

what is education for?

Dr. Nicholas Tate

Dr. Nick Tate has been chief executive of the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (1994-1997) and of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (1997-2000). From 2000-2003 he was Headmaster of Winchester College. Since 2003 he has been Director-General of the International School of Geneva, the world's largest international school.

Decisions about what happens in our education systems and schools are inseparable from those about our values, about the kind of society, and world, we want ourselves to be, and about our fundamental ends and purposes as human beings. T.S. Eliot made this point in his 1932 essay *On Modern Education and the Classics*, describing education as:

“a subject which cannot be discussed in a void: our questions raise other questions, social, economic, financial, political. And the bearings are on more ultimate problems even than these: to know what we want in general, we must derive our theory of education from our philosophy of life. The problem turns out to be a religious problem.”

Although Eliot was a Christian and an Anglican, he was using ‘religious’ here in its broadest sense. It was his contention, as early as the 1930s, that in post-traditional western societies we lacked a shared account of who we are, where we came from and where we are going, and that as a result we lacked the fundamental philosophical and religious basis from which to answer the question ‘what is education for?’

This is why in practice, in his view, we frequently fall back on narrow utilitarian explanations of what education is for, what he called the preoccupation with ‘getting on’, which he felt was at the heart of ‘modern education’. If this is so, it helps to explain the emphasis, at the level of national systems, on education as the means to enhancing the competitiveness and prosperity of the nation, and preparing us for ‘the knowledge economy’ or whatever the current rhetoric might be, and, at the level of schools, and of individual students and their parents, on getting good examination results, ensuring that one is well placed for university entrance, preparing students for the job market and improving individuals’ material life chances.

These are legitimate and important purposes of education, which may well necessitate an education that is far from narrow and utilitarian. But they can easily crowd out the more fundamental objectives of our mission statements, and as an explanation of why education is important they are incomplete.

In considering the question ‘what is education for?’ Eliot urged us to go back to those who had considered the question from the perspective of a clearly articulated philosophy of life.

There is no shortage of models. Plato and Aristotle tackled these issues two and a half millennia ago. Many philosophers and writers since then have done the same. In Western societies that too infrequently re-engage with the past the better to look forward, it is instructive to remember the answers they gave to the question. In addition to Plato and Aristotle, I am thinking of people like Aquinas, Rousseau, Matthew Arnold, Newman, and writers with views as diverse as Eliot in England, Péguy in France and Gramsci in Italy. Their answer to the question ‘what is education for?’ is always an

answer about the kind of human beings, and the kind of society, they would like to see. The broader picture always comes first.

The broader picture of course varies. Gramsci's is of a citizenry educated to throw off the shackles of outmoded ideologies that perpetuate an oppressive society. This is not the same as Eliot's or Aquinas's vision of a community that believes that true happiness is to be found only in the love of God and of our fellow creatures, and in the following of God's commandments, and not in the pursuit of riches, fame or power. This in its turn differs from Rousseau's vision of a world within which individuals are free to develop according to what he sees as their intrinsic 'nature' rather than being moulded by inherited customs and traditions.

But what all these thinkers share, as part of a tradition stretching back through two millennia of Christianity to the Romans, Greeks and Hebrew Scriptures, is a complete absence of hesitation in talking about what men and women are here on earth to do, and in distinguishing between lives that have been well led and those that fall short of what should be expected of human beings.

Traditional accounts of the purposes of education, at least in the West, are therefore shaped by a clear sense of what it is to be an educated and fully developed human being. I doubt whether most of us have such a sense today, or even in some cases feel it to be legitimate to have such a sense.

In our preoccupation with openness and tolerance - and these are crucial virtues and at the heart of what education is trying to achieve - we are in danger of forgetting that, at the level of individuals, openness and tolerance are not ends in themselves but simply a precondition for making decisions about how best we are going to live our lives. We are also in danger of forgetting that these decisions involve hard moral choices and the rejection of some pictures of the world and some ways of life as inferior to others.

Nick Tate is of the National Education Trust's Leading Thinkers.

Learn more about NET at <http://www.nationaleducationtrust.net>