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PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

What is an education supposed to do? One answer is to confer degrees that signal preparation for employability. Another is to develop the higher facets of humanity beyond the merely economic.

Let's note a difference between "education" and "degree." "Education" captures what one has learned, the skills one has acquired, the development one has experienced. "Degree" is a piece of paper that was meant to be representative of the achievement of an educational standard. One could be educated with or without a degree, as an autodidact. Alternatively, one can be the recipient of a degree without ever having been educated. Emphasis on obtaining a degree is indicative of viewing the purpose of attending a degree-granting institution, so that one can become a viable, economically productive citizen. An emphasis on achieving an education indicates a desire to develop the higher facets of oneself beyond the merely economic.

Employers only care for a degree. If education were truly important, we would expect to see a rise in salary of those with some college experience above that of the high school graduate with none. Again, there would be a commensurate increase with additional college experience. That this does not happen at all, and that the degree is all that makes a difference, it is the degree that is valued.

Even to you, your child is only an economic tool.

For example, I pull your son or daughter aside for a private conversation in which I say to him or her, "You are a generally worthless human being, good for nothing whatever except ensuring the economic productivity. Excepting this, your very existence is superfluous." You might want to have me flogged. "My child, you say, is beautiful, full of intellectual depth, emotional richness, social connectedness, spiritual profundity. To reduce her to a cog in your bureaucratic system is to ignore her very humanity." And yet the actual fact of the matter is that nearly everyone sends their children to a place that's concerned *exclusively* with developing your child into just that cog.

The Arizona Minority Student Progress Report works frantically "to establish the critically important connection between education and workforce development."¹ The educational system is a "pipeline, which provides the workforce of Arizona's future, [and is] losing too many students in the process. This has become a grave concern for the future economic health of our families and Arizona as a competitive economic power."² "Minority students... are crucial to

¹ Az Minority Student Progress Report, 6

² Ibid, 10

ongoing economic prosperity of our state because of the critical human capital that they provide. A highly qualified workforce is the best resource our state can offer for economic development.”³ First Things First, Arizona’s only public funding source dedicated exclusively to early childhood development, says “A child’s early years hold the key to their success. And our state’s. Children who are healthy and prepared when they enter kindergarten do better in school and are more likely to graduate and enroll in college. Well-educated adults are more prepared for the job opportunities of a global marketplace and to contribute to the strength of their communities. Research by Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman showed that every \$1 invested in early childhood can yield returns between \$4 and \$16.”⁴

The Career Success School District (with schools throughout the Valley) has the following posted to their webpage: “The world of work awaits every student. Career Success believes that the high school experience should expose students to a career choice of their interest. The career classes will identify the student’s aptitude for the career and teach the skills that will enable the student to gain an entry-level job in that career field.”

Our systems are designed for people to be employed. Their systems are designed for people.

MEASUREMENTS OF SUCCESS

We can most easily measure the success of a system in a direct kind of way and an indirect kind of way. The direct way is to compare and contrast that system against some objective standard. Similarly, if one opts out of one school in favor of another, better school, then we can reasonably infer her belief about that school.

When the American education system is measured against, say Finland, which is among the world’s top school systems, the response has typically been to point to the socio-economic (SE) and ethnic diversity of students being educated in low SE schools. “But we educate so many different KINDS of people,” they say. “Our students have such rich and diverse backgrounds that no other system compares to ours,” they proudly proclaim. In effect, the claim amounts to identifying racial disparities and the inferiority of minorities: where there is racial or ethnic heterogeneity, then facilities provided to each race can be equal *for their populations*. And then they send their kids to rich white schools. This is the heart of *Plessy v Ferguson*.

THE SYSTEM IS DOING WHAT IT’S SUPPOSED TO DO

The system is not broken. It is, in fact, working optimally and doing exactly what it is supposed to do. The only problem is what it is that the system is designed to do.

Consider the history of the modern grading system: A, B, C, D, F. Education systems before 1792 were apprenticeships. There was the master teacher who devoted individual attention to the needs and styles of learning of each apprentice, whether in the barrel-making down the street or in the Theology department at Oxford. There was daily participation in the student’s development. Inspired by the mechanization of the Industrial Revolution, particularly the efficiency with which factory lines could sort and discard shoes to determine if they were “up to

³ Ibid 11

⁴ First Things First

grade” and whether the workers should be paid if the shoes could be sold, schools began paying teachers based on the number of students they had, as opposed to a flat salary. A tutor at Cambridge University named William Farish understood this to mean that there is an inherent limit to how much money he could earn under the apprenticeship model. Tom Hartmann in “The World’s Most Famous Lazy Teacher” writes that the grading method increased his salary, lessened his workload, and reduced the hours he needed to spend in the classroom trying to discern whether his students understood a topic. This grading system could do it, and do it just as well for 20 as for 200.

