

Why do we educate?

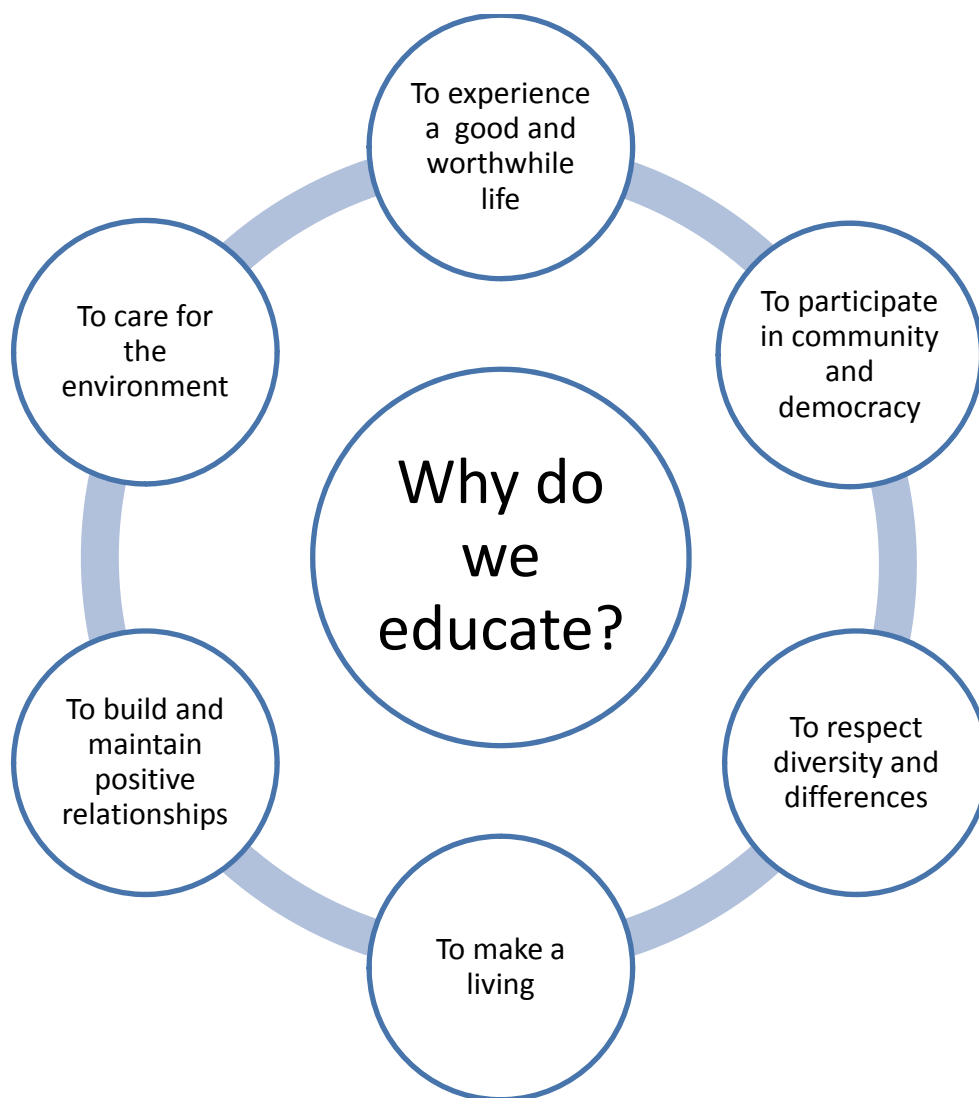
Is it to make a living or to build a better world? Should the 'educated citizen' be a critical thinker? A person who lives in a sustainable way and cares for the environment? An entrepreneur? Some of these? All of these? Something else altogether?

Below is a graphic showing some of the reasons we educate.

Are these reflected in the BC Education Plan? Should they be?

BCTF Research has prepared this graphic and a (3-page) synopsis of some research into the question 'Why do we educate?'

Can these ideas be used in teachers' discussions about the BC Education Plan? Should we be debating wider issues and accessing a wider range of research to help our thinking on what sort of education system we want to build?



- Why do we educate – what are we trying to achieve?
- How should these ideas influence the BC Education Plan?

BCTF Research synopsis:

The purposes of education: Why do we educate, and how do the ideas of 21st-century-learning advocates address this question?

The much-cited book by John Abbot (*Overschooled but undereducated*, 2010) does address this question. Abbot critiques cultures of materialism and acquisition, and stresses life quality rather than standards of living, arguing that schools are forced into stressing the latter, with curriculum stressing societal values of status, rather than life quality or issues that affect all, such as the environment. Yet, as interesting and valuable as his argument is, Abbot has a limited perspective on an issue pervading educational thinking for centuries—why do we educate? He gets close to what might have been an exploration of this in the fifth of fifteen principles that he articulates as providing a “rationale for a new form of learning” (p. 198). The fifth principle states:

Children’s search for meaning starts young. It is the children who are already anxious to make sense of issues that matter to them in their own private lives, who come to formal schooling anxious to use whatever it can offer them to help meet their personal objectives. Not the other way round. That is why a caring, thoughtful, challenging, stimulating life—a life of childlike proportions—in the greater community is so vitally important. That is why streets that are unsafe for children to play around are as much a condemnation of failed policy as are burned-out teachers. (p. 201)

Abbot is clearly linking the purposes of education to community and society, and to building both a quality of life for the individual while also creating environments which are safe and caring.

