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What is the Point of Education?

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The education system is failing our kids. This is the growing complaint among many in society, amidst the on-going struggle of many graduates and school-leavers to find employment and make the transition to the real world. These concerns are entirely valid. I will not address them directly for now but instead want to explore one essential component of education that may prove to be the missing link.

Our motivation for education today is different to what it was 200 years ago. In the midst of rapid industrial change, formal education was predominantly centred on adequately preparing children socially and intellectually for mature life, particularly in producing a well-rounded labour force. The notion of delivering education out of respect for the moral worth of the individual was a foreign one. But that is not the case today. By denying autonomy, we undermine the development of creative, imaginative young men and women, who are confident in their abilities to face the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

Understandably, education is preparation for life and so over the years, over the decades, certain basics have been put in place. The list has been a growing one to where today there are standardised packages of primary and secondary education that can be meted out to all children indiscriminately. Understandably again, this is based on some sincere motives; on the one hand, to offer an extensive and complete education to all children, whilst also remaining committed to the ideal of equality. Unfortunately, treating children as equals so often translates into treating them with an uncompromising equality that not everyone fits into. Standardisation pursued so rigorously can begin to suffocate rather than nurture the development of a child. Individuality is ignored and creativity chained. Soon, success in education is merely about adapting to and adequately fitting a very narrow model.

But education, at its essence, ought to be about facilitating young people to recognise their creative capacities and interests, guided in how to flourish in them and exercise their autonomy. Creativity is not a concept we should be afraid of. It often carries the misconception of being associated with distinctly non-academic endeavours such as the arts or sport, etc. But it is essential to every aspect of human progress. From poets and musicians to legal theorists and scientists, every discipline requires both creative and critical application to develop valuable new ideas. To do any less- such as to paternalistically decide the precise modes and methods of learning, to impose rigorous assessment that denigrate education to a scheme of labour and reward, or to determine on a child's behalf that some paths are not for them- undermines their status as a moral agent. To borrow from J. S. Mill, 'it is the privilege and proper condition of a human being, arrives at the maturity of his faculties, to use and interpret experience in his own way' (Mill, 1999:62).

I do not think it is a controversial point that children are born with a variety of aptitudes and talents. Paternalism towards children is often justified because their discretion is not yet fully formed. But by completely denying a child enough space to exercise her faculties according to her own intuitions, the education system is not only failing to recognise her status as a moral agent that possesses at least a degree of autonomy, it also hinders her from exploring her creative capabilities that can be of huge value to both the individual as well as to society. It is as we begin to create the space for children, all of them imbued with staggering potential, to be confident in

their learning, exploring both tried and tested wisdom as well as their own untapped abilities, that they, not some but all, can flourish and rise to the demands of the real world.

In practice, I am not necessarily calling for an overhaul of existing educational practice. But I want to advocate the role of allowing more freedom for autonomous thinking in every stage of the learning process. I am not talking merely about the content of what we teach but the *way* we teach, what we look for in the child, and what particular attributes we attempt to maximise in children as we teach them. Of course, much more research will be needed to assess what implications this will have on the suitable teaching environments, syllabi, or comparative assessment methods, etc. but even beginning with a slight change in our ethos can go a long way.

Hence, in response to the problem raised at the beginning, I would like to suggest that the vital missing link of education ought to be in recognising what is already there-creativity. For it already exists within those we educate. Turning our attention to personal autonomy in the learning process will help to draw it out. This is not mere idealism - As Ken Robinson notes, ‘everyone has huge creative capacities... the challenge is to develop them (Robinson, 2011: 5).

Bibliography

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