

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION?

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What is the purpose of education? The simple answer would seem to be that its purpose is to provide children with the knowledge and skills to succeed in the adult world. Indeed, when trainee teachers are asked at university, the question is greeted with a surprised bemusement that such an obvious question could be raised.

However, we know that the national data on literacy and numeracy show that large numbers of children fail to achieve acceptable standards of literacy and numeracy despite having over 10,000 hours of instructional time devoted to their education. If this was occurring in a business the management or Board would be sacked, or the business would fail to make a profit. Such a situation could not be tolerated for even a short period, let alone decades.

So, if educating children isn't a primary purpose of education, what could the purpose or purposes be? We propose that there are several purposes of education that have varied over time, but some of them are currently in desperate need of fundamental reconsideration.

Socialising into the culture

We need to look at what schools do well to understand the real major purposes of education. The first major purpose is to socialise children into the culture. In this they have done a superb job, with our current multicultural society being the envy of many countries around the world. Almost without fail, groups from a range of European, Asian and Middle Eastern cultures have been successfully incorporated into the mainstream of our society within a single generation. By the third generation most groups are intermarrying and moving into power positions in the general Australian society. It is worth reflecting on the fundamental importance of this work when we compare other countries where hatred and bitterness has existed between groups for centuries, often resulting in bloodshed.

Historical Purposes

To understand the second major purpose of education we have to look to the history of our current form of education. More than a century ago, the ruling classes were determined by bloodlines, and education was designed to provide this class with the skills and values considered appropriate for the rulers. We can see this in the early Australian immigrants, where the rulers were educated and 'well bred' with the convicts and lowlier groups such as soldiers mainly illiterate and with little or no formal education.

With the advent of the industrial revolution in the late 19th century, large numbers of workers were required with fundamental literacy and numeracy, as well as managers to oversee the factories. Theories of economics were developed by Adam Smith and colleagues, which neatly fitted into Darwin's social theory that was being developed and disseminated at the same time. Both the economic and social theories were based on 'survival of the fittest' where the more competent, adaptable, 'genetically superior' individuals would prosper and reproduce, with the less capable either not surviving or scratching out an existence at the margins.

The education system was adapted to fit into this framework. Education was made available for all apart from women and those similarly classified as incapable of learning. In this way the education system could determine those male children who had the greatest

capacity for taking managerial positions and those more 'suited' to lowlier levels in the industrial system. It was seen as being in line with nature and so beyond effective critique.

Of course it effectively barred over half the population of children even getting a chance. Over time due to the pressure of the suffragettes and others, women were added to the universal education system -- albeit in segregated schools doing a modified curriculum. The boys did science and the girls did home science and needlework. For some others, right up to the modern times the IQ test has been used to ensure that those who scored poorly on this test were denied education or were segregated into a social skills curriculum that ensured that they could not aspire to belonging in mainstream society.

Stratifying society

This reformulation of the education system again was a spectacular success and of great benefit to the smooth running of society. The education system selected those who would go on to university and join the ruling classes, with those falling by the wayside at earlier times going on to lesser positions in the economy. To cater for this second group we had a range of positions at a trade and manual level where people could earn a reasonable, though lesser standard of living. The system was considered to be fair, egalitarian and non-discriminatory, particularly when girls were given equal opportunity and the same curriculum opportunities as boys. If one had the talent and commitment, one could rise to the top of the heap through hard work. Of course this argument was simplistic and ignored the immense problems of poverty and lack of resources in the working classes, but there were some examples of individuals using education to climb to a better standard of living. After the experience of the second World War where women ran most of the economy while the men were fighting, pressure mounted for the curriculum for girls to resemble that for boys and eventually the sex-segregated schools dropped out of the public system.

We might reflect on the use of words such as 'grades' as an accurate description of this process of stratification. We might also reflect on the domination of the education by university entry requirements for decades, even though the education involved was only really relevant to a small elite. Right up to the current day children are still ranked against each other and graded into percentile rankings such as 'TER' scores rather than compared to the achievement of some criterion skill level.

While we might squirm under this description of a purpose of education as a process of societal stratification, we would have to admit that it also succeeded admirably, allowing some of the working class to become upwardly mobile, and sufficient employment being available in the factories for those that were 'graded out'. Factories had a range of labour available at different levels of education and hence different costs, which were able to be matched to their needs. It also allowed for the incorporation of women into the mainstream of the culture, albeit at lower salaries, in jobs with less security and often with lower status. Still, it was an outcome that was strongly resisted in the previous societal organisation.

Providing employment and day care.

