

The Right to Effective Education

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Societies enable their members to lead productive and enjoyable lives by effectively educating their young. In most cases, schools are entrusted with a good

portion of that teaching. Schools are charged not only with imparting specific skills that enable students to act knowledgeably in situations that may confront them long after formal schooling is over, but also with imparting ethical conduct and cultural values of long term benefit both to the individual and to the society as a whole.

Report of the Association for Behavior Analysis (ABA) Task Force on Right to Effective Education. Ogden R. Lindsley was the original Council Liaison. He was followed in this capacity by Julie S. Vargas and Kennon A. Lattal. This report was accepted by the ABA Executive Council; however, it does not necessarily reflect the view of the majority of ABA members nor does it constitute official ABA policy.

A good teacher or instructional system must satisfy at least three criteria: (1) It must be effective in helping students learn more rapidly than they would on their

own; (2) what students learn must benefit both the individual and society as a whole; and (3) it must employ positive rather than coercive or punitive methods.

Because many of the opportunities open to a person hinge on educational accomplishment, the American goal of equal opportunity cannot be realized without effective schooling. Among the rights granted to American citizens should be the right to an effective education.

PERSPECTIVE

For human societies to survive, individuals must acquire many abilities and skills in relation to a complex environment. Terms such as "teaching," "learning," and "schooling" have traditionally been used to designate the means by which the relevant knowledge is transmitted from one generation to another. In most societies, teaching takes place within a well-defined role, and some degree of technology or skill on the part of the teacher is usually recognized. The role of learning in human society is almost dictated by the protracted period of dependence of the young human, together with the importance of language in human development. The general problem of teaching is that of shifting the "reasons" for behaving in specific ways from the temporary or artificial ones employed by the teacher, to those sustained by the culture.

Just as the teacher has a role, so does the student. Students are typically more vulnerable than their teachers, if only because of their relative youth and ignorance. In most cultures, students are brought up to trust that their teachers are both effective and well-motivated and that, for this reason, they will learn. Moreover, because what they learn stands them in good stead as they become more independent, they will remain motivated to continue to learn.

The stability and mutuality of these teacher and pupil roles require that the two broad purposes of teaching—to serve the culture being taught and to serve the individual who acquires knowledge and skills—mutually sustain each other. In

this sense, it is possible to speak of the rights of pupils and students, and of the obligations of those who practice the techniques of education.

If the culture has an imperative to educate its young so that it may survive and improve, then its young have the right to be well-taught: to be taught effectively and to be taught the things that promote the adaptation of the growing individual. Ineffective education may be traced to two possible sources: teaching poorly and/or teaching the wrong things. The current crisis in the American educational system probably reflects serious defects in both.

Since educational institutions never seek to fail as an explicit goal, it is necessary to be more specific about various aspects of educational practice. It has become clear that the use of punishment to attain desired behavior is in some respects antithetical to the aims of the educational process. The suppression of unwanted behavior is often temporary; the emotional effects of punishment may impede the acquisition of more subtle but desirable performances; and aversive methods may generate contrary and rebellious behavior. Yet at the same time, alternative techniques that rely upon positive methods are still not well-understood, practiced, or implemented with adequate technology.

An accepted norm in Western democracies mandates that some form of effective education be available for all. The system should not create rejects. Educational processes have usually included choice points at advancing levels of education and the use of tests for the purpose of sorting. But testing alone, without a more generative approach to the instructional process itself, is now seen as only a partial and somewhat passive program.

In achieving better levels of instructional effectiveness, a more sound and more comprehensive appreciation of the uses of measurement is important. Measurement creates the public record of what has been achieved and serves as a contractual instrument. It also provides a scientific basis for decision-making. More

specifically, proper use of measurement achieves two critical objectives: it removes the statement of educational aims from the realm of the unverifiable, and it separates the description of outcomes from the use of vague labels asserted on the basis of intuition or unexamined authority.

These principles concerning the use of measurement are well accepted in many areas of modern life—but not in education to a consistent degree. Revolutions of modern management and of scientific prediction and verification attempt to stipulate desired outcomes in advance and then marshal resources to achieve them, adjusting methods until they produce the desired outcomes. These revolutions have not yet been seriously embraced in the educational field.

