

A Critical Thinker's Guide to
**EDUCATIONAL
FADS**

For Parents, Educators, and
Concerned Citizens

How to Get Beyond
Educational Glitz and Glitter

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Introduction

The history of education is also the history of educational panaceas, the comings and goings of quick fixes for deep-seated educational problems. This old problem is dramatically on the increase. The result is intensifying fragmentation of energy and effort in the schools, together with a significant waste of time and money. Many teachers become increasingly cynical and jaded.

It is time to recognize that education will never be improved by educational fads, and that the manner in which educational trends are marketed guarantees that they will be transformed into fads. Fads by their nature are fated to self-destruction. Parents, educators, and citizen activists need to understand the problem of educational fads so that they can effectively distinguish substantive efforts at educational reform from superficial ones. Hence the motivation for this guide.

By “fad” we mean an idea that is embraced enthusiastically for a short time. In schooling, this typically means a short-lived emphasis on a seemingly wonderful new idea that will transform teaching and learning without much effort on anyone’s part. Since by definition a fad will quickly come and go, it cannot be expected to improve instruction in any significant way. By “trend” we mean a general tendency or movement in a certain direction. Trends in schooling typically last 7-10 years, but may last longer.

Included in the sidebar on this page is an incomplete list of some of the educational trends or fads on the market today. Each has ideological advocates. Each must be critically assessed for theoretical

Educational Fads

Alignment
 Assessment
 Authentic Pedagogy
 & Assessment
 Block Scheduling
 Bloom’s Taxonomy
 Brain-Based Teaching
 & Learning
 Character Education
 Charter Schools
 Choice (*Vouchers & Privatization*)
 Constructivism
 Cooperative Learning
 Core Knowledge
 Creative Thinking
 Critical Thinking
 Cultural Literacy
 Didactic Teaching
 Emotional Intelligence
 Feminism and Gender Issues
 Gifted Education
 Global Education
 Inquiry-Based Learning
 Integrated Curriculum
 Intelligence
 Learning Styles
 Multiculturalism
 Multiple Intelligences
 No Child Left Behind
 Outcome-Based Education
 Phonics vs. Whole Language
 Portfolio-Based Assessment
 Problem Solving
 “Raise the Standards”
 Movement
 Restructuring Schools
 Movement
 School-Based Management
 School Choice
 School-To-Work Movement
 Self-Esteem Movement
 Socratic Questioning
 Teaching for Understanding
 Thematic Curriculum

underpinnings and proper application. Note: For some of the fads or trends in this guide, we mean “an emphasis on...,” as in “assessment,” “intelligence,” and so forth. This should be clear as you read through the list.

To these may be added a variety of programs focused on drug abuse prevention, child abuse prevention, sex education, extracurricular activities, school improvement, gang control, violence prevention, hunger and malnutrition, mainstreaming, individualized education, special education of differing varieties, dropout prevention and at-risk, and so forth. The list is seemingly endless.

Educational Fads

Most educational trends or fads originate in reasonable ideas. All reasonable ideas about education enhance instruction when integrated into a substantive concept of education. They fail when imposed upon instruction through a non-substantive, fragmented conception of education, which is unfortunately typically the case in schooling today. In this guide, we briefly critique many of the current educational trends and fads.

Our goal is to make the basic idea behind each of these fads intelligible so that its proper use — and likely misuse — can be taken into account. It is our aim to provide the reader with key questions to be raised in discussing these ideas. Each trend or fad is commented upon in three ways:

- the essential idea behind the trend or fad,
- the proper educational use (when integrated into a substantive concept of education), and
- the likely misuse (when the idea is unreasonably applied).

It is not our goal to provide a full and complete explication of any of these. In general, we recommend the Phi Delta Kappan for more detailed articles on virtually all of these trends or fads. This journal is readily available through most public libraries. Our goal is to provide a foundation which can be used to put all educational trends/fads into immediate perspective, making it possible for interested persons to grasp the essential idea and understand the potential use and misuse of that idea. With these understandings one can make sense of discussions of educational reform issues. One can then formulate the relevant and substantial questions and seek the answers one deserves.

We provide the “essential idea” so the reader will understand the basic thinking behind this trend or fad. We provide the “educational use” so the reader will understand how the idea may legitimately be used or taken into account in instruction. We provide the “misuse” so the reader may be on the lookout for its inappropriate (and often most likely) use.

