

**National Agenda: Ten Suggestions to Incorporate the
Realms of Meaning as a Decision Making Process to
Improve Student Achievement in the United States**

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ABSTRACT

The Realms of Meaning by Philip H. Phenix emphasizes several key ideas that schools should address in their curriculum planning and implementation. Ethical educators would benefit from this text because it is a timeless work of art that speaks to past and current educational issues. With the federal 2001 No Child Left Behind mandate to schools across the nation, educators need to be particularly aware of how they plan educate all children under the auspices of the current law. If used as a decision making tool to improve student achievement, the ideas represented in the Realms of Meaning could change the future course of education. Philip Phenix writes, “because people differ, no one curriculum suffices for everybody.” (pg. 275) This statement especially speaks to those educators who are involved in curriculum planning and implementation process to find alternative approaches to differentiate special components of the curriculum to increase student achievement in a profound way.

The purpose of this essay is to discuss recommendations that ethical educators should consider when deciding on how to improve student achievement. Ten suggestions will be made that will help improve the quality of education taught in the American educational system. These suggestions are vital to the success of all students and should be made available to educators everywhere. The Realms of Meaning provides a wealth of ideas and practical advice that could be easily imbedded within the curriculum. These ten suggestions, if incorporated properly, will give educators the opportunity to develop professionally, assist students in achieving educational goals and objectives, and help create an enduring connection with learning by establishing true meaning within the curriculum.

1. The curriculum must have a scope with a narrow focus.

When planning the curriculum, educators need to take into consideration streamlining the vast amount of information provided in each subject. According to Phenix, “the scope of the curriculum for any given person should be narrow rather than broad.” (pg. 268) So, educators must find a way to shorten the large amount of information in each discipline. The intended program needs to be well- balanced. The disciplines should be further subdivided equally among all of the six realms of meaning. This would give students a chance to experience a rich curriculum. It will allow students the chance to become more focused upon each realm and the ideas they represent. By doing this, students are able to apply their own meanings and experiences to each diverse discipline. This will enable students gain some specialty knowledge, balance, and expertise in each of the six realms of meaning: symbolics, empirics, esthetics, synnoetics, ethics, and synoptics.

2. The curriculum must have a logical sequence.

Educators should know that logic in ordering the curriculum requires that a certain amount of learning should take place in one subject before proceeding to other disciplines. Each subject lays a foundation for the next subject to be learned. Phenix argues that “a good program from a logical standpoint is one in which the sequence of items is in accordance with the inherent logic of the subject and is designed so as to bring the learner in the minimum number of steps to the kinds of meaning which characterizes the discipline in its mature expressions.” (pg. 288) This is vital information for educators to use in curriculum planning because it calls for the use of prerequisites to be utilized in schools. The idea is that students should have certain qualifications prior to taking more challenging courses. This gives students the freedom to gain factual knowledge first before integrating new information learned within the different realms.

3. The curriculum must take into account developmental factors of students in ordering content.

Developmental factors set limits to the selection of materials used in the curriculum and provide one kind of pattern. They do not solely determine the content to be taught in the classroom. However, the curriculum could be ordered according to how language, math, art, science, moral knowledge, and religion affect students at certain stages of their lives. Student maturity and mental competence play a strong part in how the curriculum

comes across to students. Phenix emphasizes the idea that “the best curriculum for any student is one that makes each learning experience available to him as soon as he is ready for it.” (pg. 291) He notes that if knowledge is taught too early in a person’s developmental stage, then students will either not understand the information at all or feel a lot of frustration and anxiety when encountered with the curriculum. However, if knowledge is given too late in a person’s developmental stage, then future learning can be postponed and the students’ overall development will be delayed.

4. Educators must selectively choose content that evokes meaning.

Phenix writes it best when he states, “His real longing is for meaning, and whether he recognizes it or not, all his striving, whatever its apparent object, is directed toward the enlargement and deepening of meaning.” (pg. 344) This should be the primary goal of all educators when planning the curriculum. Students and teachers alike strive to attain a sense of meaning in all discipline taught and discussed within the classroom. If students are able to define their own meanings in the six realms, then educators can truly say that they have done their jobs. Moreover, when students can validate their knowledge with meaning, they are able to make sense of their environment, take ownership of their learning, and are motivated to learn more about the unknown that surrounds them.

