

Why students learn

Michael Ben-Chaim*

Everyone knows why schools are important: school education, alongside physical and mental health, is the most important contributor to the long-lasting well-being of children. The indisputable value of formal education explains why so many professional educators relentlessly seek to improve school pedagogy at all grade levels and across the curriculum. The research on a wide range of aspects of learning—notably its neurological and psychological foundations; teachers' methods of behavioral and academic intervention; assessment systems; special education services; and learning technologies, environments, and communities in and outside the classroom—has been rapidly and steadily expanding since at least the early 1970s. Yet, it is widely acknowledged that the growing body of research in education has not succeeded in alleviating the chronic mediocrity of public schools. According to the 2012 NAEP long-term trend assessment, the overall performance of 17-year-olds in reading and math has not been changed since 1971 and 1973, respectively.¹ Why, then, is there such a striking disproportion of investment to return-on-investment in an enterprise that is so vital to the flourishing of every child?

One reason is that research projects in education share the following assumption: the school curriculum is intended to serve children's best interest, yet its underlying pedagogy must be value-neutral. Students are expected to gain knowledge of facts, theories, concepts, and skills, yet, according to current pedagogy, it is not necessary for them to understand the value of this knowledge or how its acquisition benefits them—in other words, *why* they should learn. Moreover, value-neutrality in education is motivated by political rather than pedagogical considerations. Disagreements about values are common in culturally diverse societies, and especially in liberal democracies that uphold the right of individual persons to determine for themselves the values that make their lives worth living. By presenting itself as value-neutral, the establishment of professional education gains political protection as a provider of impartial, unbiased, authoritative, and binding knowledge. However, political neutrality entails ethical neutrality, and an ethically neutral pedagogy cannot possibly achieve the ethical goal of promoting students' well-being.

Moreover, the paradox of value-neutral pedagogy adversely affects students' performance. Values are reasons for action: they motivate and guide it, and provide the means for assessing its success. Values clarify why people act in one way rather than another, and how they should act. Contemporary pedagogy focuses on *what* and *how* students learn, but its adherence to value-neutrality undermines teachers' and students' ability to understand *why* the curriculum matters. Students may assume that they are taught important knowledge. But if they don't understand

¹ Retrieved July 13, 2015, from:
<https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/main2012/pdf/2013456.pdf>

why it is important, they lose their motivation to learn it, and their understanding and appreciation of learning is compromised.

The negative implications of value-neutral pedagogy are especially severe for students who are not exposed at home to the works of science, the humanities, and language arts that they learn at school. Formal education gives these students the opportunity to expand their cultural horizons beyond the precincts of their everyday lives, but at the same time estranges them from academic culture and impairs their motivation and ability to make it part of their lives. Moreover, as they transition from one grade to the next, the curriculum becomes more intellectually challenging and the gap between what they already know and what they are expected to learn increases. Viewed especially from the contemporary world of digital social and entertainment media in which so many students feel as comfortable as fish in water, their classroom experience seems like an encounter with a culture that is alien, confusing, and indifferent to their personal needs and desires.

The necessary condition for improving the school system is a pedagogy that restores the indelible connection between values and education. A value-centered pedagogy must be based on an explicit and systematic answer to the question why students learn. In general, people, learn when they perceive a gap between the knowledge they have and the knowledge they need to achieve their goals. The perception of the gap defines the learner's problem-situation: when they realize that the knowledge they have compromises their ability to achieve their goals, they are motivated to search for more valuable knowledge.

By including works of science, the humanities, and language arts in the curriculum, the leadership of public education acknowledges their proven record as successful tools for gaining valuable knowledge about issues of personal and public importance. Hence, school pedagogy should focus on the value of these works as intellectual achievements that provide students with models of learning, rather than as mere sources of decontextualized, impersonal, and value-neutral facts, concepts, or skills. Accordingly, the key to students' academic success are lesson plans that help students understand how these models work: the problem-situations they address, how they solve problems, and the reasons for valuing the solutions they offer as successful endeavors to improve our knowledge and comprehension. Students who understand how works of science or literature model learning can recognize more clearly the limits of the knowledge they bring to the class, as well as why and how they should and can improve that knowledge. They are better prepared to search school literature for clues, instructions, and tools that can help them gain the knowledge they seek. They are motivated to make better use of the learning process, are more able to benefit from it, and, as a result, appreciate it more. And, when they return to their home and community at the end of the school day, they carry with them the tools to more sharply perceive and better understand their world. They view the difference between their everyday lives and the academic world as an integral part of their growth and development rather than as an alienating and frustrating necessity.

In a value-centered classroom, students' comprehension becomes intertwined with their appreciation of the curriculum. They gain scientific knowledge by learning to see and understand the reasons why professional researchers value such knowledge as a successful

solution to a problem. Students better understand works of language arts when they learn how imaginary depictions of characters, relationships, and scenes provide the means to amplify, articulate, clarify, and rethink problem-situations that arise in everyday life. Moreover, students' appreciation of the texts they read at school is directly related to their ability to decode and comprehend them. Their learning is integrated with their socialization as they understand better the cultural values that shape prominent modes of thought, reasoning, and perception in their society. Students should gain knowledge at school. But they can do so successfully only when they understand why the endeavor is worth pursuing. Hence, their success depends on a pedagogy that addresses cognition and learning within an ethical framework that focuses on the promotion of well-being.

* Dr. Michael Ben-Chaim is a visiting scholar at the Department of Philosophy, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and a consultant for Pearson Education. His email is: benchaim@comcast.net