

The Whole Child: A Global Vision for Learning

by Dr. Richard Hanzelka, ASCD



(The following address was presented by Dr. Hanzelka at the Iowa ASCD Curriculum Leadership Academy held May 10, 2007, at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Des Moines, Iowa.)

I remember very well running around this Embassy Suites Hotel getting all the details worked out for the bookstore, registration, sessions, lunch, and notebooks. It's nice to be a participant this time and see what a great job others can do. I'm impressed with how well this academy has gone.

For the past two years I have had the pleasure of serving as President-Elect and President of ASCD. There has been no greater learning in all my professional life

than what I have been able to do in those two years.

For a number of years, I have had a compulsion about clarifying the difference between achievement and learning. On the occasion of its 50th anniversary as an affiliate, Iowa ASCD gifted the ASCD headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia with an Amana grandfather clock that now sits in the main hallway of that building. Bill Wright suggested that the inscription on the clock should be, “children are messages we send to a time we will not see.” The quote resonated with the Iowa ASCD Board and with me. It seemed to bring together some thoughts I already had rolling around in my head regarding the importance of our legacy as a profession. It brought to the forefront the idea that we should be much more interested in the people we are developing rather than in a list of test scores to be touted as our success in twenty or thirty or forty years.

I kept that quote in mind as I began my work as an ASCD officer and as “whole child” language began to be more prominent. The 2007 ASCD Annual Conference theme grew out of all those considerations and from the thinking of people like Pablo Casals, world renowned cellist, who said:

Each moment we live never was before and will never be again. And yet what we teach children

in school is 2 + 2 = 4 and Paris is the capital of France. What we should be teaching them is what they are. We should be saying: “Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique. In all the world there is no other child exactly like you. In the millions of years that have passed, there has never been another child exactly like you. You may become a Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, a Beethoven. You have the capacity for anything. Yes, you are a marvel.”

About two years ago (it was good timing) I received as a gift from my brother-in-law, Bill Bryson’s book entitled, A Short History of Nearly Everything. Toward the end of the book, Bryson talked about various aspects of historical disappearances:

“A great deal of extinction hasn’t been cruel or wanton, but just kind of majestically foolish. In 1894, when a lighthouse was built on a lonely rock called Stephens Island, in the tempestuous strait between the North and South Islands of New Zealand, the lighthouse keeper’s cat kept bringing him strange little birds that it had caught. The keeper dutifully sent some specimens to the museum in Wellington. There a curator grew very excited because the bird was a relic species of flightless wrens—the only example of a flightless

perching bird ever found anywhere. He set off at once for the island, but by the time he got there the cat had killed them all. Twelve stuffed museum species of the Stephens Island flightless wren are all that now exist.”

Not long after that (June 13, 2005), an editorial by Ann Quindlan appeared in Newsweek magazine, and it reminded me of the flightless wren. It created for me a metaphor. Quindlan said:

“The bureaucrats who have built their programs on test results seem to have lost sight of any overarching point of education. Who cares if the light comes on in students’ eyes if the numbers are good? I wish more parents could find a way to protest this educational form of child abuse. The administration insists that support for No Child Left Behind, which is largely a massive testing program, is nevertheless widespread. Officials point to a national survey that offered respondents this choice: which is the bigger problem, children passing through U.S. schools without learning to read, or children being forced to take too many tests? Of course any smart kid would see that there’s something wrong with that draconian choice, and that the inquiring mind looks for answers somewhere in the middle. The real question for the future is whether, after this barrage of

mindless and endless assessment, there will be any inquiring minds left.”

I thought about the idea that we have our own “test-um-deep” cats who continue to bring forth test scores—disembodied pieces of whole children. Perhaps we run the risk of having, as Quindlan says, no inquiring minds left. Perhaps the whole child as learner will be left behind as an artifact. Perhaps through our own majestic foolishness, we will no longer have learners with inquiring minds.

To be fair, I believe accountability is an important educational imperative, but we must work very hard to make it meaningful. And I believe that those who support testing as the sole evidence of learning have an interest in improving education, but Bryson also says in his book, *“It is a truly astounding fact that for the longest time the people who were most intensely interested in the world’s living things were the ones most likely to extinguish them.”*

In March 2007, ASCD released the New Compact to Educate the Whole Child and I have renewed hope that children will, in fact, be back on the track of learning. The new compact is the result of the work of the Whole Child Commission that began meeting over a year ago. The starting point for the report is the ASCD

position on the whole child;

“Current educational practice and policy focus overwhelmingly on academic achievement. This achievement, however, is but one element of student learning and development and only a part of any complete system of educational accountability.”

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The report is a powerful document that will be rolled out across the country and the world in a series of locally guided conversations and calls to action. ASCD is now preparing facilitator guides for such public conversations. The report provides the impetus for educators, policymakers, parents, community leaders, and other stakeholders to change the conversation about learning and schooling from reforming its

structures to transforming its conditions so that each child can develop his strengths and restore his unique capacities for intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual learning.

