

The Real Purpose of Education

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Education—like democracy, free markets, freedom of the press, and “universal human rights”—is one of those subjects whose virtue is considered self-evident. So is the superiority of the industrially advanced countries in attaining them. Consequently, any package that arrives with one of these magic labels on it automatically qualifies for the “green channel” at our entry ports. No questions asked. This uncritical acceptance has severely crippled our discussion of all these vital topics. For example, in education most of our discussion centers around literacy statistics and the need to have so many graduates, masters, Ph.D.s, and so many professionals—engineers, doctors, etc.—in a given country based on the standards in the industrially advanced countries. The central issue of curriculum, and even more fundamental issue of the purpose of education, normally do not attract our attention; they have already been decided by the “advanced” countries for us and our job is only to follow in their footsteps to achieve their level of progress.

Indeed they have. In the “first” world, education has become an extension of the capitalist system. Its purpose is to provide a qualified workforce for its machinery of production and eager consumers for its products. Stated in a more polished form, the purpose of education is to provide for the economic prosperity of a country. Similarly on a personal level today the purpose of education is to be able to earn a respectable living.

While earning halal living and providing for the economic well-being of a country are certainly important Islamic goals as well, the linking of education to financial goals is extremely unfortunate. It turns the centers of learning into mere vocational centers in their outlook and spirit. It degrades education and through it the society.

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To bring home the pivotal but forgotten role of education we need to recall that there is a fundamental difference between human beings and animals. Instincts and physical needs alone can bring ants, bees, or herds of beasts together to live in a perfectly functioning animal society. Human beings do not function that way. They are not constrained by nature to follow only those ways that are necessary for the harmonious operation of their society. If they are to form a viable, thriving society, they must choose to do so. What drives that choice is the sharing of common goals, beliefs, values, and outlook on life. Without a common framework binding its members, a human society cannot continue to exist; it will disintegrate and be absorbed by other societies. Further, the society must ensure that the common ground will continue to hold from generation to generation. This is the *real* purpose of education. The education system of a society produces the citizens and leaders needed for the smooth operation of that society, now and into the future. Its state of health or sickness translates directly into the health or sickness of the society that it is meant to serve.

Today we find many internal problems—corruption, injustice, oppression, crippling poverty—everywhere we turn in the Muslim world. If we think about it, we may realize that most of these problems are man-made. The rulers who sell out to foreign powers and subjugate their people; the bureaucrats who enforce laws based on injustice; the generals who wage war against their own people; the businessmen who exploit and cheat; the journalists who lie, sensationalize, and promote indecencies, they are all educated people, in many cases “highly” educated people. Their education was meant to prepare them for the roles they are playing in real life. And it has, although in a very unexpected way!

[. . .]

Why our societies are sick? Because our education system is sick. . . .



“What did you learn at Sunday school, son?” “Oh, just that truth is truth and love is love and life is life and all that sort of thing.”