

## The Purpose of Education and Class Inequalities in British Educational System: A Study of Alan Bennett's The History Boys

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### Abstract:

*The debate about the purpose of education seems endless. It varies according to various impulses related to social, religious, political and scientific contexts. Literature also has its recognized contribution. Thus, the aim of this paper is to investigate the purpose of education as reflected in Alan Bennett's play The History Boys. Using the cultural perspective, the research paper sheds light on different styles of teaching used by three teachers; each of them represents a different approach to teaching and to education in general. It also investigates class inequality in British education system as also reflected in the play.*

**Key Words:** Education, History, Literature, Alan Bennett.

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## هدف التعليم والتمييز الصفي في النظام التربوي البريطاني: دراسة في مسرحية طلاب التاريخ

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#### ملخص:

يبدو أن الجدل حول الغرض من التعليم سيستمر بلا نهاية، حيث تختلف وجهات النظر بحسب الدوافع المرتبطة بالسياقات الاجتماعية والدينية والسياسية والعلمية. وبالتالي فإن الأدب له إسهاماته المتميزة في مناقشة هذه القضية المهمة، ومن ثم، فإن هدف هذه الورقة البحثية هو تقصي الهدف من التعليم كما ناقشه الكاتب البريطاني آلان بينيت في مسرحيته "طلاب التاريخ". وقد اتبع الباحث النقد الثقافي في تسليط الضوء على الأساليب المختلفة للتدرис التي يتبعها ثلاثة من المدرسين في هذه المسرحية؛ حيث إن كل مدرس يمثل نظرية تربوية مختلفة. كما تشير الدراسة إلى التمييز الصفي في النظام التعليمي البريطاني كما انعكس في المسرحية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التعليم؛ التاريخ؛ الأدب؛ آلان بينيت.

#### Introduction:

In all parts of the world and in almost every culture, education is very important to a person's future. But why is it so important? What is the purpose of the education that we get from the early stages of our life into adulthood? This debate about the purpose of education does not seem to have an end. Should a person get education to be prepared for the

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workplace, or should education be more focused on social, academic, cultural and intellectual development that produces good citizens?<sup>(1)</sup>.

People, especially teachers, have different opinions concerning the real purpose of education inside classrooms and also in school in general. It is important to know that other people, say colleagues, administrators, supervisors, and parents may all have different points of view about the purpose of education. One of the old views is that schools have to prepare students to be functional adults in their everyday lives. Reading, writing, and doing mathematics are the basics of a student's education. Another old belief which is held by many is creating thoughtful adults, who will be able to practice their social and political roles.

One of the fundamental goals of education is learning how to learn. Schools should teach students how to get knowledge after leaving school. Thus, understanding how to solve problems is essential for future success. School lessons teach students how to be successful in their future by having good social behaviours like getting to work on time, dressing and behaving properly, getting their work done properly, and dealing with others in a cooperative manner, which is seen, together with solving problems, by many professionals as the most important skills needed for workplace. After all, the debate goes on; what is it that should be taught? And how? What are the teaching techniques and strategies that teachers should follow to achieve their goals of teaching?

This paper aims at investigating the purpose of education as reflected in Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys*. It sheds light on different styles of teaching used by three teachers, each of whom represents a different approach to teaching and to education in general. It also investigates class inequality in British education system as also reflected in the play.

## 1. Historical Context of the Play

Alan Bennett, born in 1934 in England, is a British playwright who was best known for *The Madness of George III* and *The History Boys*. Bennett's work scrutinised the British class system, propriety, and England's north-south cultural split revealing alarming and comical results simultaneously.

Bennett's first play was *Forty Years On*. His exceptional talent was his translation of the ordinary into tragicomic dramas, and he could employ his distinctive light touch even when writing about knowledgeable heavy weights such as Wittgenstein or Kafka. He was skilful in creating an authentic dialogue for the "ordinary people" and in depicting the manners of middle and upper classes. Bennett's diverse talents that pleased his audiences led critics to identify him as one of the leading playwrights of the day.

Bennett's play *The History Boys* earned him both the Critics' Circle Theatre Award and the Laurence Olivier Award for best new play. The play was set in Yorkshire in the 1980s and it highlighted a clash of values between two teachers tutoring a boys' class through their preparation for entrance examinations to Oxford University. The play was successful both as a serious criticism of Britain's education system—then and now—and as a splendidly comic show business<sup>(2)</sup>. *The History Boys* was followed by a film version, which won six Tony Awards. Bennett also published various novellas and short-story collections.

