

Factors in Education

There are a number of factors and sub-factors that determine the efficacy of education. First and foremost are the student and the nature of the student. Second, the home and community environment in which the student lives. Third, teachers and how effectively they perform their duties. And last but not least, the academic environment, including school administrators and the manner and character of administration. All of these factors are important.

- The Student and the Nature of the Student

The student himself (herself) is the central factor. The primary purpose of education is to meet the needs of the student, i.e., to effectively educate the student and prepare him (her) to function effectively in the world, including proper employment and contributing positively to the community, to some extent according to his or her talents and interests. The secondary purpose of education is to educate and guide the student in such a way as to meet the needs of the community. Healthy, effective education does both. Effective education is tailored to both the needs of the particular student and the needs of the particular community.

The role of the student is simply to learn as much as he or she can, given the various educational opportunities, personal interests, talents and abilities, and community needs. There is a core of material (knowledge, understanding) and learning experience that most students need to learn, regardless of interests, talent and abilities, and community needs. And there is additional material and experience that students need that is more unique to their particular needs and interests.

Learning is not so much about knowledge, though knowledge is certainly an ingredient. Understanding is much more important than knowledge, but there needs to be a sufficient knowledge base. Ultimately it is wisdom that matters (accumulated wisdom is what one takes on to the next life).

Thus perhaps the most important accomplishment on the part of the student is learning how to learn, to develop the capacity for learning, for effectively accumulating and assessing knowledge, for effectively assimilating that knowledge into understanding, and effectively assimilating that understanding into wisdom. But much depends on the central factor of the student himself, namely his or her inherent consciousness, intelligence, learning abilities, and receptivity to learning.

A person is born into this world with a certain inherent consciousness and certain inherent abilities, based upon previous experience and assimilation of experience, and tempered by whatever accumulated karma there may be. That karma both limits and affords various abilities and opportunities. So the most basic factor is whatever the student brings into the world. This is not merely a matter of genetics, but mostly a matter of consciousness, where genetic conditioning is simply one of a number of boundary conditions. Regardless of circumstances, some students are simply able to learn more effectively, and others less so. In other cases circumstances are a major factor in the student's potential for learning. A student of relatively good consciousness will have a much better chance of overcoming whatever circumstances there may be. Thus the student's consciousness and concomitant attitude are key.

Closely related sub-factors are the various learning abilities and disabilities a student may have. Some people learn more effectively in certain ways, and less so in other ways. Education that takes this into consideration, for individual students, without compromising the integrity of education for other students, and without leaving a student overly reliant on his or her preferred means of learning, is simply more effective. But care must be taken to cultivate a broadening of a student's abilities to learn. For example, if a student has a natural preference for learning visually, i.e., has less ability to learn aurally or in other ways, then the student needs to learn how to learn aurally and in other ways as well.

The student needs to enjoy learning, or to learn how to enjoy learning, so that learning becomes a lifelong process. The student needs to take education and learning seriously, but without unnecessary pressures or intensity. If this "learning nature" is not already present, then it needs to be encouraged, cultivated, and developed.

- The Home and Community Environment

The next immediate factor, beyond the student himself, is the home and community environment. Parents and their nature, their effectiveness as parents, their effectiveness as role models, their ability to provide a comfortable, healthy, nurturing home environment, is important. Though many can overcome limitations in home and community, many cannot easily do this. "Good" parents encourage their children to learn and grow, to embrace good character and consideration for others, to take education and learning seriously, to respect their peers and teachers alike. "Good" parents create, sustain, and develop a home environment that is conducive to learning and growing. "Good" parents support the formal and informal education process, and while they are themselves "teachers" ... they do not compete directly with teachers or administrators. Parents must also respect and show respect for teachers and formal education, in order to cultivate these qualities in their children.

Beyond the immediate home environment are peers and the community, both of which are potentially influential factors, even more so if the parents themselves are not very effective in their positive influence on their children. Of course these factors are inter-related in the sense that all influence the student, in various degrees depending on the student and circumstances. Some students may be more or less responsive to one or both parents, peers, and/or community influence. "Good" students tend to attract "good" parents, "good" friends or peers, and "good" circumstances or community, or at least "good" learning opportunities. But students who are not inherently responsive to learning opportunities are not "bad" ... they are simply not (yet) "good" students. Thus all of these factors (parents, peers, and community) can potentially make a difference, for good or ill (again, some students can overcome these factors, for good or ill) (which means, for example, that in some cases even "good" parents may have little or no influence). But a positive, healthy influence from parents, a positive, healthy influence from peers, and a positive, healthy influence from community, each and all usually help a great deal.