Dr. Gene Carter, Executive Director of ASCD said, *“ASCD convened the Commission on the Whole Child because we believe that the success of each learner can be achieved only through a whole child approach to learning and teaching. If decisions about education policy and practice started with ‘What works for the child?’ how would resources—time, space, and human—be arrayed to ensure each child’s success? If the student were truly at the center of the system, what could we achieve?”*

Perhaps the incubators for our wingless wrens can, in fact, be fired up and begin to make a difference. With this kind of initiative, perhaps there is still hope for learners with inquiring minds.

The Whole Child Commission report can be downloaded from the ASCD website at www.ascd.org There are also opportunities to share stories of whole child initiatives on a new ASCD microsite at www.wholechilddedication.org On this site people will sign on to the whole child compact to contribute profiles of school and

community practices that exemplify whole child practices, to nominate “heroes and villains,” and to rate their schools and communities.

I’m very excited about the prospect of possible changes in this country, but I am even more excited to know that there is activity around the world on this issue. It has been my pleasure as ASCD President to have the opportunity to travel extensively. In the past 18 months, I have been to China twice, India, Puerto Rico, and Slovenia (where I attended the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement that included educators from more than 50 countries). I am happy to report that I have found incubators for wingless wrens in all those places. It was exciting to note that the curriculum reform focus is on learning, creativity, and innovation.

For example, in India, despite the great diversity of approaches, the theme of learning for every child was first and foremost in every school we visited and among the educators we met. Achievement of high test scores is seen by most as secondary to learning. Rather than stressing out about test scores, Indian educators are most concerned with developing students who are able to face future challenges as active learners. In India’s National Curriculum Framework the following appears:

“The fact that learning has become a source of burden and

stress on children and their parents is an evidence of a deep distortion in educational aims and quality. Teaching should aim at enhancing children’s natural desire and strategies to learn...knowledge needs to be distinguished from information and teaching needs to be seen as a professional activity, not as coaching for memorization or as transmission of facts.”

The document goes on to offer five guiding principles of curriculum development:

- Connecting knowledge to life outside school.
- Ensuring that learning doesn’t rely on rote methods.
- Enriching the curriculum to provide for children’s overall development rather than remaining textbook-centric.
- Making examinations more flexible and integrated with classroom life.
- Nurturing an overriding identity informed by caring concern within the democratic polity of the country.

I don’t mean to imply that all is wonderful in all countries, but it is true that all see the need to move to an emphasis on learning for the whole child. China still evaluates its secondary teachers on the degree to which students

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are able to perform on high stakes tests, but the move is away from that.

I believe the Report of the Commission on the Whole Child: *The Learning Compact Redefined: A Call to Action* gives us hope that we will see a re-emphasis on learning.

I’m encouraged enough to think that the future of our children is very bright—I believe it’s an exciting time to be in education. If I didn’t believe that, I would be doing something else at this point. I started teaching in Cedar Rapids in 1961 but there is much yet to do.

I’ll leave you with a song/poem that was written by a 5th grade teacher in one of the summer writing institutes I facilitate as part of my work with the Eastern Iowa Writing Project. Mike Millar is a poet, songwriter, and all around good guy. One of my favorite questions to ask anyone who is doing anything is “what’s it for?” I believe it relates to comments on student papers, to lessons we teach, to comments and remarks we make to our colleagues, to our spouses, and to our friends and to others—*what’s it for?*

Here is Mike Millar’s poem/song “What’s it For?”

What's It For?

Words and Music by Mike Millar
May 2006

What's it for? It's for the children. G C G^cG
What's it for? It's for the children. G C D^cD
What's it for? It's for the children. G C G C
It's for the children. That's what it's for. G D G^cG

Can you walk? Walk with the children. G C G^cG
Can you run? Run with the children. G C D^cD
Can you fly, fly, fly, with the children? G C G C
It's for the children. That's what it's for. G D G^cG

Will you think? Think of the children. G C G^cG
Will you talk? Talk with the children. G C D^cD
Can you sing, sing, sing, with the children? G C G C
It's for the children. That's what it's for. G D G^cG

It's for the child that comes with a special need. G D C G
It's for the child that no one else will feed. G D C G
It's for the child that needs your patience and love. G D CEm
It's for the children sent from God above. G D G^cG

You've got to read. Read with the children. G C G^cG
You've got to play. Play with the children. G C D^cD
Can you stay, stay, stay, with the children? G C G C
It's for the children. That's what it's for. G D G^cG

You can sigh for the children. G C G^cG
You can cry for the children. G C D^cD
You must be there for the children? G C G C
It's for the children. That's what it's for. G D G^cG

What's it for? It's for the children. G C G^cG
What's it for? It's for the children. G C D^cD
What's it for? It's for the children. G C G C
It's for the children. That's what it's for. G D G^cG

Can't you see? It's for the children. G C G^cG

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We welcome letters to the editor and opinions of our readers! All submissions may be edited for length, accuracy and clarity. Letters and guest opinions should be sent electronically to

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