Christian Views of the Purpose of Education
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Why do we do school? Why does our culture put such high value on education? Why do some Christians put a *very* high value on education? Is the purpose of Christian education different from the purpose of a public school education? Is there a difference between “education” and “schooling”? So what’s the *point* of this ubiquitous national program, paid for by compulsory taxes in every county, employing more people than any other profession? And for what purpose do Christians often pay additional steep sums to educate their children separately?

There may be as many purposes for education as there are people in some communities! In the early United States, education in New England had more of a religious and universal purpose than in the South, where plantation owners either sent their kids back to England for boarding school or brought in a tutor, often a slave, to provide personalized education in the home. Non-owner’s kids didn’t get educated.

Today we can probably divide most secular purposes for education into two camps – either focusing more on the needs of the state or community or focusing more on the needs of the student.

Secular View #1

State and community needs in American education have run the gamut and include a wide variety of goals: the country’s desire for good citizens during the immigrant waves a hundred years ago, the Army’s desire for physically fit soldiers during WWI, the bread-winners’ desire for getting kids out of the work force in the Great Depression, the need for good workers in manufacturing after WWII, the desire for more technology geeks after the Soviets beat us into space with their Sputnik satellite in 1957, and the desire for more college preparation and college access after the Vietnam War as the country added more white collar jobs. Further, curriculum movements promoting the Great Books (Mortimer Adler) or “what every American needs to know” (E.D. Hirsch), while listing things every *student* should learn, did so because of a *communal* sense of what all educated people should *share*. So in this camp one often hears the concept of *covering* curriculum and standards that are set by the state or community.

Secular View #2

By contrast, the more humanistic or progressive camp focuses more on the needs of the student rather than the needs of the state or business community, although sometimes it’s hard not to see outside forces promoting these needs as well. Emphases in this camp include adding honors and AP tracks for the brightest students while adding tech-prep, work-study and other “practical” studies to allow students of all ability levels to attain a high school diploma. The rapid rise of awareness, research, and accessibility laws in special education meant that students with physical, behavioral, or intellectual challenges could also attain a high school education (or beyond). Additionally, laws, busing schemes, and district reorganizations focused on making schooling more accessible for students of all races and socio-economic statuses. So for all students, more choices in the curriculum, the rise of magnet schools, the increase in access awareness and inclusion, and the rise of community colleges meant there were many more educational options for those who might have dropped out of the education system in previous generations. So in this camp there is more of theme of meeting *individual goals* rather than everyone covering the same curriculum.

Christian Views

So now we will shift from the secular camps to specifically Christian perspectives. As with the view of the student, the teacher, and the curriculum, Christians don’t all agree on what the purpose of education is. Some Christians feel a strong conviction that their children should be in the public schools, where they can be “salt and light” and help prevent a moral collapse of the public schools. Other Christians feel a strong conviction to remove their kids from the unhealthy peer situations and secular philosophies that can prevail in public schools. Other Christians homeschool their kids and avoid sending their children to *any* school of any type. And other Christians are less into protectionism or evangelism as their main goal and more into faith-infused learning at all levels and “in all things.”

I would like to draw on H.R. Neibuhr’s idea that there are various ways Christians see the relationship between Christ and Culture. I’d like to outline three biblically-informed ways Christians have tended to view the purpose of education.

Christian View #1

First, there’s the *Christianity-against-Culture* framework. Like the emphasis on sin that this framework has in its view of the student and the teacher, this framework can see education as a way to teach *discernment* between good and evil. In a public school setting, this framework may focus on identifying the biases against Christians and Christian perspectives in both the curriculum and the culture at large. There is often a sense of needing to protect kids from some of the godless elements of public education. Christians operating in this framework may emphasize trying to be a light to others in this environment. They may encourage participation in things like “meeting at the flagpole” before school for voluntary student-led Christian prayers. They may talk about the godless curriculum and secular worldview of some of the teachers or textbooks.

In a Christian school setting, there may be occasional mention of unchristian or antichristian aspects of the public schools and of the culture at large with an implication that the Christian school can inculcate Christian values to counteract the secular values in the public schools and in the culture. A specifically Christian curriculum in this perspective may be a primary tool in accomplishing the purpose of this schooling – to counteract and fend off the antichristian elements in culture.

