

Education as Formation

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Education is a topic of interest to all people. This is hardly surprising since God created us as learners; creatures with an in-built desire to know. But curiously, educational debates always seem to go around in circles, even within Christian communities. We think it's important, but often as people of faith we offer confused and sometimes contradictory views on why education is important. Visit three or four websites for the schools linked to or controlled by Christian churches and you will find some confusing messages. Typically, you will find an array of words and statements used to describe the type of education that is being offered and why it is important. These reflect categories such as success, lifelong learning, citizenship, academic excellence, tradition, academic performance, community, care, quality, self-esteem, values, faith, heritage, culture, sport, well-being, justice, belief and innovation.

The categories sampled, as well as the order in which they are expressed, might well give some sense of what the school administration sees as important. But even so, how does this translate into the classroom, the playground and the sporting field? Are the words on the websites just 'spin' or do they reflect authentically how the school and its staff see themselves? And if they do, how does this reflect the best of our knowledge about learning, teaching and human flourishing, not to mention our biblical understanding of the type of people God created us to be?

In the 1950s, influential educator MVC Jeffreys suggested that 'Education is in fact nothing other than the whole of life of a community viewed from the particular standpoint of learning to live that life.'⁽¹⁾ Is this an accurate description of education's role and purpose? What might this 'whole of life' in community look like within the context of schooling?

Christian parents ask, what school is best for my child? Christian teachers ask, what should motivate me? Where should I teach? How does my faith impact on or shape my teaching?

I'm one of the authors of a new book that explores these questions and more. ⁽²⁾ My co-authors are Bryan Cowling and Michael Jensen. It is the outcome of a year of intensive reading, thinking and discussion with a group of nine other Christian educators. We have explored the why, what and how of education. Why do we school in the way we do? What should be our priorities? How do we make wise choices each day at school?

We've concluded from our work that an understanding of God's plan for humanity should also shape our purpose for education, its content and the way schooling, teaching, curriculum and pedagogy are implemented. What we do as teachers is meant to help the children we teach to take their place as grown humans and mature citizens in the family of God. It matters what the priorities of the school are, how we teach, how we encourage learning, the nature of the social structures we promote, the methods we use to discipline our children and so on. If we keep our sights fixed on the goal of seeing children knowing, accepting and following Christ, does it matter how we offer them education in our schools? We think that it does, because there is a relationship between our priorities shaped by the gospel, our faith in Christ, how we live out and speak of this faith, and our actions (Phil.1:27, Jas 2:14-26). Education is all about the formation of the whole child.

Van Brummelen ⁽³⁾ reminds us that knowing, being and acting are all tied together in a biblical view of knowledge. Authentic Christian teaching and education should demonstrate this and

reflect priorities shaped and oriented to the Kingdom of God, not the kingdoms we seek to create on earth. We are keen to continue a conversation with teachers, parents, school leaders and people who value education and its God-given purposes.

Endnotes:

1. Jefferys, MVC (1950) *Glaucon: An Inquiry into the Aims of Education*, London, Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons Ltd., p.3.
2. Cairney, Trevor, Cowling Bryan & Jensen, Michael. (2011) *New Perspectives on Anglican Education: Reconsidering Purpose and Plotting Future Directions*, Sydney, Anglican Education Commission.
3. Van Brummelen, Harro (1994) *Stepping Stones to Curriculum, A Biblical Path*, Seattle, Alta Vista College Press.