Bennett is one of the authors who discussed the social and political changes of the 1980s that made considerable changes to the education system whose aim was to create a 'market' for education. Schools started competing with each other to attract 'customers' (students). The idea was that "bad" schools would lose students to the "good" schools. So they have to either improve their performance or reduce in capacity and then close.

The reforms included the introduction of The National Curriculum which became compulsory for schools. Before teaching certain subjects and curricula, schools had had the freedom to choose their own subjects. National curriculum assessments were also introduced and it was officially known as Standard Assessment Tests (SATS). Besides, formula funding meant that the more children a school attracts to it, the more financial support it would receive.

Parents, again, were able to choose the school for their children and use the open enrolment. Most schools could withdraw from local government control and become scholarship-maintained schools, thus, receiving funding direct from central government. The government offered more money than the school would usually get from the local authority. Religious education was reformed; the law stated that the majority of collective worship should be "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character".

Two education laws are important to elucidate the origins of today's education systems. The first one, known as 'The Scottish Act', is distinguished by the obligatory school attendance from the age of 5 to 12. The second one, born in 1944, is distinguished by exempting students from tuition fees. It was at this time that the triple system was introduced in British education system, which in turn led to what is known as technical, grammar and modern schools. It is important to note here that in 1988 the national curriculum was applied in British schools, with English, Maths, Science, and Religion being compulsory subjects. So it was compulsory for children to go to school from 5 to 11 years old as a 'primary stage', and then a specific education would be offered to end at the age of 16.

There is, still, a variety of schools available to British students that could be divided into three sections the most important of which is the 'Independent schools' that have their own

'curriculum and admission policies'. This variety distinguishes the British education system from other systems in the world.

## 2. The Purpose of Education as Reflected in *The History Boys*

Some of the play's raised questions concern the general purpose of knowledge and education could be: Is education needed to be practically beneficial in order to help students pass exams and be quantifiably fruitful? Or is it needed to motivate personal development and wisdom, and thus supports students in their life experiences? To answer this and other questions that can trigger in our minds, we have to shed light on the different teaching techniques adopted by the fictional teachers in the play that reflect three different perspectives to the educational system.

Bennett's play reveals the changes that took place in the educational policies and approaches during Margaret Thatcher's rule in the 1980s and raises several issues about the nature of education and knowledge that remain significant nowadays. Two chief perspectives can be detected in the play, though a third important one can also be inferred.

The two major perspectives detected in the play are embodied in the modern technique that depends on grand narratives and that of the postmodern that depends on performativity and productivity. The clash between the two methods of teaching is represented in the opposing ideas about education adopted by the teacher of general studies Hector and the history teacher Irwin. It is a clash between the "presentation" of education and the "commodification" of education. Furthermore, Mrs Lintott, the teacher of history, provides a criticism of the educational system from a feminist perspective<sup>(3)</sup>.

## 2.1. Hector

Hector is a teacher of literature and general studies. He teaches knowledge lacking any practical application. The title of his course is “a verbal fig-leaf”, while the mild expression is General Studies which he considers to be a euphemism that hides the true nature of his lessons. Hector is said to represent the “old guard” of British education. For him, education is a way to assist one’s own growth and help relieve emotional pain. Hector teaches the boys to memorize poetry by heart so that it can help them with the inevitable difficulties of life. In his classes, the students often act scenes from plays or movies. Hector believes that the ability to inspire and enlighten the students has to be the most important. He adopts education for education’s sake, and puts great emphasis on arts, so he rejects formal syllabus, timetables and lesson plans. His students became good not only in quoting, but also in acting and singing.

Hector’s teaching has no practical purpose. One student, Timms, describes Hector’s teaching technique to Irwin: “Mr Hector’s stuff’s not meant for the exam, sir. It’s to make us more rounded human beings”<sup>(4)</sup>. This method will not help the students get into prestigious universities. He always tells the boys that prestigious universities will not necessarily give them contentment; after achieving a certain level of success, life still goes on. Therefore, it is not mandatory to serve the requirements of the educational establishments or any social systems but rather to serve the personal needs outside these systems.

Hector employs the grand narrative or modern technique to enlighten the students or, as his student says, “making the students more rounded human beings”<sup>(5)</sup>. His adoption of this method indicates the freedom that academics have in choosing the education policies they think to be beneficial. They do not let other social systems determine the content of their education or their role inside the educational systems. However, this method proved

inconvenient according to the new political and economic climate that subjects all aspects of life to the demands of the market, seeing education as a product that should cover the market needs. Hector's method, the modern method, is considered an old style compared with the contemporary policies that have different criteria for knowledge and education.

