

Chapter I
Common Sense
Or
The “Duh” Factor in Education

The business of education is not to prepare
students for life. Education is life itself.

John Dewey

In the next 25 years or so we will look back on education of the 20th century as barbaric, somewhat akin to comparing medicine of the 20th century to that of the 19th, when barbers were cutting open “patients” with no anesthesia, no antiseptic, and little idea of what the surgery would produce. Part of the problem is a failure to apply what we know about teaching and learning to the practice of teaching and learning. New brain research in particular may begin to change this. Another problem is a failure to use common sense. We already know, for example, that most adolescents do not function optimally (I’m being kind) early in the morning. Most of us actually were adolescents at one time or another, and a lot of us have taught or raised them. We know from experience that most adolescents struggle early in the morning. Moreover, there is now also a convincing body of empirical research which explains why this is so (Weiss, 1997). Young people in the throes of puberty are biochemically (hormonally) different from children and adults. This impacts them in significant ways, one of which has to do with internal, or biological clocks. Specifically, most adolescent brains release serotonin, a “sleep” hormone, later in the evening than do children and adults. Yet despite our common sense and empirical data, we continue to schedule junior and senior high school classes as early as 7:00 am in many schools, which requires many students to actually begin their days at 6:00 am, or even earlier. Then we fret and complain because the ingrates are *falling asleep in class*.

Another classic example of the disconnect between what we know and what we do is the current academic calendar. There is not one shred of evidence to suggest that a nine month school year with short winter and spring breaks, and a *long* summer hiatus, is in any way appropriate for optimal learning. As many of us are aware, the current school calendar is *over a century old* and based on an agrarian model of society that now applies to roughly 3% of American students. Despite popular opinion, spring break was not designed for trips to the beach. It was put into the school calendar so that students could help their families sow the fields. With few exceptions, the entire American educational

system follows a calendar that schedules breaks and disrupts students' learning for three months of every year, in the interest of a societal model that *doesn't exist*.

A related “duh” is the segmented, fragmented approach to curriculum in all grades and the equally segmented, fragmented approach to time, particularly in secondary schools. How many of us in the “real world” consciously separate subject matter, resources, ideas and people when we solve problems? Can you imagine if engineers solving problems in the work place could only address mathematical questions from 8:00 to 9:00 am, then not only were forced to switch to physics problems from 9:00 to 10:00 am, but also had to completely change the group of colleagues with whom they were working and were not allowed to refer back to previous work or other colleagues? Then at 11:00 am were switched to yet another discipline? Of course not, because “real world” thinking and problem solving is naturally integrated. That is how our brains function. This analogy could be applied to any “real world” task in any problem solving situation, but amazingly, is painfully rare in our schools. As management “guru” Peter Drucker (1989) says pointedly, “Nothing in our educational system at present prepares us for the reality in which we live and work. Our schools scorn the real world of work” (p.19). While I’m not sure schools actually “scorn the real world of work,” I don’t believe there is any question that as institutions, schools have managed to create a system in which institutional imperatives, e.g., curriculum development processes, state mandates, teacher contracts, funding issues, etc. rule the day, often not only to the detriment of students, and thus society, but even in the face of overwhelming evidence that much of what we’re doing doesn’t make sense.

Some school policies not only don’t make sense, but are fundamentally punitive. The practice of retaining or “failing” students, and relegating them to the same classroom for a second year is not supported by empirical data or common sense. Statistically, when a student is “held back” just one year, his or her chances of making it to graduation are reduced by 50%. When students are retained twice, their chance of graduating is near zero (Barr & Parrett, 1995). In fact, school “drop outs” are five times more likely to have been retained than their peers who stay in school, and a study of 9,000 youth in the journal *Pediatrics* found that nearly 1 in 5 children who fails a grade develops serious behavioral problems as a teenager (Rusch, 2000). In a review of 63 empirical studies on retention, Thomas Holmes, an education professor at the University of Georgia, found that “retention harmed students' achievement, attendance record, personal adjustment in school, and attitude toward school” (Kelly, 1999, p. 2). And worse, the majority of students who are retained remain behind their peers academically for as long as they are in school.

Retention would be analogous to physicians prescribing aspirin for bacterial infections despite overwhelming evidence that aspirin doesn’t fight infections, then continuing to do it over and over again. Why would we think that subjecting a student to

an experience that clearly didn't work the first time will magically work the second time? Even if a child learns most of the material the second time around, it is still old material! With rare exception, usually for emotionally immature students, retention simply subjugates students to an approach that didn't meet their needs to begin with. More often than not, the result is a further decrease in self-confidence and an increase in alienation. When kids "fail" a grade, they don't need a repeat of a manifestly ineffective educational experience; they need educators to try a new approach.