UBC Education faculty Stack, Coulter, Grosjean, Mazawi and Smith (2006) address their exploration of the purposes of education by considering “educational ends” and tracing the debate back to Plato and Aristotle. They reference Burbules (2004), who, they suggest, updates the conversation:

Burbules assumes that education is a particular kind of end, one that involves helping people to improve the quality of their lives. In other words, the end of an education is a good and worthwhile life. The fundamental challenge, then, becomes ‘identifying and specifying the specific ideals to which education should aspire; what is it about being educated that makes us better people?’ (Burbules, p. 4; Stack et al, p. 15)

They separate the concept of “ends” from “means”, arguing that much of the debate in education focuses extensively and in some cases exclusively on educational “means”—what is taught and how—rather than “ends”, which reflect wider purposes of education. Yet for many, including Abbot, the “ends” stated by recent governments are also linked to countries’ economies and individual prosperity rather than to any significant focus on developing an individual’s “good and worthwhile life”, which enables citizens’ contributing to a civic and civil society.

Cuban (2003) identified and listed five values that he believes are widely shared and which good schools should develop. These can be considered possible “ends” of an education system, and are included here to illustrate his view of education systems being the foundation of civic participation in a democratic society. By stating these “ends” publicly, Cuban and other authors also encourage discussion of them, and place them

firmly within a moral framework, with morality focusing on both the individual and the collective. Cuban's five values are:

- participation in and willingness to serve in local and national communities
- open-mindedness to different opinions and a willingness to listen to such opinions
- respect for values that differ from one's own
- treating individuals decently and fairly, regardless of background
- a commitment to reason through problems and struggle toward openly-arrived-at compromise. (pp. 46–47)

In considering how to judge whether a school is “good”, Cuban (2003) posed three questions:

- Are parents, staff, and students satisfied with what occurs in the school?
- Is the school achieving the explicit goals it set for itself?
- Are democratic behaviours, values, and attitudes evident in the students? (p. 48)

Such criteria may be of low priority in many education systems which currently stress managerial efficiency, and where success is measured in standardized tests which dominate system accountability processes and structures. If such tests dominate educational approaches and drive teaching, then the focus on values must necessarily diminish. Criteria such as those developed by Cuban are highly unlikely to occur in jurisdictions with standards-based centralization and uniformity, yet Cuban offers a clear alternative to standardized accountability linked to narrowly-defined school effectiveness, by stressing “good” over “effective” as the key concept of schooling, and linking the definition of goodness to a decent individual life and the need for a sustainable and sustaining democracy. Thus, the notion of “goodness” is linked to the moral nature of schooling, while “effectiveness” is linked to managerial efficiency.

Yinger (2005) proposed a vision for the future of teaching which consisted of three components, all including some notions of morality:

- education rechartered as public good, with broad citizen participation in deciding goals and outcomes
- teaching re-framed as a professional covenant, stressing moral purpose and imagination, social responsibility and personal caring
- learning re-cast in its moral, cultural, and human significance, in which healthy communities, good societies, and sustainable ecosystems will be determined as much by moral choices as by scientific knowledge. (pp. 308-309).

Noddings has also articulated a view that the goals of education might be focused on caring and relationship:

She has been able to demonstrate the significance of caring and relationship both as an educational goal, and as a fundamental aspect of education. As a result Nel Noddings' work has become a key reference point for those wanting to reaffirm the ethical and moral foundations of teaching, schooling, and education more broadly.¹

Kincheloe (2008) argues for a “fundamental rethinking and deep reconceptualization” of the purposes of schooling to include consideration of:

¹ <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/noddings.htm>

- what human beings are capable of achieving
- the role of social, cultural, and political in shaping human identity
- the relationship between community and schooling
- the ways that power operates to create purposes for schooling that are not necessarily in the best interests of the children that attend them
- how students and teachers might relate to knowledge
- the ways schooling affects the lives of students from marginalized groups
- the organization of schooling and the relationship between teachers and learners. (p. 6)

The above authors explore the purposes of education in ways that are absent from much of the current discussion of 21st century learning. Their focus is on the needs of the individual and the needs of society, which they view as fundamentally linked to a quality of life which is primarily moral and ethical. Yet this is not a narrow view of imposed morality or ethics, but one based on building a “good” life in an inclusive, sustainable, just, and caring society. The views expressed by the advocates of 21st century learning, and those of what I will term the “civil society”, are quite different, but not necessarily dichotomous. They are different because one (21st century learning) focuses primarily on “means” while the other (civil society) group largely addresses “ends”. The first suggests radical change of teaching and learning approaches to fit within new economies and new technologies, while the latter suggests we consider what kind of world we want and then build approaches within education systems to create such a world.

In much of the current focus on the BC Education Plan there is minimal focus on the purposes of education. This short synthesis of some of the relevant research provides ways for teachers to introduce these concepts into local and provincial discussions. For more resources linked to defining and exploring the purposes of education, link to the following page on the BCTF website:

<http://www.bctf.ca/IssuesInEducation.aspx?id=21966>. To read the BCTF Research Discussion Paper on 21st century learning, go to: <http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Issues/21CL/21CL-DiscussionPaper.pdf>

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