



## The Failures of Education in the West

### PART 1

## The Purpose of Education in the West

*'In truth, if the modern world is so concerned with education, it is not because of the fact that it has made any extraordinary discoveries in that field; it is as Chesterton says because modern man has lost his bearings; he knows neither where he is nor where he is going.'*  
- (D and I. Gallagher (eds), 'Philosophy and Education' in *The Education of Man*, p.41)

The Western education systems have long been hailed as the gold standard by which all other nations measure themselves. Predominantly the British, Scandinavian, Korean, and Japanese systems are held in high regard, producing thousands of well-educated and qualified individuals yearly. But what is it that makes these systems the epitome of educational excellence and academic prowess in comparison to others, and if this is the case, why are they failing?

The first article of this series will aim to explicate the impetus behind education in the West, with subsequent articles going on to address the different systems of education and the current educational failings.

*"That education should be regulated by law and should be an affair of state is not to be denied, but what should be the character of this public education, and how young persons should be educated, are questions which remain to be considered. As things are, there is disagreement about the subjects. For mankind are by no means agreed about the things to be taught, whether we look to virtue or the best life. Neither is it clear whether education is more concerned with intellectual or with moral virtue. The existing practice is perplexing; no one knows on what principle we should proceed- should the useful in life, or should virtue, or should the higher knowledge, be the aim of our training; all three opinions have been entertained."* – Aristotle, written 350 B.C.E.

It must initially be acknowledged that Western institutions have been unable to present a formally codified or stable foundation upon which the aims of their education system rests. Many philosophers have illustrated differing criteria behind the purpose of education, and have thereby unknowingly revealed a fundamentally flawed and disunited basis with no clear trajectory of arriving at a definitive truth. The questions which consequently arise revolve around an alternative system that holds transcendental truths as its primary objective, and acts as a practical scheme of development focusing on the end, and not simply the means. A system which successfully combines moral virtue with intellectual virtue, and allows for the true flourishing of humankind.

### Philosophical Views on the Aims of Education

*"The most serious weakness in modern education is the uncertainty about its aim. A glance over history reminds us that, the most vital and effective systems of education have envisaged their objectives quite definitely in terms of personal qualities and social situations. By contrast, education in the liberal democracies is distressingly nebulous in aims."* – Galton, 1950

The philosophical understandings behind the purpose of education vary greatly, and in his book *The Philosophy of Education*, T.W. Moore highlighted a view relating closely to the dilemma perplexing Aristotle; 'Amongst philosophers of education, there is quite considerable diversity of opinion about what exactly their task is or ought to be.'

In chronological order, we can see the differences as follows:

**Plato** held the belief that the chief purpose of education was to produce elite members of society who would take up positions of influence and power.

**John Locke** held the idea that man was shaped 'nine parts of ten' by his education alone, and did not possess any innate ideas of logic or belief. He further believed in preserving and improving a constitutional monarchy, and an education that would complement this would be reserved for the elite. The system would revolve around selective upbringing with the counselling of individual tutors, and would not allow for poorer children to mix with the children of gentleman.

**Jean-Jacques Rousseau** believed in a more hands off approach, and forwarded the idea that children should be left to develop 'according to nature'. He advanced the view of enjoining nature and freedom with the child at the very centre, and in imparting education onto a child whilst treating him as a child. Rousseau's impact on education was unprecedented and paved the way for the English Education Act 1944 which aimed to make education more accessible and saw to separating the stages of development.

**John Dewey** strongly held onto the belief that education had no aim, rather parents and teachers had the aims. He believed that society would form its own purpose and shape itself through using education as a tool. Above all, Dewey believed that education was an instrument vital in facilitating democracy, and he thus allied the two.

**Bertrand Russell's** idea of education was a process of self-development and he attempted to blend individualism and socialism. His aims as written by Philip Stander were as follows; 'It was the means for transforming civilization and for democratizing, humanizing, and bridging empathetic distance between people.'

### **Comparative Educational Aims and Economic Value**

Different ideologies and different countries naturally have differing aims in education, and historically this can be seen through Russell's analysis of Athenian and Chinese education in his book *On Education*. In terms of similarities, there was the enjoyment of life, appreciation of a rich literary heritage, and worship carried out through various rituals. However, Russell attributed the downfall of the Greeks and the preservation of the Chinese civilizations to education. He based the differences on varying outlooks, in this case being vigor and idleness – the Chinese prospered in terms of basic survival for they were not concerned with more than fine art and stability. The Greeks on the other hand focused primarily on maintaining power, creating leaders, and conquering new lands with such fervor that it led to their eventual demise. Nevertheless, the passive outlook of the Chinese meant that they lacked advancements in other fields, rendering their system incompatible with modern day developments.

Christopher Winch and John Gingell identified three aims of the British education system in their book *Philosophy and Educational Policy* as follows: 1) deliver a standardized education to the future working class that would ensure the maintenance of the current socio-political order, 2) make traditional education accessible to those identified as displaying qualities of excellence, 3) purposefully isolate parts of education and restrict it to the gentry. This form of education would sustain the current hierarchy and would continue to ensure the political elite's positions in the Empire, at the exclusion of the 'lesser'. This rigid and archaic method of education is not one which prospers only under authoritarian rule, but also in modern democracies such as today. These aims of education are also illustrated via the methods adopted in the American education system, where studies regarding equal opportunities address the differences of progression in social classes, and also highlight the economic agendas.

