Rumination 3# - The lost goal of education?

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Since arrival in the Faculty of Education at Victoria University in mid-2018 I have had many remarkable experiences. Not all however are the source of a strong catharsis, an ‘a ha’ experience as was the following: I was lucky enough to attend the 50th anniversary of the cohort of pre-service teachers who attended Wellington Teachers’ College in 1968. In the course of the pleasurable evening a common experience remembered was the staff philosophy at the College, “that they should try to develop the person and then the teacher would emerge from that”\(^1\) in cultural activities, such as art, reading, music, talking, dialogue and so on during their training. Sam Hunt the poet and New Zealand treasure was a student to whom they made constant and well-deserved reference. Sam never graduated – apparently the Dean told him to concentrate on his poetry skills.

We have come a long way from such a perspective, or so we are apt to think – our teachers are arguably more professional, the national curriculum is detailed and teachers meet clearly defined standards on graduation. Yet, when I talk with my Islamic educational colleagues I learn that the point of education in their culture for over a millennium has been to develop the character of the child. We must remember one of the oldest universities\(^2\) in the world is Islamic - it is over 1200 years old and found in Tunisia \(^3\) (Ez-Zitouna University), not in Europe in the Middle Ages as we commonly think. In Chinese-inspired education a version of this is the importance of developing a good moral character - inspired by the views of Confucius - and a deep respect for others. We find a strong other-directed morality rather than an ego-oriented morality in China. In Scandinavian educational culture this is called bildung or dannelse and means the formation of a shared centred-ness and a shared cultural identity. In my limited, but growing understanding of Māori and Pasifika culture, I have noted many of these same points.

\(^1\) Georgia Morgan (2007). A Short History of the Victoria University College of Education Art Collection. Unpublished manuscript.
\(^2\) Established in the year 859, the University of al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco, was the first degree-granting educational institute in the world (as recognised by UNESCO and Guinness World Records).
\(^3\) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Ez-Zitouna#History
Current global speak around the world and in many Anglo-Saxon countries profess a different view on these matters, if we exclude for a moment the point on curriculum knowledge. It is the desire to grow students who are resilient and possess ample funds of ‘grit’ to master set-backs. They are cognitively knowledgeable of their own thought processes. All possess so-called 21st century skills of team work and sociability.

Sometimes, I wonder if the pendulum of education has swung too far and we have lost ourselves in the science of education and in particular that international pastime of measuring literacy and numeracy scores. We want to perform well and to manage ourselves; to be the cleverest in the local, national and international class. This is very much to the exclusion of the other side of the pendulum where character, morality, bildung and other-directedness rest. A phrase I often quote from the Swedish child activist in early 1900 rings in my ears, “the formation of one’s identity is based upon what remains after we have forgotten everything we have learnt” (my translation). As with life we need a pendulum that swings both ways – or do we?