In a homeschool setting, there may be even more emphasis on being set apart from the secular influences of the public schools and a culture sometimes seen as hostile to Christians. Although the point could be made that there may be as many differing perspectives on homeschooling as there are homeschooling parents, a very common theme among Christian homeschoolers is that schools in general, especially the public schools, are not something to be participated in.

Philosophies of education that may appeal within this framework of *Christianity-against-Culture* include perennialism and essentialism and sometimes older philosophies such as neo-scholasticism. There’s a strong sense that part of the purpose of education is to get back to the basics and back to a seemingly values-oriented curriculum that perhaps the more recent forms of education have lost. Homeschoolers in this framework are often interested in education that focuses on the Great Books or on traditional learning tools such as the Puritan’s Horn Book, the Basil Readers of the 1960s (phonics oriented), and creationist science books. So although inculcating values is a large part of the purpose of education in this frame, there is also a big emphasis on covering the basics and a time-tested curriculum. That means this first Christian view is quite curriculum-centered.

Christian View #2

On the other side of the spectrum is a kind of *Christianity-Embracing-Culture* framework. This perspective may focus on more of the humanistic and progressive trends associated with 20th-century (“modern”) ideas about education. Christians in this framework may also embrace some of the curricular emphases associated with the philosophies of reconstructionism, existentialism, or postmodernism in education.

But more important than the curriculum in this framework is the formation of the student. This framework sees compatibility between biblical concepts of the person and modern philosophies of education. Biblical concepts may include the concept of being made in the image of God and having unique strengths and gifts from God. Modern educational approaches that seem to align well with these concepts may include individualized or differentiated instruction, project-based or cooperative learning, and mastery learning.

In the public schools this framework may see the Christian student availing him/herself of the many choices and opportunities to explore gifts and strengths and further educational options. There may be some emphasis on employing critical thinking concerning the various worldviews presented in the curriculum and by the various teachers. But there is far less emphasis on being on-guard culturally and more emphasis on finding God-given opportunities to prepare individuals for their potential as adults.

In the Christian schools, this framework may see the student as immersed in worldview formation, again with a primary goal of discovering gifts, strengths, and opportunities for personal growth. The choice of attending a Christian school is less about avoiding the public schools and more about being able to add in the specifically Christian perspective to maximize the student’s maturation process. Also, since individual and school-wide *excellence* are often seen as more attainable at a private school, the purpose of choosing a Christian school in this framework often includes some emphasis on opportunities for participation in high quality arts or athletic programs, having high-quality academic offerings available (such as A.P. courses, dual enrollment in a college course, or the International Baccalaureate Program), and the hope of a smooth transition to a high-quality college or university.

Homeschoolers in this framework may focus even more on self-actualization of the student. Stripping away all the logistics and crowd-control mechanisms of traditional schooling – public or private—homeschooling is said to be able to “cover” as much curriculum in half a day as a school covers in a whole day. Even in the homeschools using a curriculum, this leaves half of each day (often the afternoon) for interest-initiated learning—that is, children pursuing their own interests and dreams with very little structure (e.g., doing 4-H projects, learning to play an instrument, attending ballet or drama classes in civic centers, or exploring the public library). Some homeschoolers even do away with the structured curriculum in the morning too and devote the whole day, year round, to the purpose of helping the student find his or her own interests and pursue his or her dreams with very little structure or typical school constraints thought to cause negative associations or other impediments to avid exploration.

Christian View #3

Finally, a third Christian framework can be generated from a *Christ-Transforming-Culture* perspective. Here we see a third option that does not deny the existence of sin and evil in our culture and even in our schools. Nor does it deny the beauty and potential of young hearts and minds eagerly exploring the gifts and opportunities God has provided them. This option acknowledges both of these other perspectives but sees the overall purpose of education as more than these.

