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Goals and Objectives: Pathways to Educational Myopia?



by John Van Dyk

One important task continually confronting Christian schools is to reflect on their purposes. What should Christian schools accomplish? What goals should they pursue? How do they prioritize their goals? On the basis of what criteria do they select their goals? Do principals, teachers, and the supporting community really take ownership of the selected goals and unitedly seek to meet them? When Christian schools neglect to pose these sorts of questions, they soon end up in the quagmire of pragmatism, running their programs according to the whims of changing circumstances, current fads, and pressing state requirements.

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It is no secret that teacher education programs stress goals and objectives. In their required methods courses, teacher education students spend much time learning how to write goals and objectives for their unit and lesson plans. Experienced teachers may smile at this practice: their instructional decisions are commonly formed by available resources and interesting learning activities, rather than by carefully formulated goals.¹ I personally believe that concern about goals and objectives is legitimate and important. Nevertheless, we need to be careful to ask the right questions about goals and objectives, lest we fall victim to what we may call "educational myopia."

Educational Myopia

What is educational myopia? Myopia means, of course, shortsightedness. Many of us suffer from the defect of myopia. It causes our vision to be limited to what is immediately ahead of us. Myopia prevents us from seeing the big picture within which we place our immediate concerns. Myopia, in other words, seriously impairs our vision.

Educational myopia is no exception. It, too, is a malady that limits our vision. It restricts our perspective to the immediacies at hand. School boards and constituencies, for example, are frequently overwhelmed by financial concerns that easily cause them to lose sense of what Christian education is all about. School principals, too, are victims of educational myopia. Because of the demands of daily affairs they can easily lose sight of the larger purposes of the institution they serve. Teachers get caught up in the busyness of lesson

plans, grading, classroom management, and a host of bureaucratic activities that seriously restrict their time for reflection and renewing their vision.

Educational myopia can be a deceptive force. Some Christian schools, for example, reflect little on purposes and goals, and seldom ask whether or not they are meeting their goals. Yet, from the outside, they appear to be very successful. Such schools often have good enrollments, bright students, outstanding sports teams, and in general appear to be doing fine. Why should such ostensibly successful schools complicate matters by asking questions about the purpose of education? Why not let well enough alone?

The reality, however, is this: even outwardly successful schools can be seriously myopic. And just as we are headed for trouble when myopic people drive their cars without corrected vision, so these schools are in danger of straying far away from the path on which they started, ending up in places where they should not be.

Educational myopia needs to be recognized for what it is: a silent enemy that creeps into our schools and sooner or later derails them. Such myopia needs to be identified and combatted on several levels. We may refer to such levels as a macro-level and a micro-level.

On the macro-level we are dealing with the school community as a whole and these questions: What is the school as an institution trying to accomplish? What is its main purpose? Questions like these quickly lead to others: Does the school have available for its staff and constituency a clearly articulated mission? I am not talking about a paragraph or two of vague platitudes. I refer to a mission statement which spells out the institutional goals in sufficient detail for parents to know what their children will experience and for teachers to know how and what to teach and for what purpose. Without such a clear mission statement, myopia easily invades the school system.

In this article, however, I wish to explore myopia at the micro-level, that is, at the classroom teaching level. There is, of course, a clear connection between the macro and micro-level. At least, there ought to be. As they plan their lessons and learning activities for their classrooms, teachers must be conscious of what the larger school community is trying to do. The teachers' goals must help implement the institutional goals.

In actuality, teachers often need not worry about institutional goals except perhaps in the broadest sense. In Christian schools, for example, some teachers give lip service to the goal of "training for Kingdom service"; however, since this is a vague and general goal, it need not function in the specifics of the teacher's lesson plans. Often the school's mission statement is so brief and so vague that for all practical purposes the teacher can safely ignore it. In fact, the teacher's classroom practice may well contradict the institutional mission statement, without ever becoming a problem either for the institution or for the teacher.

