

Can Education Change the World?

It would be hard to argue against the idea that education can change the world. It is put forward as a universal right of freedom— a pure thing that can help drag the developing world up from poverty, and can allow the equality of knowledge to flourish.

Yet there may be another side to this. Perhaps the most civilised and educated people in Europe during the 20th century were the Germans – the culture that produced the greatest music and some of the finest literature. It's universities and schools were among the best in the world. And yet it was responsible for two of the most devastating wars in the history of the world, and levels of brutality and cruelty that the modern world thought it had long abolished.

It might be useful to begin by examining some of the key terms in this question. What, first of all, do we mean by education?

Are we defining education narrowly, as purely just the curriculum undertaken in the developed world at schools and universities? The standard subjects-based education, divided into sciences and arts, and then further divided into the individual subjects? Or do we mean any form of learning, from the way a child comes to understand what things taste good when put in the mouth, and what things really need to be spat out, to the hugely complex series of rules, laws and observations, that make it possible for a hunter-gatherer to survive in the rainforests of Brazil?

It could be argued that if we mean the former – the conventional academic curriculum, then that is a way of society forcing its stifling rules and conventions on people, a way of ensuring that we all remain behind the boundaries that have been put forward for us. From that perspective, you might argue that education is a means not of changing the world, but of keeping it the same, with the same ideas, and people ruling.

What about per say, a more broad type of education – the education of and for life – what some people call 'the school of life' again seems more about surviving in the world than changing it.

And there are other ways of criticising the idea that only through education can the world be changed.

Some of the most 'important' – that is, destructive and terrible events that have ever happen have been brought on by those without an education. Wikipedia has a list of the most terrible wars and catastrophes in human history. Many of them were inflicted on the world by the uneducated. The Mongol conquests of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries killed 30-40 million people, and destroyed many civilized kingdoms, yet the Mongols were illiterate and uneducated, in the modern sense. The conquests of the even more barbaric Tamerlane killed 20-30 million between 1369 and 1405.

So, it seems that education can lead to destruction, and that the lack of it can dramatically change the world – even if that means for the worst.

But this is to ignore science. The world around us has been shaped by the march of science and technology. The drugs that treat us, the engines that move us from one place to another, the computer on which I'm writing this – only exist because of education. So only a fool would say that education can't change the world.

And as individuals, we all have boundless capacities for growth and knowledge. In much of the world that capacity is unfulfilled. Greatness lies buried within individuals. Education can give that greatness a chance to flourish. And I would say that that is a fundamental human right – the right to fulfil our potential.

We live in a world full of terrible challenges – global warming, the struggle for diminishing resources, the clash of ideologies and religions. Education is our only hope of meeting these challenges.

So, not only can education change the world – it might save it.

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