

In defence of a liberal education

Kevin Donnelly

What is the purpose of education? Much of the education debate, especially during the recent federal election, has focused on issues such as accountability, academic standards and funding to government and non-government schools.

Since the election, the debate has been broadened to include concerns about Australia's lack of skilled workers, especially in the traditional trades, and the need to strengthen Australia's approaches to vocational education and training.

Thankfully, more recently, as a result of the federal government's work in the area of values education, there is recognition that education must have a strong ethical base and that building character is as equally important as acquiring skills.

In the context of building character, of interest is the approach to values education taken in the recent publication *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* (DEST, 2005). The document defines values education as:

Any explicit and/or implicit school-based activity which promotes student understanding and knowledge of values, and which develops the skills and dispositions of students so they can enact particular values as individuals and as members of the wider community.

Also included is a list of preferred values. These include: care and compassion, doing your best, fair go, freedom, honesty and trustworthiness, integrity, respect, responsibility and understanding, tolerance and inclusion.

While the definition of values education is uncontroversial, one concern is that it begs the question: what values?

An added concern is that while the values listed are reasonable, they represent a motherhood approach to defining the ethical role of education.

An alternative approach to the above can be found in what is described as a liberal education. Unlike values education, instead of simply advocating character traits such as being compassionate, being honest, doing your best and being inclusive, a liberal approach begins by defining the purpose of education.

Based on a liberal view of education, Brian Crittenden, one time head of education at La Trobe University, defines the purpose of education as involving:

... a systematic and sustained introduction to those public forms of meaning in which the standards of human excellence in the intellectual, moral and aesthetic domains are expressed and critically investigated.

The ideal of a liberal education goes back to the early Greek philosophers and is best summed up by Socrates' admonition, recalled in Plato's *Apology*, that education must deal with 'truth and understanding and the perfection of the soul'.

Matthew Arnold makes a similar plea when he argues that education must inculcate what he terms 'sweetness and light' by basing education on the 'best that has been thought and said'.

Second, the values associated with a liberal education are more clearly defined and more enduring than those in the national framework document. These include the ability to know right from wrong, true from false, the ability to discriminate and a willingness to admit error and to acknowledge that wisdom does not reside in oneself alone.

Associated with a liberal view of education is the recognition that education cannot be restricted to what is contemporary and utilitarian and that,

such is Man's imperfection, that the struggle for beauty and truth is an on-going one that requires humility and hard work.

Unfortunately, much of the current approach to education is the opposite of a liberal education. Students are taught that how one interprets the world is both subjective and relative and that everyone is entitled to their opinion.

Not only is there no such thing as right or wrong, but learning is also restricted to what is entertaining and relevant. Whereas history once dealt with the grand narrative of the rise of Western civilisation, with the struggle for enlightenment and freedom from hunger and oppression, history is now about the local community.

In literature, instead of studying the classics that deal with emotions such as love, jealousy, anger, ambition and trust—that is, the emotions that define what it is to be human—students are fed a diet of poorly written, superficial texts dealing with social problems and self-centred, egotistical characters with little to admire.

Much is being written about the discipline problems in schools, the fact that students no longer respect teachers or parents and that many students lack resilience and fail to see any value in what they study.

One of the strengths of a liberal education is that it addresses such concerns. Not only are students given a strong ethical base, but they also experience the fulfilment that comes from mastering challenging subjects that have something enduring to say about the human condition.

Dr Kevin Donnelly is Director of Education Strategies and author of Why Our Schools are Failing.