Hector's method goes in opposing direction with the new economic, social and political context since his teaching does not produce quantifiable or measurable results. Of course, there are some results, but they cannot be seen in terms of profitability and productivity that dominate the new educational climate which requires statistical results to be assessed on the basis of the new assessment methods introduced into the educational systems. So these results cannot be judged as useful or efficient. Beside the new assessment methods, there appeared the league tables that pushed all schools to compete to get high positions on these tables. As the Headmaster put it:

It is not that he does not produce results. He does. But they are unpredictable and unquantifiable and in the current educational climate that is no use. He well may be doing his job but there is no method that I know of that enables me to assess the job that he is doing<sup>(6)</sup>.

Education is no longer an independent system; it has been a part of the social system: a subsystem that has to serve the requirements of the basic system. Thus, individuals have to be well qualified to achieve the goals of this system. Educational systems are now to be defined in terms of the norms and standards of the neoliberal logic. This logic has its own criteria that have to be fulfilled and this is what Hector could not understand. Hector is strongly opposed to the results-oriented teaching method in which knowledge is considered successful if it is skilfully used by students in exams and interviews, if it helps schools gain a considerable number of scholarships, and if it raises schools high on the league tables.

With the motorcycle accident which leaves Irwin crippled and Hector dead, the play in its end comes down on the side that knowledge and education are essential as ways to deal with life's unpleasant arbitrariness. However, Mrs Lintott perceives that some of Hector's students ended up having unsatisfying lives; they have an erroneous sense that art can protect them. Posner, for example, the student who most entirely adopts Hector's attitudes, ends up lonely, with little material success compared with his classmates. Hector's final words at the end of the play, words that seem to come from beyond the grave, are that the boys should "pass the parcel. That's sometimes all you can do. Take it, feel it and pass it on"<sup>(7)</sup>. Though it was not clear in the play what is it exactly to take and pass, most of his phrases were a bit vague. But Hector knows very well that the game of success is small and insufficient in the face of our ultimate mortality. The idea is to use literature and history as tools to more enjoyable and pleasant life

## 2.2. Irwin

On the other extreme of the play's major question we have the school's Headmaster, who sees education in practical terms. He strongly wants his students to join high rated universities, particularly Oxford and Cambridge, in order to promote the profile of his school and gain more prosperity and prestige. For these reasons, the Headmaster brings a new university graduate, Irwin, to prepare the students to compete for seats at Oxford and Cambridge<sup>(8)</sup>.

Irwin's teaching principles and his approach to history are in accordance with the changing perspectives on education. He is supported by the school headmaster who adopts educational reforms of the neoliberal logic of the 1980s.

Irwin develops a special technique to make the students more competitive candidates to university scholarships. He represents a kind of objectivity and stimulates the students to take

a different attitude towards history, even if they do not believe in the truth of their argument, or to find unconventional ways to answer expectable exam questions.

Having a different attitude to history can distinguish the students from other candidates who will offer expected answers to common exam questions. At first, the students dealt suspiciously with Irwin's method because they believe it is not right to have such an attitude to history that is different from the official versions of the past. One student, Scripps, describes Irwin's method as follows: "For purposes of the examination, truth is, if not an irrelevance, then so relative as just to amount to another point of view"<sup>(9)</sup>. However, they accept Irwin's teaching at the end and employ his technique to provide answers to the entrance exam questions. Now, Irwin's method taught the students to challenge both the authorized version of history and the authority that made it. He wants them to think outside the box. It was a move that was allowed neither by Hector nor by Mrs Lintott. The student Dakin says: "I didn't know that you were allowed to call art and literature into question"<sup>(10)</sup>. In contrast, proposing a new viewpoint about historical truths which have already been established turns out to be ethically questionable when raising the issue of the Holocaust and this was something rejected by Hector who refused to make the common dominant version of history just relative. This approach is more experimental and gives less importance to the literature and arts which are so valuable to Hector. Irwin believes that those disciplines are auxiliary and that they are intended to support an argument, nothing more.

This wide gap between the two teachers' approaches is most clearly realized in the scene in which they argued with the boys about the appropriateness of using the Holocaust as an exam topic. Hector, as well as Dakin, is horrified at the thought of it, saying that any attempt would be reductive regardless of how respectful the attempt is. For Dakin, the issue is personal

as he lost some of his relatives in the Holocaust and is not able to see the humanity of trying to look at it with anything other than horror. In contrast, Irwin feels that the issue can be studied objectively without the typical emotional reactions that the event evokes.