The fact is that much of what goes on in schools today is not rational. In other words, what we say we want to achieve cannot be achieved with the methods we use. Interestingly, this irrationality is not lost on students. I firmly believe it is part of the cynicism and despair that many students feel. They can clearly see that often times what they are being asked to do and how they are told to do it are not helpful, meaningful, or practical. There is empirical support for this contention. One of America's foremost educational researchers, John Goodlad (1984), found that his "data... point to a potentially volatile disjuncture between the youth culture and the daily conduct of [their] schools...(p. 81)." I believe that this "disjuncture" has grown ominously in the decade since he reported his findings. The current explosion of "at-risk" youth may be a partial manifestation of the irrationality in schools I mentioned above.

A practical example of the disconnect between students and the schools that ostensibly serve them is the concept of "critical thinking." For years now, students have heard teachers and even the media extol the necessity and virtue of critical thinking. They see it referred to in the margins of their textbooks. Yet most of them are still sitting in rows, limited to two way communication between themselves and teachers (with teachers controlling the vast majority of dialogue), reading text and answering questions created by the publisher—in general, following a "connect the dots" curriculum. Occasionally, students get the luxury of essay or "short answer" questions, and in some cases, even "group work," yet rarely are students invited to be active participants in the planning or execution of their own learning. Rarely are they allowed to diverge from the carefully orchestrated plans of curriculum designers and teachers. And rarely are students allowed to ask the questions that direct classroom inquiry. Ironically, it is precisely the things students don't get to do that engender critical thinking. I'm not suggesting, by the way, that students should run schools (at least not unilaterally). Educators still have primary responsibility for providing optimal learning opportunities. I am suggesting, however, that if we truly want students to be "critical thinkers," to be "independent, life-long learners," to be "innovative problem solvers," then we have to bring some rationality to the educational process. We have to create learning contexts (whether or not they are in traditional classrooms) that will actually lead to the outcomes we say we want. For example, it is ridiculous to assume that all real learning must take place in schools. As Will Nixon, a freelance writer astutely notes, "Using the real world is the way learning

has happened for 99.9 percent of human existence. Only in the last hundred years have we put it in a little box called a classroom” (Nixon, 1997, p. 34). Whether learning takes place in the classroom or in the real world, what we ask students to do, and how we have them do it, at the very least must make sense relative to how people learn and what we want to accomplish. I will explore this concept more in chapter seven.

An important question at this point might be: How did we end up with an educational system in which means don’t match desired ends?

I believe the answer is simply because the modern educational system was and is designed by adults for adults. It is a system of convenience that allows adults to institutionally mold the lives of young people to suit societal ends. Certainly, we all want good things for our children, and as it relates to school, literacy and numeracy are not only laudable goals, but school is a reasonable place to achieve those goals. Moreover, the process of schooling can reasonably be expected to fulfill some societal goals of acculturation. However, if we are honest about the evolution of modern mainstays of school structure such as the nine month school year, fragmentation of the curriculum by subject, and the fifty minute class period (at the secondary level), we must acknowledge that they exist not because they serve students as learners, but because they serve adults as employers, teachers, parents, taxpayers, etc. It is widely known, for example, that the present public schools are, in great part, based on an industrial model. The short class periods, bell system, rows of desks, transmission model of pedagogy (teacher transmitting finite points of knowledge to passive students), etc. are all based on a factory model of schooling. Even the buildings are based on factory architecture. Robert Reich, Secretary of Labor in the first Clinton presidency describes the typical 20th century school experience in his book *The Work of Nations* with stinging clarity:

Children [move] from grade to grade through a preplanned sequence of standard subjects, as if on factory conveyor belts. At each stage, certain facts [are] poured into their heads. Children with the greatest capacity to absorb the facts, and with the most submissive demeanor, [are] placed on a rapid track through the sequence; those with the least capacity for fact retention and self-discipline, on the slowest. Most children [end] up on a conveyor belt of medium speed. Standardized tests [are] routinely administered at certain checkpoints in order to measure how many of the facts [have] stuck in the small heads, and product defects [are] taken off the line and returned for retooling. As in the mass-production system, discipline and order [are] emphasized above all else. (cited in Cushner, Mclelland, and Safford, 2000, p. 15)

To be fair, the transmission model of pedagogy described in this chapter has its roots at least as far back as the monastic schools of the 7th or 8th century A.D. (Knowles, 1980), but there is a striking similarity between the nature of monastic schools (indoctrination) and the factory model of 20th century schools (compliance). The point, simply, is that American public schools were designed, both structurally and functionally, as a means to societal ends, not as student centered institutions.