A function of education increasing in importance has been the provision of extended day care for children while parents went to work. The demand has been increasing systematically as more families require two incomes to meet family expectations of material wealth. We have seen a basic trend towards earlier starting ages for schooling and longer periods of compulsory education as government policy across Australia. While never sold as 'day care' the implications of increasing school hours on the flexibility of the economy make it clear that this is a key deriving force for this change. Similarly, as we move deeper into a service economy, education is providing increasing levels of

employment for teachers, administrators, aides and professionals. Our society needs education to provide this employment, and it is a trend that is likely to continue and probably accelerate.

Time for a change

While these purposes of education were clearly beneficial to the broad society for nearly a century, it is becoming increasingly clear that they have to change. The manual jobs for those unable to cope with schooling no longer exist. There is a growing disparity between sections of our society and from the most conservative estimate, six percent of children are now being educated for unemployment with most commentators predicting this percentage will grow. If a child is not literate, the probability of employment drops dramatically, and it has been established that there is a strong link between illiteracy and crime. If a person cannot read as an adult, reading will be unlikely to be modelled for their children and the stimulating environment linked to high success rates in reading development is unlikely to occur. We are likely to build in a multi-generational problem with widespread implications for the health of our community. Australia already has the second highest rate of youth suicide in the world. Every major city is experiencing high levels of youth crime and social disturbance, including abuse of drugs and alcohol.

A vision for the future

Our vision for the education system of the future is one where EVERY child meets criterion levels of performance in the fundamentals of education – reading, writing, numeracy and knowledge of how to find out information. Assessment would be against criteria set as the standard with teachers and schools both accountable for the level of achievement, but also provided with the levels of support and training to achieve if they were failing. A child failing to achieve criterion would be a family, school and teacher problem – not just blamed on the inadequacies of the child, family or a combination of the two. There are many implications of this vision:

Everyone belongs

If it is expected that all children will achieve criterion levels of performance, then there is no rationale for excluding some children by segregation and congregation. Including ALL children physically, socially and in the curriculum becomes an issue to be addressed by the individual teacher, school and system. It is not assumed that all will be immediately successful, but we will recognise the problem as one of the CAPACITY of the teacher, school and system – not a problem of the inadequacy of individual children.

Multi-level teaching

All classes have always had a wide range of talent and achievement. When the goal of schools was to grade, this did not present a problem. The teacher taught to somewhere around the middle and those that didn't succeed were graded out. The new model however means that all children in the class have to be taught, even though they are at a diverse level. This is a skill not commonly incorporated in teacher training and will need considerable time and effort to bring teachers to the required level of expertise.

Changing of the school culture

It is very clear that the current school culture does not 'suit' large numbers of children – particularly boys. Even for those boys who are academically successful, there is often either an active dislike of school or at least an indifference bordering on hostility. In particular, we move from a system in primary school where most children like school to one in high school where the opposite occurs. While it is easy to dismiss this as 'hormones' it is clear that if children do not like school they are unlikely to perform at their maximum. We know that people enjoy learning when they are 'engaged actively' in

learning; when there is a high level of success and success is acknowledged; the material is relevant to the child's world, and the child has some control over the process. There is already a large body of educational research on these issues that needs to be brought to bear if we are to move into a new paradigm of education.

Teaching democracy democratically

If a key role of the new education is to prepare children for the world, we need to have a close look at that world now and the world that is likely to come in the future. Much of this is implied above – literacy and numeracy required as well as some other key skills. Others have talked about the need for teaching flexibility and the skills to adapt to a changing environment, as this seems to be an increasing reality in the workforce. However, if we are to really address the increasing alienation of large numbers of children, particularly teenagers, then we have to look at the logic of using a highly authoritarian system to prepare children for a world of democracy, increasing change, chaos and requiring a great deal of flexibility and creativity to survive. This to us is one of the major changes of the system that will be required over the next decades.

Why does the system change so slowly?

It is sometimes highly frustrating to see how slowly the education system changes and with so much reluctance. However we need to understand the position of the education system – it is the vehicle that we use to transmit the culture to the next generation. As such it CANNOT be ahead of the society, or the society will quickly react. Notice the huge controversy that is generated when a school tries to address a social issue that is broadly accepted outside the school – for example homosexuality. A teacher who tries to discuss homosexuality in the classroom is destined for a short teaching career. We need to recognise that schools will almost always be one of the last to embrace social change, and then only when forced. We have numerous examples – the education of girls and people with disabilities only occurred when forced by public and legal pressure. Similarly, the schools are far behind the community concern about lack of literacy and are only reacting when forced through national testing and medial campaigns.

So our role as citizens is to get out and push. The 'battleship education' won't turn easily but if enough of us get out there pushing for a better deal, it will change. If it can move to an acceptance that it has to teach all children from a belief that only a few elite males deserved education, then it can adapt to the coming world. A world where all children are present, belong and are included in a curriculum that achieves real outcomes for every child.