For both; Headmaster and Irwin, this is a matter of commodification which is the standard criteria of the current dominant climate; the climate that subjects all aspects of life to the demands of the market. Their aim is to impress the entrance exam committee to earn the school as many university scholarships as possible and thus raise the school profile, although the official version of the Holocaust issue is also dominant in the educational system. So Irwin's technique is oriented towards producing performative and commodifiable knowledge to the students. Yet, for Irwin, his technique is not just making clever discussions, but rather identifying, selecting, and ordering the particular facts which will be cleverly presented. It is not simply, as one of his students describes, turning the knowledge upon its head. It is, in fact, more complex and aims to, as Scripps comments, "find a proposition, invert it, and then look around for proofs"<sup>(11)</sup>.

As mentioned earlier, what makes Irwin's technique valid is that it will help the students attend prestigious universities and make the school more competitive by assigning it a high position in leagues tables. A part from that, this method resembles the teaching method at university; the more you read, the stronger your arguments will be. It is important to mention here that Irwin is not against Mr Hector's or Mrs Lintott's methods for he knows that both methods are essential for the students' exams.

### 2.3. Lintott

Like Hector, Mrs Lintott's approach, the lecturing method, does not allow the students to think outside the box. She teaches history and represents the teaching style that has

dominated the educational system since the national curriculum was introduced into schools. In her course, the boys acquired the desired knowledge of history needed to achieve a high score in the examinations, but they actually do not take part in the material itself. For her, teaching is getting the students memorize the required knowledge and then throw it up in the exam.

In this point, Mrs Lintott's teaching method is like Hector's. They are not profitable according to the new educational policy. On the other hand, it resembles Irwin's method in that each of them has a different attitude to history, knowing that there is always another version of it, although Mrs Lintott sticks to the official version only. What she does in her classes is conveying the official facts to her students in a well-organized manner; the official facts that exclude women from power positions. She always says that facts are facts and history is history, not drama<sup>(12)</sup>. This method has its negative effects at the long term. It shapes the students way of thinking, and thus their identity because they study the knowledge that people in power positions want them to study, with all its deficiencies, limitations, and hidden facts.

Mrs Lintott's method of memorizing and then repeating the information, regardless the type of information, does not in fact improve the students' intelligence because the nature of the exam questions make the students remember the information for a short time just to forget it when they finish the exam. Students learn for the sake of the exams only; they do not gain long-term information. Students who find difficulty studying in this way will be discouraged. However, this does not mean that they are less intelligent than other students. A typical example is dyslexic students. Many dyslexic students are very intelligent but they cannot achieve high marks in the exam because they are not able to express themselves as

required in the exam. We have heard of great scientists or writers who had not been good students at schools and who had even been dismissed from schools. From this we can deduce that the schooling system does not always get the best of students. Intelligent students leave schools with low confidence because they are named low-achieving students as they do not match the dominant schooling system.

To conclude with this part, the three teachers' methods are important and they can be integrated to produce the best results, Mrs Lintott provides the students with the basic knowledge they need, though this knowledge by itself is not sufficient; Mr Hector's dialectical method teaches the students how to think quickly, innovatively, and creatively; he teaches them how to argue using the basic knowledge they have been taught; and Irwin, by his rhetorical method, teaches them how to impress others by their arguments when they adopt unusual points of view.

### 3. Class Inequality in British Education System

After the educational reforms of the 1980s, inequality in British schools appeared to have increased; fewer children of poor families could attend highly ranked schools. Fearing from narrowing their curriculum and funding, schools started behaving in "selfish" ways to protect their own interests due to the system of winners and losers.

Education is also more affected by socio-economic inequality more than any other government policy. Socio-economic inequality is clearly reflected in *The History Boys*. Bennett exposes the unfairness of private education. He has frankly said that inequities between public and private schools lead to inequalities in university acceptances, and this effectively maintains the old-fashioned hierarchy in British society<sup>(13)</sup>. The students in the play are in a

grammar school which means that they do not have to pay to attend. They are intelligent enough to succeed at Oxford and Cambridge owing to Mrs Lintott's teachings. However, they need some extra training and skills in order to reach the same level as the private schools students, who have been preparing for these examinations during their whole study. Private schools are the most prestigious schools in Britain and they primarily serve richer students. Irwin always reminds the boys that they will be competing against more advantaged students, like those who have travelled to Rome, for example, and can talk about that on the exam.

Knowing their class background, the grammar school boys seem to have a harder road to success. Rudge, in particular, comes from a working-class family. Throughout the play, people look down upon him, humiliate him, and think that he will not succeed. His father was a concierge at Oxford, and this fact eventually helps Rudge get admission. Apparently, Oxford wants only to make a progress show by accepting the son of a concierge as one of its students. In this way, Bennett attracts attention to the unfairness of the educational system; wealthy students will always have the upper hand. Class is generally an obstacle for these students on their journey to success, but surprisingly, Rudge's working-class background helps him. The play thus shows class as one of the invisible factors affecting education.

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