Goals and Objectives

During the past half century or so educators have thought much about goals and objectives,² particularly the objectives of specific lessons. The standard lesson plan today is still very much in line with what Ralph Tyler proposed nearly 50 years ago: first state what you wish to achieve in the classroom, then plan how to reach your goals, and finally evaluate the extent to which you have succeeded in meeting your goals.³ In other words use a tripartite lesson plan: 1) state goals and objectives, 2) plan teaching strategies/learning activities, and 3) evaluate.

But how are teachers to determine their goals and objectives? Tyler himself suggests a number of criteria. We should take into account, he says, the general social milieu in which we find ourselves.⁴ Today, for example, technologically skilled people are needed, so teachers should include technological goals in their lesson plans. Again, we need to take the developmental levels of our students into account. After all, understanding square roots as a goal would be quite inappropriate in a lesson plan for a second-grade class. And, of course, there are the institutional goals already referred to. Surely they must play an important role in the teachers' specific lesson and unit plans.

The behaviorism that governed schooling in the 50's and 60's produced educational myopia by reducing learning to merely "changes in behavior." Behaviorism reduced educational goals to "behavioral objectives" or "performance objectives" to be prescribed in detail and rigorously

tested. For example, a science teacher might write the following performance objective: "Given a list of 35 chemical elements, the student will be able to recall and write the valences of at least 30." Objectives like this surely have their place. However, a dependency on these kinds of objectives will hinder rather than help the task of schooling. As Harro Van Brummelen affirms, "such objectives often reflect a mechanistic, reductionistic view of learning and, ultimately, a deterministic view of the person."⁵ In short, they lead to educational myopia.

Elliot Eisner has shown the inadequacies of the behavioral, performance-objectives approach, arguing that behavioral objectives confine education to predictable outcomes, when in fact much of learning is unpredictable and open-ended. Excessive use of performance objectives leads to a stifling conformity--all the students doing exactly the same thing, regardless of diversity of ability and learning styles. In addition, such objectives are inapplicable to much of the curriculum. Eisner asks: What kind of behavioral objectives could we write for art, music appreciation, and literature? Eisner proposes that we need to spend more time with "expressive objectives," objectives which invite students to learn and to explore but do not prescribe predetermined outcomes. For example, expressive objectives aimed at learning to write poetry or interpret literature or appreciate music can hardly capture specific, predetermined behaviors.⁶

Goal Taxonomies

Benjamin Bloom has contributed significantly to the discussion about educational goals and objectives. He designed what has come to be known as "Bloom's taxonomy," a classification of educational goals into three broad areas: the cognitive, the affective, and the psychomotor domains.⁷ According to Bloom, teachers should write goals and objectives aimed at what the students should know (the cognitive), what they should believe and feel (affective), and what they should be able to perform (psychomotor). Bloom himself further elaborated the cognitive domain, while leaving the specifications of the affective and the psychomotor to others.⁸

It is worth our while to consider Bloom's elaboration of the cognitive domain. This domain,

Bloom proposed, consists of a series of progressively complex levels. The basic level is simply the ability to memorize and recall factual information. Next is the level of comprehension. Students must not only be able to recall, they must also be able to demonstrate ability to comprehend by, for example, explaining or paraphrasing a point. The higher levels in the cognitive domain describe ability to apply, analyze, synthesize, and, finally, evaluate.

Bloom's taxonomy quickly became a handy reference. Especially those stressing the need to develop critical thinking skills eagerly adopted

Concern about the goals and objectives of Christian education is legitimate and important.

Bloom's proposals. Teachers were urged to make sure that their teaching strategies take the students through all six levels. They should ask of their students "higher-level" questions, not merely questions about facts. And indeed, all of us teachers would do well to review our own teaching, classroom questioning, and testing practices. Studies show that most teachers are already satisfied with teaching and learning at the first two basic levels of Bloom's taxonomy.⁹

The Christian Response

Faced with Bloom's taxonomy, Christian schools considered what sorts of goals their teachers should write in their lesson plans. The schools recognized that Bloom's taxonomy can easily lead to educational myopia. After all, Bloom relegated and confined religious issues, beliefs and commitments, and the call to be Christian in all areas of life to a nebulous area called the "affective." Clearly such a reduction of one's faith is unacceptable to the Reformed, Christian educator.