As I emphasize in my articles on the view of the student and of the teacher, this framework sees students as being prepared to be agents of change in God’s plan to transform culture for good. So part of the purpose of education is to identify and even strategize regarding the presence of evil—in the world, in our society, in our own neighborhoods, and in our personal lives. (This concept of evil coming home is probably what is most alarming to parents about the recent spate of school shootings and terrorist bombings.) So evil exists. But another important part of the purpose of education is to prepare students to be agents of anti-evil change in the world—abroad, nationally, or locally—wherever God calls them. This is a purpose that goes beyond just preparing the student to be all s/he can be. And it’s more than just opportunities for high-quality academics, sports and music.

To paraphrase J. Smith (*Desiring the Kingdom*): we are not just *informing* the students, we’re helping to *form* them. So the purpose of schooling is to be a major part of the formation process that God has called them to. The curriculum is important in this. Classroom management strategies and instructional strategies are important. But the overarching main point is not merely to avoid badness around us or maximize student self-actualization – it’s to coach the students to be the strong team players that God wants in his plan to transform culture. We do not know where God will call each student to serve—which position on the field each student will play—but we do know that we are called to seriously train the students to be ready for this. This training involves the student’s heart, mind, and strength. That’s the main purpose of education in all its forms and levels.

Some brief case studies in the purpose of education:

1. In colonial schools a major (perhaps \*the\* major) goal was to teach students to read so they could read the Bible so they could have eternal salvation. Some studies indicate that the literacy rate in New England at the time was higher than today’s literacy rate across the United States. That’s how seriously people took this purpose of education!
2. During the wave of immigration from eastern Europe in the early 1900s, a major assumption was that the purpose of sending these immigrant children to school was to make them good citizens of America and maybe to make them good factory workers as well. Different political extremes focused on these two different purposes, but both purposes focused primarily on what American society wanted these immigrants to be or become. So not so much on what the individual students’ interests and potential would be.
3. High academics is a major factor in many American parents’ minds not only when they choose a school for their kids but also when they buy a house. They check not only the housing prices and interest rates, the neighborhood’s safety stats, and the look of the lawns, but also how well the local schools are rated on things like graduation rates and college acceptance rates. (And maybe football and basketball teams’ win-loss records.) So the choice where to live usually factors in the excellence of the schools. Christians often fall into the trap of talking a whole lot about the excellence of a school’s academics (and/or sports) and ignoring or forgetting about how well the school shapes students’ moral and/or spiritual development. (D. Graham’s “idols” – Heartland keynotes Oct. 2015)
4. Is the point of academics just to be smart or to get a great job that pays well because of the opportunity to “use your brains” and “use your education”? Often we don’t even realize that we’ve gotten drawn into a conversation about the value education that implies that the only purpose of education is to prepare people for jobs. This is especially true in conversations about higher education. So we hear at-home moms ruefully stating that they’re “wasting” their college education. Or we hear politicians asking if a degree at a private college will “pay for itself” with presumably higher earning power upon graduation. And we hear 18-year-olds saying going anywhere except a community college isn’t “worth it” since the job outlook isn’t great and therefore that future salary wouldn’t be “worth” the added cost of a four-year college. Although some of these might be good questions to ponder in terms of financial stewardship and strategy, we should not allow ourselves to assume that the only purpose of education is to make more money than the schooling process cost us.
5. Sometimes the purpose of education and therefore the main criterion for choosing a school, unfortunately, is safety. It’s sad if a family feels their kids are unsafe at school, so it’s understandable when families choose to carpool or bus their kids somewhere else (or even move to a different neighborhood). But safety from guns, drugs, bullying, environmental hazards, and racial, gender or religious discrimination or harassment should be *guaranteed* in any and every school. Families should not have to make huge financial and time investments just to avoid these illegal and harmful factors in their children’s education. And those of us who participate in the Christian schools should search our motives to make sure we are not making an idol out of safety. Jesus didn’t always choose the safest path to walk and doesn’t always ask us to elevate that above all other motives in our decision making. (D. Graham’s “idols” – Heartland keynotes Oct. 2015)
6. Some families seek a school with top-notch sports programs so that their kids can develop into noticeable prospects for college scouts. Although only 1% of high school varsity players make it to the pros, they can all hope. But even if they don’t make it to the pros, many do get offered scholarships to play in college. This can defray college expenses quite a bit. So it seems that some families can prioritize a school’s athletic rankings, sometimes more, unfortunately, than the school’s academic and character-building strengths.
