

Hollygirt School Prize Giving 2022

What is the purpose of education?

At this time of year people who work in education are busy making sure all the organisational aspects have been taken care of – do we have enough staff to teach the number of students we are expecting: have we got sufficient rooms with the correct furniture; do we have good enough IT, text books, other learning resources; is the timetable clear; are we organised for the first week's activities; and many other aspects that make education institutions work whether we are talking about schools, colleges, or universities.

As teachers and students, we all enter into an unspoken agreement about what we are here to do. There is an assumption that we all see the purpose of education in the same way, but how often do we stop to think about and discuss our beliefs about education. How do we know we have a shared understanding?

For example, the Government website highlights a speech by Nick Gibb where he states the purpose of education:

“Education is the engine of our economy, it is the foundation of our culture, and it’s an essential preparation for adult life”.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-purpose-of-education>

So, the focus here is on the economic contribution that an educated person can make by developing employability skills and getting a job. The important standards that underpin this are that every child has the right to an education, starting with the basics of good literacy and numeracy skills and culminating with GCSEs.

Whilst it is agreed that the basics of English and maths are important, there are also wider skills and knowledge that young people need to enable them to move on to the next stages in life: whether that is A levels or BTEC; university, apprenticeship or a job. Adult life is very complicated in today's society and so schools also need to focus on developing character traits such as 'persistence, grit, optimism and curiosity' (ibid.).

Sir Ken Robinson, who was a great educational thinker, also outlined 4 key purposes of education on his website: personal development; cultural; economic; and social. This leads him to suggest 8 core competencies, which are “curiosity, creativity, criticism, communication, collaboration, compassion, composure, and citizenship”.

<https://www.edutopia.org/article/what-education>

So, Ken is focussing on a consideration of education as wider than academic or skills learning.

When I am teaching post-graduate education students, I ask them to review a different way of classifying the abilities of an individual, rather than focussing purely on intelligence or academic abilities. We use the VIA Classification of Character Strengths, which includes 6 sections. I can't go into the details tonight, but hopefully

the characteristics will mean something to you. How many do you think you possess?

1. Wisdom and knowledge – creativity, curiosity, judgement, love of learning, perspective
2. Courage – bravery, perseverance, honesty, zest
3. Humanity – love, kindness, social intelligence
4. Justice – teamwork, fairness, leadership
5. Temperance – humility, prudence, self-regulation/ self-control
6. Transcendence – appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humour, spirituality

<https://www.viacharacter.org/>

It is worth us thinking about how we incorporate opportunities to develop such character strengths in education, in order to develop well-rounded adults who can contribute to society in a variety of ways.

The students who have left Hollygirt and moved to the next stage in their lives will have some of the character strengths listed, but do we ever think to highlight those on references or CVs, or do we just focus on the academic outcomes, such as GCSEs? Would it be worth a university admissions tutor or an employer knowing that someone has curiosity, perseverance, good teamwork skills, and high standards?

I don't have the answer, the purpose of education is an ongoing debate, but I hope I have got you thinking about the importance of developing and acknowledging a range of skills and character traits that will benefit you as an individual as well as society.

Dr Debra Costley

September 2022