Realistically, not every community is healthy. If a student is worried mostly about survival issues, or various less-than-healthy peer pressures, he or she is likely not able to focus on learning in any higher sense. Thus not only is the student ultimately responsible for himself, his abilities, receptivity, and

attitude, so are the parents, peers, and community also responsible for whatever influence is afforded. When the student enters the formal learning environment, all of these factors play a conditioning role. They are (all) what the student brings to school, and determine some of the initial conditions that teachers have to then work with (the other initial conditions being teachers themselves and the academic environment).

- **Teachers and their Effectiveness**

The role of the teacher is, of course, to encourage and facilitate learning. In the formal sense, the teacher is responsible for the immediate learning environment, the means and effectiveness of instruction, and the cultivation of understanding on the part of the students.

But the teacher is not infallible, nor is the teacher necessarily an authority in any field of knowledge. He or she is (hopefully) simply well-educated in that field, well-trained in teaching methods, and temperamentally well-suited to the role of teacher. But the teacher is also a student, and needs to learn from the teaching experience, to learn as well from the students, and to evolve in his or her teaching role. The most effective teachers tend to be non-prescriptive and non-imposing, creating an effective learning environment, earning the trust and respect of and rapport with his or her students.

In modern society, education and the teacher are generally considered to be important, but the "rewards" and status afforded most teachers is not commensurate with the value professed. In an enlightened society, the best people in each field become the leaders and teachers in that field, without consideration for rewards or status. But in our society, some teachers are both noble-and-well-qualified and others are not.

Most teachers are conditioned by current educational philosophy and psychology, which may or may not be healthy. Though most teachers are properly motivated and care about teaching, care about students, and how effective they are as teachers, some may not be well-qualified as teachers, and many are not well-qualified in the material or fields in which they teach. This is because most school systems are more concerned with superficial indications of teaching ability (e.g., how well the teacher matches the educational philosophy

being embraced by the system) and are less concerned with mastery of the material being taught. In short, many who are well-qualified in the material, and who are also good teachers, are not drawn to teaching because of the biases that exist in the system.

But even where teachers are well-qualified and properly motivated, where they are inherently very effective, they are still subject to the limitations of the student (what the student brings to school) and the limitations or boundary conditions imposed by school administrators. Within these various initial conditions and boundary conditions, the challenges facing the teacher are considerable.

And yet, teachers can make a considerable difference. Teachers are in a position to motivate and challenge their students. Teachers are in a position to be positive, healthy role models. Teachers are in a position to provide needed knowledge and an appropriate context for that knowledge, to the considerable benefit of their students. Students will learn from their teachers, for good or ill, and usually both. So it is very important that teachers be well-qualified both in their field and as teachers, and well-motivated, and properly supported by parents, and properly supported (financially, materially, emotionally, professional, and otherwise) by the school and community itself.

- **The Academic and Administrative Environment**

A fourth factor in education is the academic environment, i.e., whether or not and to what extent the academic environment facilitates learning. And this is generally the result of administrators and educational philosophy. The school system as a whole determines qualifications for teachers and administrative conditions (policies) through which teachers and administrators work, and through which students learn. These are usually a reflection of the values of the community, the qualifications of administrators, and the various abilities and biases of administrators. And the school system and community generally (through consciousness and policy and practice) determine the caliber of teachers attracted to their schools.

But most important in this factor is the basic educational philosophy that is embraced by the school. It seems that today many, if not most, schools have a

rather permissive educational philosophy and lack a healthy environment of discipline, structure, and expectations, to provide a context for learning. The result of this is that disruptive and disrespectful students are tolerated to such an extent that the teaching and learning environment is severely compromised. Of course the better students rise above these factors, but they are still limited to some extent, and do not learn as much or as effectively as they would in a more healthy environment. And the students who are not as well-disposed to learning tend to learn very little. So an environment where students are properly disciplined, where there is sufficient but not too much structure, where the primary focus is upon learning, and enjoying learning, is essential.

It is also important for the school administration (policy) and administrators (practice) to effectively support both the authority and abilities of teachers. In short, teachers need to be qualified, motivated, and empowered, to teach effectively. And what is taught needs to be placed into a meaningful context, so that students can see that context and anticipate the usefulness of what they are learning. To be effective, administrators cannot simply be teachers who are promoted into the administration. They must understand and appreciate being or having been teachers, but they must also be well-qualified as administrators. A poor school administration makes it extremely difficult for teachers to teach and students to learn. A healthy, effectively academic and administrative environment facilitates both effective teaching and effective learning.

Ultimately, all of these factors are important. The student and the nature of the student, his or her abilities, disabilities, attitude, and potential for learning. The home and community environment, parents and peers. Teachers and their abilities, disabilities, attitude, and capacity for teaching. And the academic and administrative environment in which all of these factors are combined.