7. Some Christian school families name morality as the main purpose for sending their kids to a private school vs. the local public school. I’ve even heard a private school teacher (many years ago in another state) refer to the “moral wasteland” of the public schools. This may play out as a desire to keep kids away from teachings about evolution, AIDS, or socialism. Or it may be a desire to protect them from drug dealers in the hallways and parking lots of the public school. I think we should always put a filter on our thoughts of separating from others to make sure our motives aren’t driven primarily by fear or elitism. And as tax-paying, voting citizens we all are sort of part-owners and part-controllers of all the schools and should work to make sure that all schools are not only physically safe but morally safe (which is a vaguer and a tougher concept). As with safety, which is generally a good idea, we should search our motives to make sure we’re not make an idol out of morality, which is also generally a good idea! But making an idol out of it would be like Jesus refusing to talk to sinners like the tax collectors and prostitutes he did talk to. (D. Graham’s “idols” – Heartland keynotes Oct. 2015)
8. Socialization is sometimes mentioned as a purpose of education, even though few printed curriculum guides, textbooks, or state standards even mention socialization. It’s definitely a slippery concept and one that would be hard to get nailed down with agreed-upon definitions by all parties involved. And some people actually think socialization is none of the school’s business. Nonetheless, most teachers feel that socialization is an important part of their job and an important by-product of what happens to a kid throughout the schooling process. Many critics of homeschooling point to the apparent lack of socialization among some homeschooled kids as a flaw in the homeschooling system of education. Many homeschoolers and private school parents, by contrast, specifically don’t want the type of socialization they envision their kids getting in the public schools. To be sure, some public school teachers believe students should choose for themselves which religion to belong to and therefore parents who attempt to raise their children to be strong believers in one particular faith are overly controlling. On the other hand, some homeschooling parents and Christian school parents specifically do not want their kids having teachers who try to strip away their faith. The common theme here is a strong focus on socialization as a primary purpose of education and on what kind of socialization is or isn’t desired.
9. Homeschooling presents a variety of perspectives on the purpose of education. Curriculum centered homeschoolers will often buy entire sets of Great Books and/or other time-tested curriculum materials for their kids at home while expressing dismay that the public and private schools have abandoned most of this classic educational curriculum. Student-centered homeschoolers will often find a wide variety of exploratory experiences in the various arts especially for their kids. They express dismay that the public and private schools have too much structure, too many rules, and too little freedom to try out new things. These families may even make their initial switch to homeschooling as a result of a particularly artistic or kinesthetic (or very bright) child feeling bored or stifled in school. Religious homeschoolers may fall into one or the other of the above categories, but they often also list religious freedom as a part of the purpose of their approach to education for their children. “Religious” homeschooling, of course, can run the gamut from the highly organized Amish children learning in a “dame school” essentially to the very free for all approach that may be seen in a hippy commune or doomsday cult. However, many Christian homeschoolers have pretty structured schedules, at least for a good portion of the weekday, with a variety of Christian and secular learning materials, and often a lot of interaction with other homeschooling families for picnics, educational outings (e.g., museums, zoos, cultural events for children), sports opportunities, and fine arts opportunities.

For Oct. 18, write 1.5-3.0 pages on the purpose of education from your perspective.

**Purpose of education (20 points)**

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| Developing5 | Competent15 | Exemplary20 |
| The paper shows limited awareness of the purpose of education in our society and presents only a weak rationale with few or no connections to worldview, purpose of education, and view of the student, teacher, and work.  | The paper shows an emerging understanding of the nature and purpose of education, its rationale, and its connections to worldview, purpose of education, and view of the student, teacher, and work.  | The paper presents a broad but coherent definition of education in our society and a logical rationale for it. The rationale is well connected to worldview, purpose of education, and view of the student, teacher, and work.  |
| The best papers—drawing on the course textbooks and different philosophies studied—address the varying expectations placed on the education system by local communities, parents, the state, and others. Excellent papers provide specific examples to illustrate potentially competing demands—such as job preparation, citizenship, discipling, or Kingdom building—explaining how these relate to one’s overall worldview and addressing briefly how the purpose of education relates to other components of a philosophy of education, such as parents’ and states’ goals for education.  |