It is important to note here the distinction between education and schooling. Schooling is a process, a system, in some cases a control mechanism. Schooling is done to and occasionally for students. Or as Neil Postman (1996) suggests in *The End of Education*, schooling is a process of engineering. It can also be a unifying and productive experience, but it is not “learning” and it often does not educate students, at least not in the ways intended.

Another example of how schools have been designed by adults for adults has to do with what is taught (curriculum). The curriculum that ends up in the average classroom is the result of a complex process of collusion between publishers, politicians, educators, state agencies, unions, and parents among others. Many teachers prefer textbooks to other curriculum resources because they are self-contained resources that often include course content (information about the subject), activities, and assessment (testing) in one package. States and school districts enjoy the ease of procurement—one stop shopping. Politicians, parents and special interest groups generally prefer textbooks because the content can be easily reviewed and controlled. Even unions indirectly impact this process by “protecting” members (teachers) from the “extra duty” that would be necessary in a thorough and complex curriculum development or adoption process based on student needs.² And of course, neither schools nor taxpayers want to pay for a more thoughtful, time-consuming process. The one constituency which is conspicuously left out of this procedure is the population for whom the curriculum is ostensibly chosen: students. Frankly, their needs are of only cursory importance, and the thought of having students actually participate in such a process is almost unheard of.

Governance is another school phenomenon which is sold as something for students, but in reality is usually done to students by adults in order to protect the comfort level of the same adults. In other words, teachers and administrators usually impose rigid structures on children in an effort to limit the day-to-day contingencies they (the adults) have to deal with. Alfie Kohn (1996) makes a profound point when he suggests that much of school governance (in the form of classroom management) is a manifestation of adult needs to control student behavior. Even “student government” generally constitutes a

² **It is important to note that the inclination of unions to “protect” teachers from extra duty is a rational response to a history of poor pay and working conditions. The answer is simply to pay teachers like “real” professionals so there is no need for collective bargaining.**

group of select students implementing institutional policies within guidelines prescribed by adults. Rarely are school rules or enforcement policies truly designed to facilitate student learning and growth. If they were, students would have to play a direct role so as to “learn” from the process and build skills for self-regulation. In reality, students are usually manipulatives in highly controlled systems. They are not asked nor allowed to participate at any meaningful level in the establishment or preservation of collectively agreed upon norms of behavior for protecting learning environments. These systems are simply imposed on students. Then, not surprisingly, when students run afoul of school governance, educators, politicians, and parents complain that students are incapable of monitoring their own behavior. No kidding. They’ve been effectively trained to have others monitor their behavior for them.

When all the above structures, e.g., the budget, the curriculum, the schedules, the teaching, and governance, don’t meet or serve the students where they are, this exacerbates problems for students. As a result, they naturally detach themselves from their own schooling. Then adults claim “the students don’t care.” The reality is that adults frequently require youth to function under conditions they would never tolerate themselves. Imagine if the sanitation department picked up our garbage at 4:00 am, prohibited us from putting it out before 3:00 am, required that the trash be placed exactly six inches from the curb in navy blue, plastic polymer cans, then failed to pick up the trash and cited us if we violated the protocol in any way. As silly as this scenario may sound, it is not far from the perception many students have about how the schools treat them. And in a sense, they are right. Students endure all kinds of indignities every day. Young adults with jobs, cars, bills, etc. must request “hall passes” to go to the bathroom. Children of all ages are constantly being asked to put their magazines and books away because it is “time for reading,” or letters away because it is “time for writing.” Subjects and ideas that truly invigorate and inspire students are often off limits because “it’s not in the curriculum” or “we don’t do that on Mondays.” When students have opportunities to travel, or accompany their parents to work, or attend community events during the school day, they are often hassled by schools for missing “instructional time.” Fortunately, what they experience on these adventures outside of school is often as important or more important than what they “missed.”

The problem is that until the structures that support the school system are changed to meet student needs rather than adult needs, the disconnect between what we say we want to achieve and what we do to achieve it will widen, and student cynicism will increase as a result.

Fortunately, the status quo is not universal. There are classrooms and schools around the country that are challenging the status quo and creating tremendous outcomes for students. Realms of Inquiry in Salt Lake City, the Key Learning Community in Indianapolis, Cathedral High School in El Paso, and Central Park East in Harlem, among

many others are examples. Importantly, they demonstrate that just as the “one size fits all” model of education does not serve all students, neither is there a one size fits all model of reform. Moreover, they show that when schools develop rational structures to support their goals and when the educators in them truly believe that their mission is to serve students, then even widely divergent schools can achieve great things.

Having said that, I nonetheless believe that there are some issues that apply to education reform across the board. To start, the process requires that we ask some basic questions. The first question should be: What does it mean to learn? As fundamental as this sounds, it is a question that is rarely asked, even among educators. Of course, I have some ideas...