5. The curriculum must make use of the disciplines.

Educators should choose materials for the curriculum that is taken specifically from “the organized scholarly disciplines.” (pg. 311) This does not include information from personal experience. The information in the disciplines is much too large in scope and would not do justice to discussions involving personal knowledge in the classroom. When using the disciplines, time is one of the most important factors to consider when planning. Moreover, educators, in the curriculum implementation process, do not need to convey to students the idea that they are the sole authority of knowledge in a particular area. Instead, they should be a source of facts by attempting to provide a good understanding of the discipline. Learning within a discipline has to be productive and should lead to future insight. However, in planning and implementing curriculum, educators should know that every discipline is integrative to some degree and can make use of materials from other disciplines to gain new insights into the future.

6. The curriculum should look at representative ideas in each subject to be taught in schools.

Phenix writes, “Each person should be highly trained in a specialty instead of comprehensively like a generalist” and that the “depth of knowledge and skill should be the goal, rather than superficial acquaintance with a variety of fields.” (pg. 268) Educators need to take into consideration the main ideas that represent each field. The concepts that curriculum planners emphasize must be indicative of the discipline being taught. Moreover, these concepts should help the learner formulate other ideas about the subject. In essence, they are used as building blocks of knowledge. Educators should select specific examples while delivering the curriculum to exemplify the representative ideas to students.

7. The curriculum must have methods of inquiry.

The curriculum must have methods of inquiry as a means to incite active engagement by students in their own learning process. The suggestion is that students learn better when they are not just passive recipients of information. Students are able to construct their own knowledge through methods of inquiry and become active participants in their own learning. Methods of inquiry should be included in a curriculum that organizes studies according to disciplines. Educators should take a special note to teach inquiry as what Phenix calls “a program of guided rediscovery, in which the student discovers for himself what others have found out before him.” (pg. 336) Moreover, the author emphasizes that this level of inquiry must not only be reenacted under similar conditions as others before him, but also should include looking at the students’ prior knowledge and level of advancement in the subject area. As a result, this process will give students the opportunity to discover new information and validate prior knowledge.

8. The curriculum must take into account the students’ enthusiasm for learning.

Phenix emphasizes the idea “that for the most effective learning curricula need to be designed as far as practicable to take into account each person’s particular aptitudes and enthusiasm.” (pg. 275) He further gives credence to his argument when he writes, “Students learn best what they most profoundly want to know. Their learning efficiency is in direct relation to their motivation. Hence, the materials of instruction should be selected in light of the students’ real interest.” (pg. 345) This ideology conveys a strong message to educators in the curriculum planning and integration process. The curriculum content needs to be chosen in a manner that will maximize meanings for children. If students’ interests are taken into account when planning, then educators will see more learning occurring in the classroom and student achievement increasing across all disciplines.

9. The curriculum should be taught in a learner- friendly environment.

The learning environment in which the curriculum is to be taught should be student friendly. This type of setting will improve achievement levels. Learning conditions in the schools where the curriculum is taught should provide an ample amount of light, fresh air, and have convenient work space. Students and teachers should have access to instructional materials. Classrooms should be equipped with teacher aides so that teachers can solely focus on teaching. In addition, each classroom should have updated technology to assist in student learning. Computers, electronic devices, and other programs can be used as a technology tool to reinforce key ideas seen in class. Hopefully, this will lead to strong gains in student achievement.

10. The curriculum must appeal to the learners’ imagination.

According to Phenix, “The principle of appeal to the imagination calls for the selection of materials that are drawn from extraordinary rather than from the experience of everyday life. They should be such as to transform ordinary perspectives rather than confirm them.” (pg. 346) The curriculum should inspire students to think outside themselves and their current situation. “It has everything to do with finding materials that have unusual power to speak to persons in the depth of their being by giving them a

vision of a new order of life in which they can participate and by which their ordinary existence can be transfigured.” (pg. 350) The goal of developing a curriculum that speaks to the learners’ imagination is to provide a means for students to question what they are learning and to be given the chance to change their ways of thinking. This would allow students to become critical thinkers who are interested in what they are discovering in order to gain even more knowledge.

In conclusion, the purpose of this essay was to discuss recommendations that ethical educators should consider when deciding on how to improve student achievement. It is hoped these ten suggestions will drastically improve the quality of education that students receive and promote student achievement. The suggestions provided by Philip H. Phenix in the Realms of Meaning will give educators a basis to start revising the current curricular issues created by the federal Leave No Child Behind mandate. Since this mandate has been put into law, the American public has been anxiously awaiting for drastic improvement in student achievement. Schools have been left to their own devices to find new methodologies to undertake such a daunting task. By analyzing all of the ideas presented by Phenix in the Realms of Meaning, educational leaders now have a timeless philosophical tool to devise new recommendations to be implemented to advance the school system into the next millennium. If all ten recommendations are followed, not only will students achieve academically and accomplish their educational goals, master educational objectives, and make deeper connections with the curriculum, but also educators will be given the opportunity to grow professionally.

Reference

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