In the modern-day happenings of December 2015, Dr. Aderhold, the superintendent of a high-achieving school district near Princeton, New Jersey in the US questioned whether the intense focus on achievement in elite schools had finally gone too far, and wrote to parents that there needed to be a wholesome approach to schooling and education. Dr. Aderhold's view propelled the idea of achievement into national discussions, and revealed a difference in the educational goals of white-American families and Asian-American families from China, India, and Korea.

With the former taking a more relaxed approach, the latter argued that with a lack of competitiveness and without a strict focus on achievement, their children would fall behind and be unable to secure holdings in the labour market.

Professor Jennifer Lee of the University of California, pinpointed the root cause of these frictions and pressures between Asian and White families as the following; “They don’t have the same chances to **get their children internships or jobs at law firms**, so what they believe is that their children must excel beyond their white peers in academic settings so they have the same chances to excel later.”

Recent social mobility reports conducted by think tank LKMco regarding the British Labour Market, also highlighted a concerning difference in the educational attainment of BME background students, and their subsequent success in the labour market. What the study found was that though Muslim women and minority ethnic children had success in an educational environment, their progression was not reflected within the job sphere. This was in stark contrast to working class white students, who underperformed at school and university, yet still had a significant presence in the labour market.

Though these studies and findings present to us a clear understanding of structural discrimination, above all, they highlight an intrinsic aim of education in the West as basing the value of a student on their later success in the labour market. The engineering of education for capitalist gains and the structural discrimination that is rife has resulted in students being pitted against each other, racial tensions intensifying, student depression and anxiety heightening (in 2014 one school reported 120 students were recommended for mental health assessments; 40 were hospitalized), cluster suicide rates rocketing, and success being defined as a grade that will ensure job prospects. As we can understand it, the education system aims to maintain the current political order and prepare students to live a life that will be satisfied superficially with economic gains, whilst ignoring the benefit and betterment of society at large.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of July 2015, Schools Minister Nick Gibb also addressed the Education Reform Summit in England where he spoke about the purpose and aims of Education. An excerpt of his speech highlighted the aims of education within the British Government as being three; Economy, Culture, and Preparation for adult life. In regards to economy, Gibb said, “But education is also about the practical business of ensuring that young people receive the preparation they need to secure a good job and a fulfilling career...,” and went on to address GDP growth, employment, business enlargement resulting in job creation, and the skills needed to succeed in a demanding economy. To conclude his speech, Gibb reiterated the three aims as part of governmental reform; “Three purposes - empowering young people to succeed in the economy, participate in culture, and leave school prepared for adult life - have consistently guided our programme of reform.” It can thus be acknowledged and accepted that Gibb’s speech visibly reinforces the strong capitalist agenda underpinning educational reforms. As we can understand it, the education system aims to maintain the current political order and prepare students to live a life that will be satisfied superficially with economic gains, whilst ignoring the benefit and betterment of society at large.

## **The Educational Divide**

What must not go amiss is that the *intense achievement focus* is a presence within elite, privately funded schools, masquerading under the guise of charities. The need to uphold an elite class of people and allow for working class peoples to be governed with relative ease is illustrated clearly in the current education system and various schooling models. Private schools reserved for those able to afford them offer an education that mimics more of an individual nurturing process, whereas state schools struggle with higher teacher student ratios, imitating a robotic transfer of knowledge unto students. As John Stuart Mill in his book *On Liberty*, 1859 wrote; ‘*A general state education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another; and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the pre-dominant power in the government, whether this be a monarch, a priesthood, an aristocracy, or the majority of the existing generation, in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind leading by natural tendency to one over the body.*’

The very ideas of class divisions and elitist governments held by Plato and Locke have been reinforced today through the modern day educational structure. Through private schools and

grammar schools, through intolerably high university fees, through unaffordable popular catchment areas, and through a dire lack of cultural capital, the reality has revealed itself. Only those who can afford to buy into the upper-middle class factions of society, are the ones who will receive an education that is right for getting ahead and will allow for them to dominate and have a representation in the relevant institutions of power.

What education is and what it ought to be is currently at loggerheads, with prominent Western philosophers unable to arrive at a definitive and unanimous agreement. The reality through a review of history and the current systems leaves us with the understanding that there is no clear aim of education in the West. What we can definitively say is that the systems in place seek to continue the succession of power into the hands of the elite, systematically discriminate against the working class, leave a spiritual void within the hearts of men, base the value of people on their economic standing; and seek to capitalize on education itself through making it accessible to the masses through monetary means.

*'The purpose of education is to fit men and women for life, and the purpose of this life, so we hold, is to fit them for eternity... life must always be a fascinating game because it is a game played for eternal stakes.'*

- (B. Tucker (ed), 'Aims in Education: Neo Thomism' in *Catholic Education in a Secular Society*, Sheed and Ward, 1968, p.125.

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