Questions You Should Ask of Every Reform Enthusiast

- What is your concept of education?
- What is your concept of an educated person?
- What abilities must persons develop (to be considered educated)?
- What intellectual standards must they acquire?
- What intellectual traits?
- What is your concept of the educational process? (How does one go about educating a person?)
- What intellectual structures are present in all content (that enable students to relate or contrast what they are learning in one subject with what they are learning in other subjects)?
- How should content be presented in the teaching process? (How should history be presented? Science? Math? Literature?)
- How should students learn content? (How should they learn history? Science? Math? Literature?)
- How should we understand the fundamental goal in teaching any given subject?
- When we assess students during the learning process, what should we focus our assessment on?
- How does _____ (insert name of trend or fad) serve a substantive concept of education? Use this question as a lead into questions that probe the relationship of the trend or fad to essential abilities, standards, and traits. Then lead into questions that probe the relationship of the trend or fad to the essential ingredients in the educational process.
- How will it help students analyze and evaluate their own thinking and the thinking of others more effectively?
- How will it help them act reasonably and effectively in their lives?
- How will it help them make self-assessment an integral part of their lives?
- How will it help them master content in diverse disciplines?
- How will it help them become proficient readers, writers, speakers, and listeners?
- How will it help them improve the quality of their lives and the lives of others?
- How will it help them become reasonable and fair-minded persons?
- How will it help them use their reasoning skills to contribute to their own emotional life and that of others?
- How will it help them think, feel, and act effectively and with integrity?

They will not have been taught how to assess thinking for clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logicalness and significance — and hence they will not do so. Students will fall back on their habits of preparing for tests by memorizing bits and pieces from textbooks or class lectures. The teachers will not know how to teach for such crucial traits as intellectual perseverance or intellectual humility. Without intellectual perseverance students give up as soon as work becomes difficult or challenging. Without intellectual humility students lack an awareness of the extent of their ignorance (and hence are unmotivated to learn).

In short, though alignment is essential to the educational process, what is more important is *what* we are aligning and *how* we are aligning it.

Assessment

Essential Idea: Teaching cannot be effectively designed unless it includes a sound conception of how to assess the nature and quality of student learning. One cannot make adjustments in teaching if one does not know to what extent students are learning what we are intending them to learn. For many years much schooling has been based on false assumptions about student learning. Often we have assumed, for example, that because students had successfully memorized content for a test they actually understood it or could use it effectively when its application to the real world became imperative.

In many ways, the quality of schooling reflects the quality of assessment being used in schooling. For example, if we assess recall and memorization as a major point of emphasis, then we generate masses of citizens skilled only at tasks that require memorization and recall. Or again, if we focus assessment on superficial information that is learned in a fragmented way, we are cultivating minds that are superficial and fragmented.

We must design assessment in light of the primary goals of schooling. This presupposes that we think through these goals and not simply develop goals that are vague, high-sounding, but largely empty of meaning.

It follows that if one of our primary goals is that students become lifelong learners and critical thinkers, then a primary goal in assessment is to determine the extent to which students are learning how to assess and improve their own thinking and learning.

Proper Educational Use: Both educators and students need to learn the fundamental logic of assessment: its contrast with subjective preference, how to set assessment goals, how to ask evaluative questions, how to gather facts relevant to the questions asked, how to set up evaluative criteria, how to fairly apply evaluative criteria to the facts we have gathered. Virtually all human thought and action is permeated with value judgments that require

evaluative thought. We must evaluate persons, books, foods, cars, homes, relationships, jobs, schools — everything that can have merit or worth, can help us or harm us.

Therefore, we must include in our design of education a sound conception of how student learning is going to be assessed. We must ensure that there is integration and convergence across the following parameters: the mission statement, the curriculum, the use of textbooks, the design of instruction, and the design of assessment. We must begin with an assessment of that alignment. We must make sure that assessment is focused on a substantive conception of education. The total design of teaching and learning must be so focused.

This means we must assess whether teachers are teaching and students learning the essential abilities, essential standards, and essential traits. We must also assess such matters as how teachers are hired, evaluated, and given professional development training; how administrative policies and practices impact student learning; how student attitudes and work habits impact student learning; how parental support, or lack thereof, impacts student learning. The total system at work must be evaluated from the perspective of our responsibility to provide all students with a substantive education.

Likely Misuse: It is easy to misunderstand assessment. Assessment should not be seen as good in and of itself. Teachers, students, indeed all of us, continually assess situations, people, experiences. And, unfortunately, we often use inappropriate standards in assessing whatever we are assessing. So there is nothing magic in the *idea* of assessment. What we want to do is to assess *well, reasonably, logically, accurately.*

In the classroom, it is easy to assume that we are effectively monitoring student learning when we are not (again, merely because we are “assessing” it). Typically we miss the most obvious forms of instructional failure. For example, many students are learning to hate math (as a result of math instruction). Many students are learning to dislike school (as a result of instruction in general). Many students are learning that school is a place that does not deal with questions or issues of importance to their world. Many students are learning that when one is learning one should be passive, quiet, take notes, and memorize (when a test is drawing near). None of these “learnings” are intended. And for years we hardly noticed them. Even now we almost never assess the extent to which our instruction is failing in significant ways.

Typically, students are “learning” that knowledge is determined by the teacher. This is connected with the fact that students often get good grades merely by telling teachers what they want to hear—even when students don’t understand the meaning of what they are saying. Hence, though many students could define democracy as a government of the people, by the