Henry Beversluis, working on behalf of Christian Schools International, helped develop another, more Reformed taxonomy of educational goals. Like Bloom, he proposed a three-category classification: the intellectual, decisional, and creative.¹⁰ Beversluis's "intellectual" closely resembles the

“cognitive” of Bloom’s taxonomy. The decisional domain suggests that students must be confronted by choices: they need to be taught to make the right decisions, an important goal indeed. But what exactly Beversluis meant by the third domain, the creative, has been somewhat of a puzzle. It looks as if the intent was to provide educational opportunities that help students reach their full potential. But how such potential is to be distinguished from the intellectual and decisional domains is not very clear. More recently, CSI has added a fourth category, namely, the emotional, to make sure that factors such as self-esteem and self-confidence are not neglected.

Donald Oppewal, long-time education professor at Calvin College, provides us with an interesting translation of the CSI taxonomy. He proposes a three-phased “three C’s taxonomy”: curriculum and instruction should lead students 1) to consider, 2) to choose, and 3) to commit. Oppewal explains: “The first phase, the consider phase, lends itself best to the intellectual dimension, the choose phase lends itself to the decisional dimension, while the culmination in the commit phase lends itself to the creative dimension of learning goals.”¹¹

Professor Nicholas Wolterstorff suggests still another Christian goal taxonomy. Schools, he said, should aim at three types of learning: knowledge, competencies, and tendencies.¹² Our graduates, he argued, should be familiar with a wide range of content (knowledge), equipped with a wide array of skills (competencies), and firmly set on the road toward discipleship (tendencies). Curriculum writing in some CSI districts follows Wolterstorff’s taxonomy.

Harro Van Brummelen expresses appreciation for the attempts to spell out specific goals for Christian schools. Nevertheless, he remains fundamentally critical of the proposals just described. Two of his concerns are especially important. First, the Bloom and CSI taxonomies introduce too sharp a distinction between the intellectual domain and the other domains. Such a distinction makes it look as if knowledge is a separate, objective category, unrelated to the affective or tendency or decisional dimension. Van Brummelen believes that the proposed taxonomies “are still rooted in a dualistic view of life that assumes a neutral body of knowledge exists to which we can add a moral or affective or decisional dimension.”¹³

A second critique is that the various proposed domains are not clearly distinguishable. For example, our knowledge is intertwined with the “affective.” Our knowledge of content is inseparably connected to how we feel, what we believe, and the attitudes we take. Objective, factual knowledge, detached from values and feelings, simply does not exist, as those of us in the Kuyperian and Dooyeweerdian tradition have stoutly maintained and as postmodernism has more recently confirmed.

Harro Van Brummelen goes on to suggest a more holistic, integral taxonomy. Rather than work with three distinct categories, he designed a hierarchical taxonomy. The ultimate goal of Christian education, he says, is responsible discipleship. But such discipleship cannot come about without the right disposition (the tendencies of Wolterstorff) leading to commitment. These dispositions, in turn, must flow from the more basic curricular and instructional goals. Van Brummelen suggests at least three types of goals at this basic level: knowledge-that (content), knowledge-how (skills), and creative, problem-solving activities.¹⁴

Van Brummelen’s model is a step in the right direction, it seems to me. Responsible discipleship clearly must be the overarching, ultimate goal of our Christian educational efforts. If we train only for marketable skills, academic excellence, and good moral behavior but neglect the higher purpose of knowledgeable and competent Christian discipleship, we miss the mark and fall victim to myopia. Many public schools and secular universities, too, teach marketable skills and academic expertise, and encourage good moral behavior. Christian schools must take a broader perspective. They must correct a myopic vision. They aim for Kingdom citizenship.

