fast pace of change means education must continuously adapt to changing needs. Today's schools look different from the schools you and I attended, and the classrooms of tomorrow will look very different from classrooms of today. This fact was made very clear to me a couple of weeks ago when one of my grandchildren, 4-year-old Kinsley, was at my house. I found her in the kitchen using her dad's iPhone to play with her 4-year-old cousin, Aubrey, yet they weren't in the kitchen or even in the house together. Kinsley was with me in Georgia and Aubrey was in Florida, yet they were playing together as if they were in the same room. Aubrey was building a tower out of her toys, and thanks to the technology of FaceTime, Kinsley could not only see Aubrey constructing the tower but could give her comments about the best way to build it. Both girls giggled and screamed when the tower fell. Together, using technology, they began to build again. I can only imagine what education will look like when these two girls are in high school. Will FaceTime (or whatever technology replaces it) help them collaborate with students on the other side of the world to design new things that will improve our lives?

This led me to think again about the real goals of education. Some research indicates that up until 1900, human knowledge doubled approximately every 100 years. By the end of World War II knowledge was doubling every 25 years. Today, on average, some say human knowledge is doubling every 13 months. It would be impossible to store this amount of knowledge in a child's mind, or a teacher's for that matter. I don't think we would want to do this, even if we could; however, it is possible to teach our students how to seek the information they need, how to critically review the information they find, and how to use that information to make informed decisions.

America is known as a nation of innovators. The ability to think critically is the one skill that separates leaders from followers, the producers from consumers. I want our students to grow up and be leaders. If they are to be leaders, we must teach them how to gather and evaluate information. They must make discriminating judgments about the reliability of their sources and usefulness of information to solve problems. Children must be encouraged to ask questions, then to question the answers. We need to ask them open-ended questions with no right or wrong answer, questions that require consideration of different points of view. One of the most frustrating things to me as a teacher was when my students wanted me to give them the correct answer to every problem. I wanted them to realize that problems seldom have a single answer. If they were solving a math problem, they didn't have to do it my way as long as they could explain to me how they arrived at the right answer.

Encourage children to use their imaginations. Urge them to explore and question the world around them. Even young children need opportunities to make their own decisions, whether they are deciding what to wear to school or what they want for lunch. Making decisions needs to be a part of every student's daily life.

So, what is the purpose and mission of our schools? Is education about preparing students for a specific career or is it about teaching students lifelong values, discipline, and the ability to explore new ideas and to think independently? I tend to think the purpose of education is teaching our students how to think critically and how to solve problems. When students master this, they will be prepared for whatever the future offers.