

## EDUCATION WEEK

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# Taking a Relationship-Centered Approach to Education

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Let's play "what if" for a second.

What if schools used real-world scenarios to teach? What if learning were tied to complex problem-solving? What if students graduated from high school knowing how to negotiate peace treaties, stimulate depressed economies, and reduce obesity rates in America?

Now imagine a school where students and teachers decided collaboratively that the future of energy, the problem of inadequate access to safe drinking water, and the issues surrounding genetically modified organisms were among the topics of study. In this model, students would be taught to use skills and knowledge from the traditional disciplines—math, science, English, social studies, and so on—to take steps toward scaling and solving aspects of these complex issues. Teachers would work together, leveraging their content expertise in service of a problem. Students would navigate complex, unpredictable situations using a multitude of educational resources. This real-world problem-solving approach would partner with expert field practitioners, community members, research scientists, political leaders, and business owners, all showing students ways of addressing the pressing problems facing the world, from the local to the global.

Imagine how much richer this educational experience would be. Imagine how many more members of future generations would be engaged in tackling the world's toughest problems.

Sadly, there are very few schools like this in our nation, but not for a lack of trying. The heart of contemporary K-12 education reform is broad and disjointed: Curriculum standards, teaching strategies, school choice, teacher pay, quality and culture, and achievement gaps all take turns leading the charge. Alarming, the missing narrative is arguably the most important factor in preparing students with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in today's world: why we educate in the first place.

Right now, the vast majority of U.S. schools make use of a subject-centered approach to education, in

which the emphasis is on gaining content knowledge, developing skills within disciplines, and advancing academic levels. In this view of learning, having young people master math, science, English, and other material theoretically equips them for life's next steps.

The hope in our current system is essentially this: Young people who command the disciplines will be "educated," thus enabling them to contribute meaningfully to society.

But as celebrated as that hope has been, what we need now is a relationship-centered approach to teaching and learning. Allow me to explain.

An educational purpose that includes, but ultimately rises above, the disciplines and highlights the relationships between them is the unequivocal way forward. We are all complexly related, to Earth and to each other, and these relationships are inescapable, inherently valuable, and increasingly interconnected. We would benefit from framing educational purpose around how we might improve the social (our relationships with each other) and natural (our relationship with Earth) worlds.



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Mixing the disciplines to that end has clear benefits. To begin with, a relationship-centered approach to education has the potential to be considerably more interesting for students. A disturbing proportion of students—seven out of 10 in some national studies—are uninterested in school, primarily from its lack of perceived relevance. But having students examine topics that naturally transcend the disciplines—such as the Internet or world hunger or nuclear proliferation—can captivate and help students see the importance of their work. Giving students a say in the topics will go even further; the rapid exchange of information in this generation calls for rapid-fire exchanges of ideas in the classroom.

Another compelling benefit is that a relationship-centered approach demands that teachers plan curriculum together. Imagine groups of teachers from across disciplines reaching out to students, discovering their interests, and developing related curriculum. That kind of teamwork is not easy now.

Many educators' and policymakers' ongoing allegiance, spoken or unspoken, to the subject-centered approach is evident in how we prepare to teach in the classroom. Despite the emergence of up-to-date local, state, and national standards, learning outcomes remain divided into traditional subject areas. This division makes it natural and efficient for education leaders, administrators, and district officials to develop and map curriculum for each discipline independent of the other disciplines.

Thus, the planning process is a lonely one. With the exception of sharing best practices with colleagues and aligning curriculum, teachers are generally on their own.

The result of such isolated planning within the disciplines is costly: Students usually encounter potentially related standards in different classes, at different times in the school year, and with few connections between content areas. The subject-centered experience supposedly allows for specialization and makes certain that the accumulated wisdom of civilization is passed on to students.

But too often our disciplinary approach promotes compartmentalized thinking, fortifies intellectual barriers,

and snuffs out cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural insights essential to addressing our world's greatest challenges. Our educational institutions are setting our students up for learned helplessness, Elizabeth Coleman, then the president of Bennington College, **said in a 2009 speech**.

When we focus instead on relationship-centered teaching and learning, teachers can implement curriculum mapping more successfully because they are involved in its development and can adapt it to their specific classroom and school situations.

Kim Marshall, a principal coach with New Leaders for New Schools, wrote in **an Education Week Commentary in 2006** that when teachers "work together to plan multiweek curriculum units ... the result is more thoughtful instruction, deeper student understanding, and yes, better standardized-test scores."

Further, authorizing teachers to arrange standards around not just interdisciplinary topics but transdisciplinary problems can position students to offer creative solutions as they encounter related standards in all their classes, at the same time during the school year, and with multiple connections between the content areas.

Connections are the heartbeat of learning, and putting the disciplines to good use is at the core of innovation and progress. A subject-centered approach rigidly divides standards across the disciplines and stifles any impulse to collaborate and work in teams. A relationship-centered approach demands making connections and has a proven track record in students' formative years. Why, then, are we limiting that approach only to primary education?

Lastly, a relationship-centered approach to education can help close what many see as a growing gap between the number of job applicants with the necessary entry-level skills and the number of college graduates who cannot find work. Today, the ability to use whatever it takes to solve multifaceted problems is an essential ingredient for employment, yet our current educational philosophy gets in the way of this. Thankfully, philosophies can change.

In a way, we are all educators. We educate so that we can help leave the world a little better than we found it. Ignoring the local and global problems we face makes that impossible.

Imagine, instead, a world where conversations about important issues are validated and encouraged at a young age.

That is a world where change is possible. That is why we educate.

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