Still Another Way:

Two Tiers of Goals

Is it absolutely necessary to design intricate taxonomies of educational goals in order to escape educational myopia? Perhaps not. We can stay attuned to the larger vision of Christian education if in our unit and lesson planning we make sure to take into account two tiers of goals: 1) the overarching goal, and 2) a number of overlapping “goal areas.” By overarching goal I mean the responsible, knowledgeable, and competent disciple-

ship I referred to above. This goal should be the central, controlling goal for the entire institution. To be reminded of this goal, teachers do well to place a paraphrase of Ephesians 4:11-12 on their desks: "We are called to be teachers in order to equip God's people for works of service." Whenever teachers set this overarching goal aside, educational myopia sets in, no matter how well they may have formulated their specific objectives and planned their lessons.

Serving the overarching goal is a second tier of some six "goal areas." Taken together, these six areas nudge our teaching efforts in the right direction and help us meet the overarching goal. Let us briefly survey these "goal areas."

The first of them comprises what we traditionally call "content" and "skills." Obviously this area takes up a very large part of our goal statements. Our students must master many skills—including the so-called "basics"—and develop insight into an ever-expanding range of subject matter. They must be able to understand, recall, define, describe, and explain all sorts of important matters. This goal area, then, refers largely to academics.

A second goal area is closely related, since it focuses on one of the important skills all students must learn, namely, the skill of critical thinking. As Christians living in a confused world, we must be able to reason correctly, distinguish sharply, and judge rightly. Now, we could easily subsume this area under the previous one, especially if we are willing to include critical thinking among the "basics." We do not go wrong, however, to single out this goal area and give it special emphasis. We must make sure that our schools do not get bogged down in a myopic reduction of education to merely the transmission of content. Teachers must be encouraged to place the goal of critical thinking high on their agenda of objectives to be achieved. Bloom's cognitive domain can help teachers meet this goal.

A third goal area reflects Bloom's "psychomotor domain." Again I single out this category because of our tendency to limit our teaching to cerebral and intellectual issues, thereby neglecting the need for students to be involved in hands-on learning. They need opportunities to build and construct and to be physically active, especially in classes where there is heavy emphasis on "seatwork."

Our fourth goal area focuses on creative abilities. All of our students have creative gifts. Too often these come to expression only in art and music classes. All teachers need to include in their unit plans goals and objectives that aim at the development of children's imagination and their artistic and dramatic powers.

The fifth goal area addresses student feelings and emotions. How students feel has everything to do with how they learn. After all, we confess a holistic anthropology: our children are integral, unified beings. If we aim, for example, to make our lessons enjoyable, our students will do better.

*. . . to equip our
students to exhibit
the fruit of the Spirit.*

Teachers do well to include in their lesson plans a goal such as this one: the students will enjoy this lesson. Once we accept enjoyment in learning as a legitimate goal, we set the stage for more creative and effective teaching. Other objectives in this goal area might relate to emotions such as righteous anger and joyful celebration. In teaching a unit about rain forests, for example, one goal should be to awaken in the students a holy anger. They should be upset when they encounter the greed, exploitation, and injustice callous people display in the wanton destruction of God's good creation. Such righteous anger should lead to a resolve to do something about it.

Finally, we consider a special goal area designed to promote the skills required to meet the overarching goal of responsible discipleship. Our unit and lesson plans should include objectives aimed at developing patience, willingness to listen to and respect one another, and an eagerness to encourage and to assist. In short, our planning should seek to equip our students to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit. As Christian teachers we do want our children to learn these skills, of course. Yet we seldom explicitly state them as specific goals.

Not all of these goal areas can be specifically pursued in every lesson, of course. But over the course of an entire unit, and certainly through a semester of teaching, all six goal areas should be

addressed. Whenever we neglect any one of them, educational myopia sets in.