Part of the needed revolution lies in the assumption that the methods of natural science can offer assistance in the education enterprise. Some useful information from science exists now. We must create the conditions that permit application of what we already know in the task of teaching: teaching well, teaching complex skills, teaching large numbers of students, teaching in the face of great variety, teaching with the best blends of technological and human means available. At the same time, we must struggle to advance the basic understanding of learning and performance, which might some day show us how to carry out these tasks more effectively.

Given this perspective, we offer a variety of recommendations. Each represents a distillation in broad terms of principles we have learned as scientists and as empirically-grounded practitioners that can improve the educational opportunities offered by the nation's schools. As such, each then becomes an element of every student's educational entitlement.

ELEMENTS OF EDUCATIONAL ENTITLEMENT

Educational Context

1. Students are entitled to social and physical environments at school that en-

courage and maintain academic achievement and progress, and discourage socially deviant or unacceptable behavior. The regulatory aspects of the school environment, however, should not impede or impair the aims of the educational process.

2. Students are entitled to attend schools in which they are treated with care and individual attention, comparable to the attention they would receive as members of a caring family.

3. Students are entitled to school programs that, when needed, provide support and training for parents in parenting and teaching skills.

4. Students are entitled to receive consequences and attention at home that encourage and maintain success at school, based on frequent communication and recommendation from school personnel to parents or guardians.

Curriculum and Instructional Objectives

1. Students are entitled to educational programs based on empirically validated hierarchies or sequences of instructional objectives and measurable performance criteria. These objectives should be shown to be of long-term value in the culture, and their sequence in the instructional process should be shown to promote cumulative mastery.

2. Students are entitled to educational programs with mastery criteria that include a time or speed dimension so that they may work to achieve fluent, accurate performance.

3. Students are entitled to educational programs with instructional objectives that promote short-term and long-term personal and vocational success, and that will be maintained, once mastered, by the natural consequences available in their everyday lives.

4. Students are entitled to educational programs that include long-term retention and maintenance of skills and knowledge as explicitly measured instructional objectives.

Assessment and Student Placement

1. Students are entitled to assessment and reporting methods that are sufficiently “criterion-referenced” to promote useful decision-making among employers, institutions of higher education, parents, and children themselves (that is, the consumers of the educational process). Methods that report categorical labels (for example, “learning disabled,” “gifted,” “emotionally disturbed”) are antithetical to the desired assessment goals of specifying actual levels of skills and knowledge.

2. Students are entitled to placement based on conformity between their measured entering skills and the skills required as prerequisites for a given level in a hierarchically sequenced curriculum.

Instructional Method

1. Students are entitled to educational programs that allow them to master instructional objectives at their own pace and to respond as rapidly and as frequently as they are able during at least some self-paced instructional sessions each day.

2. Students are entitled to sufficient practice opportunities to enable them to truly master skills and knowledge at each step in the curriculum.

3. Students are entitled to educational programs that provide consequences from teachers, materials, or teaching devices, designed to correct errors and/or to increase the frequency of responding. Instructional consequences should be adjusted on the basis of individual performance until they enable students to achieve desired outcomes.

4. Students are entitled to educational programs that adjust in response to measures of individual learning and performance. This includes providing individualized instruction when group instruction does not produce desired outcomes.

5. Students are entitled to use the most up-to-date and most technologically advanced equipment to assist in the process of mastering the skills required for suc-

cess in our culture—with the proviso that programs delivered via that equipment incorporate the validated features described elsewhere in this document.

6. Students are entitled to educational programs in which teachers receive performance-based training, administrative and supervisory support, and observation and evaluation in measurably effective, scientifically validated instructional methods.

Measurement and Summative Evaluation

1. Students are entitled to educational programs and assessment procedures in which decisions are based on objective, curriculum-based measures of performance, with attention to data collection and analysis comparable to that expected in the medical profession.

2. Students are entitled to educational programs that report achievement and progress with objective measures of performance and improvement, rather than with merely subjective ratings, norm-referenced comparisons, accuracy without speed measures (which does not unequivocally specify performance), or category scales (e.g., letter grading).

Assumption of Responsibility for Success

1. Students are entitled to attend schools in which there are frequently administered financial and operational consequences for school personnel, depending on objective measures of student learning and achievement.

2. Students are entitled to attend schools in which primary responsibility for student achievement and progress is assumed by teachers and administrators and the educational program in general, and in which programs are changed until students are able to achieve desired learning outcomes.

3. Students are entitled to attend schools that meet their educational needs and to change schools or school programs when their educational needs are not being met.