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# A Subtractive Education

The goal of today's schools seems to be to outfit children in the educational armor that will enable them to soldier on to their appropriate places in the white-collar hierarchy. Mr. Childress wants schools instead to chip away at that armor, to discover the true core of each student.

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## By Herb Childress

**I** AM A meandering kind of thinker. Something comes up for me, and that reminds me of something else, and then I remember a third thing, and pretty soon I'm talking about something brand new. Let me take you on a little tour of how that works for me.

I'm walking to Albertson's because Ben & Jerry's Frozen Yogurt is on sale — two pints for five dollars. I get to the store, it's about seven o'clock at night, and the parking lot is jammed; people are weaving around with their shopping carts through the stream of incoming cars trying to get their groceries to their own cars and go home.

And I'm looking at all of these hundreds of people and all of these cars, and I suddenly think, "I wonder how many of these people could resolve a trigonometric identity." Honest to God, that's what came into my head. Well, from there, this meandering thinker was off to the races. "I wonder how many of these people could tell you about the origins of the French Revolution. I wonder how many can still diagram a sentence."

And then I thought, "Well, why would I care if they could or not? They all have enough money to afford their cars and their groceries; they're getting by. Would they get by any better if they remembered how to construct the perpendicular bisector of a line segment using only a straightedge and a compass?"

Well, that of course took me right back to the high school that I wrote my book about and to all the kids who ever asked why they should bother learning something. "Why are we doing this?" That was the plaintive cry from the back corners of the room. "Why are we doing this?" It never came from the front: up front were the kids to whom it never occurred to ask that question or who had given up asking it. And the arguments that came back from the teachers were never very compelling to me. They said things like, "There's *lots* of careers that use algebra," though they never offered a specific example. Or, when the question came up with regard to conjugating French verbs, it would be met with, "Well, you might travel to France someday." For these kids from rural Northern California, even

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**Here I am in the Albertson's parking lot, willing to bet my Ben & Jerry's and most of my paycheck that not one of the next three people I see could name the first European to sail around the Cape of Good Hope.**

What would a  
subtractive  
education  
look like?



the City of Lights was neither a likely nor an especially desirable destination. Their picture of France amounted to the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, and a language that made them say things like, "Hello, I name myself Stacy. How do you name yourself?"

"Why are we doing this?" the kids ask. So let's ask ourselves why we have them doing all of these crazy things. When I think about what high school is for, I remember that John Ogbu, the educational anthropologist, wrote that, "whatever else educa-

tion may be, from the standpoint of society it is a preparation of children for adult life as adults in their society conceive it."

Well, I don't know, John. Here I am in the Albertson's parking lot, willing to bet my Ben & Jerry's and most of my paycheck that not one of the next three people I see could name the first European to sail around the Cape of Good Hope. "Adult life as adults in our society conceive it" doesn't typically include answering trivia questions like that, unless we're standing on a stage across from Alex Trebek. (By the way, it was Vasco da Gama in 1497, and yes, I had to look it up.)

But let's give John Ogbu another reading and another chance: "Whatever else education may be, from the standpoint of society it is a preparation of children for adult life as adults in their society conceive it." I think that's true, but the problem we have, in our very diverse society, is that Ogbu's phrase "preparation for adulthood" has many different meanings, based on a lot of potential adulthoods. I think we need to make those adulthoods explicit so that we're not working at cross-purposes. So I'm going to do two things here. I'm going to start out by telling you what I think a successful adulthood is, and then I'm going to tell you — based on the evidence of my own and other people's research — what our education system says that a successful adulthood is:

Here's a definition I hold of strong adulthood. I've cast it in the form of a list of my ideal outcome measures for a high school, the characteristics I hope that graduates have as they prepare to move toward adulthood.

• **Graduates of my ideal high school should love to read.** This is not at all the same as saying that they *can* read. There's an enormous middle ground between illiterate and literate, which has sometimes been called aliterate — a term

for people who can read but choose not to, who see little value or reward in it. People who *love* to read are people who are open to new ideas, who are engaged in constant reinvention.

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• **Graduates of my ideal high school should enjoy numbers.** I'm no mathematician, but I can do arithmetic in my head very well. It's a skill I developed before I was 8 by playing cribbage and rummy and pinochle and by keeping score at bowling. It's a skill that has served me well all the way through calculus and physics, it's a skill that helps me navigate the everyday world of taxes and budgeting, of saving and knowing when I can indulge in an extravagance, and it's a skill that helps me evaluate the accuracy and pertinence of information that's offered to me.

• **Graduates of my ideal high school should enjoy physical exertion and activity.** And that activity should take several forms, from team sports to hiking across town to playing hacky sack. Anything that gets you sweaty is a damn sight better than television, and we should encourage young people to regard physical activity as a lifelong pursuit, rather than as something to look back on fondly once high school football has ended.

• **Graduates of my ideal high school should have some well-developed outlet for their creative desires.** This will also take all kinds of forms, from writing to visual arts to music to physics, but the quest for putting ideas together in a unique way is part of what makes us really human.

• **Graduates of my ideal high school should know how to work in groups, and they should know how to teach a skill to someone else.** Kids are going to be working with groups for the rest of their lives, from work to marriage and parenthood to community service. We are social animals, and we need to quit pretending that individual performance is the only thing that really matters.

• **Graduates of my ideal high school should be brave and take risks.** This means that they must be exposed to failure and supported through the other side. They need to know that it's possible to fall down and still get up again.