Some teachers will object to including all of these goal areas in their unit planning, on the ground that we cannot always assess whether or not students have reached such goals. How can we assess whether or not students actually enjoy our lessons? How do we know whether a sense of righteous anger has really been achieved? But such an objection in itself reflects educational myopia. It assumes that we aim to teach only what we can assess. Behaviorists, of course, are happy with such an assumption. Christian teachers should reject such behaviorism. And in fact they do. Christian teachers know that, for example, modeling a Christian lifestyle is important, because students learn from such modeling. Teachers can easily distinguish between students who pick up on such modeling and those who don't. No formal assessment procedures are necessary here. And so it is with much of our teaching, as Eisner has reminded us.

I suggest that classroom teachers look again at their current unit plans, and ask whether objectives belonging to each of the six goal areas are indeed addressed somewhere along the line. They should ask: Besides planning to teach facts and develop skills, am I teaching my students to analyze, to evaluate, and to explore the connections of one day's learning to the next? Do I provide opportunities for hands-on learning and physical activity in my classes, even when at first these may seem inappropriate? Do I encourage creativity in my classroom? Do I promote self-confidence, good feelings, an absence of fear, and both appropriate laughter and appropriate indignation? Am I busy teaching my students the servanthood skills needed to function as knowledgeable and competent disciples of the Lord?

The fluidity of these goal areas should also be readily apparent. They do not represent distinct, separate domains. Rather, they represent facets of our teaching task. Nor are they cast in stone. In fact, they can easily be reconfigured in accordance with institutional priorities and local needs. No doubt there are additional goal areas as well. And each goal area itself can be further expanded into a number of more specific objectives.

The suggested goal areas provide us with a checklist. They help us identify what we are stressing and what we are neglecting. They provide a

corrective of our vision, especially when they reveal that our teaching is heavily skewed towards only one or two of these goal areas. In short, they will help prevent myopia. And wherever educational myopia is recognized and corrected, there our Christian schools and our students will be served well.

NOTES

- 1 This phenomenon points to the difference between a logical and psychological approach to lesson planning. From a logical point of view, teachers ought to begin their planning by asking about goals and objectives. However, psychological factors—such as teachers' interests, comfort zones, and styles—often overrule logic.
- 2 The difference between goals and objectives is never very clear. I point to two ways in which the difference can be somewhat approximated: (a) goals are broad and general, objectives are specific and focused; (b) goals refer to the final, ultimate purpose, while objectives represent means or steps towards the ultimate purpose. The terms are correlative: they are defined in terms of each other.
- 3 Ralph W. Tyler, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).
- 4 Tyler, 5-33.
- 5 Harro Van Brummelen, *Walking With God in the Classroom* (Seattle: Alta Vista, 1992 [1988]) 122. See also Van Brummelen's critique of performance objectives in his recent book *Steppingstones to Curriculum: A Biblical Path* (Seattle: Alta Vista, 1994) 215.
- 6 Elliot W. Eisner, "Instructional and Expressive Objectives: Their Formulation and Use in Curriculum" in *Instructional Objectives: An Analysis of Emerging Issues*, James Popham, ed. (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1969) 13-18.
- 7 Benjamin S. Bloom, ed., *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: Cognitive Domain* (New York: McKay, 1956).
- 8 David R. Kratochwill, et al., *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook II: Affective Domain* (New York: Longman, 1964); and Anita J. Harrow, *Taxonomy of the Psychomotor Domain: A Guide for Developing Behavior Objectives* (New York: McKay, 1972).
- 9 Meredith Gall, "Synthesis of Research on Teachers' Questioning," *Educational Leadership* 42 (November 1984) 42.
- 10 Nicholas Henry Beversluis, *Christian Philosophy of Education* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: National Union of Christian Schools, 1971). See especially chapters 3 and 4. In this book Beversluis spoke of "moral growth" rather than specifically a "decisional domain."
- 11 Donald Oppewal, *Biblical Knowing and Teaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin College Monographs, 1985) 18.
- 12 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Educating for Responsible Action* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980) 14-15. Of special interest is the appendix "Reflections on Taxonomy."
- 13 Van Brummelen, *Walking With God*, 118.
- 14 Van Brummelen, *Walking With God*, 119.