The students who learned differently and failed to mesh with Farish’s lecture-form of teaching could be discarded. Again, Hartmann writes, “Without grades, the assembly-line-classroom would not be possible. With grades, whole categories of children were discovered who didn’t fit onto the conveyor belt, providing an entire new realm of employment for adults who would diagnose, treat, and remediate these newly-discovered “learning disabled” children.” Enter the Factory Model of Education.

Rena Uptis, former Dean of Education at Queen’s University at Kingston in Ontario, Canada states “...schools have been built for young people to be trained to fulfill the roles society intends of them. In this ideology, education is seen as most effective when it is efficient and organized, preparing young people for the bureaucracy of work.” We can see the factory model in classroom design (all desks facing the front, minimal student interaction, silence and good behavior are prized, everyone learning the same materials at the same time in the same way at the same pace and measured by the same standard). David Brooks, quoting Shimon Waronker, head of the New American Academy in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, says, “The American education model was actually copied from the 18th century Prussian model designed to create docile subjects and factory workers.”

The system is *designed* to sort the teachable from the unteachable, the employable from the unemployable, the malleable and docile from the rigid and opinionated. The system is *designed* to discard the rambunctious, headstrong, disobedient “misfits.” In a world of invisible, institutional racism, that means that the system was *designed* to sort and discard, to suspend and expel undesirable black and brown kids; to silence their non-standard, disrespectful, and offensive ways of speaking, like Ben Fields who body-slammed and arrested a 16-year old Black girl in South Carolina; to vilify them for the creative ways of expressing themselves in their too loud, misogynistic, violent music, as demonstrated by the phenomenon of using rap lyrics as evidence against defendants in criminal cases;⁵ to send girls like Mariah Havard, of Buckeye Union High School in Phoenix, to the principal’s office when her Black Lives Matter t-shirt is inappropriate for a school setting because it was disruptive to the school’s educational environment. Why would people in the education system be so interested in Farish-style grading systems if not for the easy discarding of the undesirables, who amount to the black and brown kids about whom they couldn’t care less?

⁵ Peters, Justin (2013, Aug. 13) *A Shameful Prosecutorial Act: Using Rap Lyrics Against Young Black Male Defendants*.

Retrieved from:

http://www.slate.com/blogs/crime/2013/08/14/vonte_skinner_lamont_peterson_using_rap_lyrics_against_young_black_male.html

BUT WHAT DEGREE?

If we were to prioritize education in the hopes of developing all the facets of people—the financial, as well as the intellectual, emotional, social, physical, and spiritual, one degree stands out: Philosophy. The various national graduate standardized admission tests (GMAT for MBA's, LSAT for law school, and GRE for most other disciplines) prove this to be true. According to the 2015 Profile of Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) candidates, Philosophy is ranked 4th among more than 30 undergraduate disciplines. Those with the highest Law School Admission Test (LSAT) scores are Philosophy majors (tied with Economics) and Philosophy undergraduates rank highest in verbal reasoning, analytical writing and are 10th in quantitative reasoning. The Graduate Record Exam (GRE) is the national standardized test used to assess applicants to graduate school in most disciplines. Philosophy majors earn more over a lifetime than every other non-STEM major. According to NACE, the National Association of Colleges and Employers, “Philosophy majors are projected to be the top-paid Class of 2016 humanities graduates at the bachelor’s degree level.”⁶

WHY PHILOSOPHY?

Philosophy has been around for 5,000 years. All we need is a desire to understand and an interpersonal skill set that allows us to peer into what it is that another person understands, or believes herself to understand. Philosophy concerns itself with intellectual depth, emotional richness, social connectedness, spiritual profundity. Doing philosophy *is* gaining an education, and education *is* doing philosophy. I don't claim that we *are* better people as a result of studying philosophy, only that we can't *become* better people without it.

Philosophy teaches us to listen better, to converse better, and to ask better questions. Consider an example from Dr. Emdin's work where the little girl is told that she's always late to class and is unprepared by not having her book. She fired back that she was *in* the classroom but not at her desk; that she *was* prepared with the book because she shared one with a friend because neither could afford to buy theirs individually. So much of the problem, if not all of it, could have been avoided if someone had just sat down and *listened* to her explain what she means by being in the classroom and what being prepared meant to her. If, rather than assuming a position of authority, someone had simply conversed with her on a human level to develop an understanding of where she was; if someone had just asked a few simple questions, a whole lot of misunderstandings could have been avoided.

CONCLUSION

If the purpose of education is to produce workers, Arizona's system works. If the purpose of education is to produce fully developed humans, then the system is not broken, just separate and unequal.

THIS MATERIAL IS EXCERPTED FROM A LONGER WORK IN PROGRESS
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⁶ (2016, Feb. 24). *Philosophy Projected as Top-Paid Class of 2016 Humanities Major*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nacweb.org/s02242016/top-paid-humanities-graduates-2016.aspx>