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Gardner, Howard. (2006). *Five Minds for the Future*. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press.

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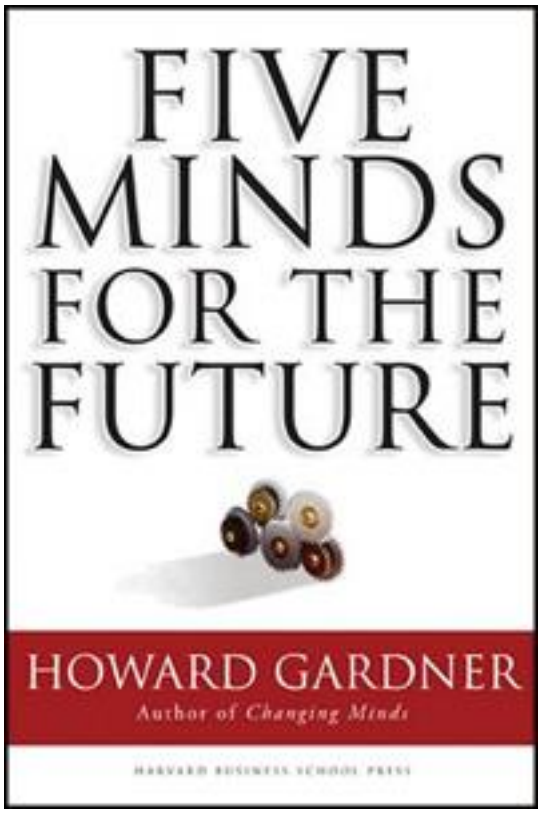
This review expresses philosophical opposition to the ideas presented in Howard Gardner's book, *Find Minds for the Future*. My efforts here are two-fold: one, I attempt to show that Gardner is lacking a sound philosophical foundation for the argument that schools should be responsible for developing "respectful minds" in students; two, I criticize current attempts at educational reform in general, making the argument that most lack a sound philosophical foundation and, consequently, are reactionary and short-sighted.

In *Five Minds for the Future*, Howard Gardner proposes five "minds that people will need if they…are to thrive in the world during the eras to come" (p. 1). The main characteristic of the "eras" to which Gardner refers is increasing globalization. To best survive and thrive in these eras, schools (and businesses, though they are not my focus here) must, according to the author, facilitate—in their students and employees, respectively—the development of these five minds: 1. the disciplined mind, 2. the synthesizing mind, 3. the creating mind, 4. the respectful mind, and 5. the ethical mind.



I feel little need to spend time with the first three "minds." Anyone connected to education should easily recognize the need for (and, likely, the current efforts to develop) students who are 1) beginning to master disciplines (rather than just accumulating subject matter—Gardner draws an interesting and important distinction in Chapter 2), 2) attempting to synthesize the meaningful natures of those disciplines, and 3) creating new knowledge and possibilities beyond those disciplines. The argument Gardner proposes for the development of those three minds is logical—if not common sense. It is his proposal of the fourth mind—the respectful mind—with which I wish to take issue. (I find the fifth and final mind—the ethical mind—equally objectionable for many of the same reasons I object to the respectful mind, but my focus here will be on the respectful mind only.)

In his explanation of the "respectful mind"—found mostly in chapter five—Gardner offers this definition: "*the respectful mind* notes and welcomes differences between human individuals and between human groups, tries to understand 'others,' and seeks to work effectively with them" (p. 3). I could not agree more with Gardner's insistence that young people in our world develop this type of mind. Where I disagree with Gardner, though, is in his conclusion that the development of this respectful mind be left to schools, especially after he admits that the responsibility of its development "should be distributed across the society" (p. 109). Those are Gardner's words; his ideal in this case is for the responsibility of developing respectful minds to be, as he says, "distributed across society"—to be shared, to not be the burden of schools alone. Unfortunately, he quickly scraps this idea, noting the failure of "parents, neighbors, political leaders, religious leaders, the popular media, and the range of community organizations" to handle their respective involvement in this responsibility. In light of the failings of these institutions, he proposes instead that, "If one wishes to raise individuals who are respectful of differences across groups, a special burden is accordingly placed on *education*…" (p. 114, italics added). And so, that quickly, Gardner does the only logical thing: he straps to schools (and schools alone) the task of developing respectful minds in our youth—a task that should be the responsibility of many individuals and institutions working together.

To be more specific, Gardner adds to the tasks of the educator this duty: "fashion persons who respect differences" by "[providing] models and [offering] lessons that encourage…a sympathetic stance" towards differences (p. 110). He goes even further by saying that teachers as models are a "crucial starting point" towards the development of respectful minds (p. 110). Now, does the responsibility of developing students with respectful minds (and, essentially, all forms of "character education") *im*plicitly fall within the realm of good education and teaching? Of course. The idea of "teachers as role models" is as important in our current society as ever before. That role shouldn't change, nor can it given the nature of the profession and the relationship between teacher and student.

But, in assigning to schools the task of cultivating respectful minds, Gardner is not just asking them to overcome other institutions' failure to do their part towards this end; he is also asking schools to combat *dis*respectful minds at work in these same domestic, political and religious institutions. Consider the child who lives in a home where family members routinely demean races, religions, genders, and sexual orientations different from their own. Consider the child who

listens to politicians discuss “illegal aliens” or “Islamic fundamentalists” in a way that at once dehumanizes and degrades (and disrespects). Consider the church-going child who sees on the news his religious leaders denouncing homosexuals and homosexuality or some other group that does not fit their ideal image of “holiness.”

Is it really fair to expect that schools alone can solve such issues of deeply-rooted, institutionalized disrespect of this magnitude? Absolutely not. And while the presence of this disrespect among these powerful institutions lends credence to the *need* for the development of respectful minds, it also lends further evidence to the idea that this is not an objective that schools alone can possibly accomplish or should even be asked to attempt—in their current form or any other form. Schools cannot and should not be expected to solve large-scale societal ills like disrespect. Things that fall under the category of “character education”—things that have previously and historically been the responsibility of domestic, religious, political, and communal institutions—should not be dumped on schools. When they are, we should not expect schools to meet these tasks with any level of success or effectiveness.

Is there any doubting the power that family, government and religion have over education? And when we do ask schools to take on these institutions and the disrespect they perpetuate, to not just go about this business without their support, but to necessarily oppose and overcome them in the quest to develop students with “respectful minds,” we are doing nothing but setting schools up for failure.

In fact, I would argue that the primary reasons public schools fail is because we expect the wrong things from them in general—things that, 1) should not *ex*plicitly fall within the realm of formal education, and 2) things that children are not getting elsewhere in their development. We too often expect public schools to do too many things they *should not* be asked to do, for one, to take on the deliberate task of creating respectful minds. Schools do not exist to raise children in this regard. They exist to supplement—they cannot *replace*, only *supplement*—with good teachers, formal education, and intellectual instruction the child-raising efforts of parents, society, and communities.

Educational reform too often fails to take into consideration the aims and goals of education in a philosophical sense. Why? Because we, as a nation, seem to lack a clear definition, a clear focus of what education should be and do for our children. Is it simply a means to an end—a way into college and then a professional career? Is it an end in itself—meant only to develop intelligent and life-long learners? Is it a means of perfecting and perpetuating democracy? Is it a socialization process? Is it a replacement for deteriorating family and societal values? Until these questions—these and other potential aims of education—are fleshed out more thoroughly and philosophically, reform attempts like Gardner’s are rudderless and futile because they are created with undefined or flawed aims of education in mind. The result of such misguided reform is a host of reactionary and short-sighted practices within our education system.

About the Reviewer

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