

THE AIMS OF EDUCATION IN AN AGE OF STASIS AND CHANGE

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Summary

Grounded in the position that education is a universal, systematic effort intended to change the knowledge, behaviors, dispositions and skills of individuals, this article challenges the reader to consider the need for the development of a more sustainable future through carefully planned teaching and skillfully nurtured learning. Working from the belief that our global future rests with young citizens, the question is raised as to what are the aims of education.

To these ends, this article considers the role of social theory in shaping the collective future. A historical review connects social, economic and political trends with the development of schools and what they teach. The fundamental relationship between a moral code and a sensitivity of aesthetic dimensions of life among the peoples of the planet is considered, and the interrelationship between schools and the greater society is examined in light of the critical question of global sustainability. It is argued that since contemporary life is sophisticated, the future requires the development of citizens capable of engaging in critical thinking. It is further argued that education for sustainability will require that an educational strategy be put in place that results in the development of individual world citizens who understand and appreciate the relationship linking education for sustainability and education for social justice. Recognizing the constancy of change in our dynamic world and accepting the

democratic imperative, the point is made that only through constructive dialogue connecting communities, parents, educators and students can the goal of a more sustainable future for humanity be achieved.

1. Introduction

“Even the most valid of aims which can be put in words will, as words, do more harm than good unless one recognizes that they are not aims, but rather suggestions to educators as to how to observe, how to look ahead, and how to choose in liberating and directing the energies of the concrete situations in which they find themselves.” John Dewey

The above quote from one of the preeminent educational philosophers of the twentieth century subtly captures the very complex notion that educational aims are by definition dynamic, and therefore need to adapt and change given new circumstances and the continued evolution of democratic societies. This need for adaptive change in education and its aims continues in the contemporary moment when education in all its ramifications is essential for sustainability and a sustainable future. Since 1948, when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations affirmed, "everyone has a right to education," there has been a growing universal acceptance that education is a basic human right. The United Nations' initiative, "Education for All," which began in 1990, has endeavored to make formal education accessible to all children and adults. However, there are still over 100 million children in the world who do not receive any formal education, and over one sixth of the world's population continue to be illiterate. These challenging numbers, along with the pressing need that education contribute to a more sustainable future through teaching and learning, assure that education and its goals will be among the most important, debated and contested issues of the of the 21st century.

Mass schooling, as a universal, nation-state goal, is a relatively new issue in the history of the world. In many respects, schools have assumed the traditional roles of the family and the church in the education of children, and by the twentieth century state authorization, control and funding of education for the masses had become the norm. Many forces have influenced and are influencing this process. Local, state and national governments develop and apply educational policies and practices. Parents, educators, intellectuals and special interest groups also attempt to shape the formal educational process in one way or another. However, probably the most important forces supporting and shaping universal modern education were the historical, political, and economic changes, which required the transformation of individuals into responsible democratic citizens and into productive industrial workers. As a result, education has become a universal, systematic effort to teach and to change the knowledge, behaviors, dispositions and skills of individuals. Universal education, in both the public and private sense, has become central in the socialization and acculturation of young citizens based on the wants and needs of modern industrialized society.

The wants and needs of a society, however, are ever changing depending on the political, historical and personal context of time and place. The wants are expressed as the aims of education and are derived from the general values of the society, which in

the modern era are heavily influenced by forces supporting consumption and industrial production. Education itself does not have aims; it is parents, teachers, and society that hold aims for education. Education is part of complex, nation-state systems which define the meaning of a “good” education. As Dewey (1916) stated,

The vice of externally imposed ends has deep roots. Teachers receive them from superior authorities; these authorities accept them from what is current in the community. The teachers impose them upon children. As a consequence, the intelligence of the children is not free; it is confined to receiving the aims laid down from above.

Today's greatest educational debates are not over school funding, equity, segregation, transportation or pluralism. The current question revolves around the aims of education: What aims should education have, whose aims should be put into practice and why? It seems that knowledge is power; therefore, since school curriculums reinforce officially approved knowledge, those who influence and control education exercise extraordinary power in society.

Currently, the liberal tradition of education, which endeavors to balance the public interests of society with the private interests of the individual, is being challenged by the needs of a changing world and a global economy. The critical thinking of independent citizens willing to assume their responsibilities and rights within the democratic political process of the nation-state has been the bedrock of this tradition. Through the liberal tradition, the “good life,” material progress and security were within the reach of individual and society alike. The “good life,” however, has been challenged by those concerned about the over-consumption and incredible short and long-term costs of this model. Critical theorists have insisted that unacceptable levels of social injustice are inherent in the liberal educational tradition. Environmentalists see an unacceptable burden on the earth in humanity’s ecological footprint resulting from the goal of material progress. Feminists and minority groups argue over various interpretations of equity and equality for a better world. Whose voices will be heard as national governments, in both the developed and developing worlds, exercise their power over educational policies and practices?

2. The Role of Theory in the Aims of Education

The aims of education are directly impacted by theories concerning the purpose of schooling. Those in the field outline several theoretical perspectives used to explain the aims of education: social transmission theories, interpretive theories and social transformation theories.

In the 19th century, the school overtook the socialization role previously belonging to the family and church. Schools became responsible for the transmission of knowledge, rules, and customs. In this tradition, functionalists claim that the purposes of education can be divided into four categories: intellectual, political, economic, and social. The most common aim of schooling according to functionalist theory is to develop the intellect; to provide children with the knowledge and skills necessary to survive in society. Reading, writing, and math are included in this category. The political aims of

education center around the preparation of future citizens and workers. Functionalists argue that schools must prepare children to become productive and active adults. Social science classes are often responsible for teaching children their civic duties, patriotism, and how to be law-abiding citizens.

Those who espouse a functionalist theory as the purpose of education maintain broad aims in the purpose of schooling. Through education, the social problems of racism, discrimination, hunger, poverty, sexually transmitted diseases, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, pollution and other environmental issues can be solved. In this tradition, the current manifestation of full-service schools provides on-site assistance from social workers, nurses, and law enforcement officials, as well as health and rehabilitative services in the education and support of students. This functionalist view of education endeavors to balance the interests of the individual with the needs of society in securing progress and security.

In terms of the economic aims of education, schools prepare students for work and careers. Today the school-to-career movement in the United States and other countries focuses on student acquisition of marketable skills as defined by both national and global economies. Schools groom the work force by teaching the benefits of punctuality, efficiency and teamwork. As a result of a changing workplace, employers increasingly demand the preparation in schools of “thinking workers” who are equipped with the talents of flexibility, adaptability and problem-solving to meet the challenges of lean production and just-in-time delivery of goods and services. Testing, tracking and ability grouping identify the "best" students for the "best" jobs. Education in this sense plays a role in a country's economic development, and directly and indirectly in reinforcing the consumer/producer model that is shaping the global economy.

From another perspective, interpretive theorists or phenomenologists focus on the social aspects of education. Working from the perspective that knowledge and skills cannot be poured into a student's head, phenomenologists believe that education must be constructed via the social interactions of students and teachers. Knowledge is relative and subjective. These aims are out of sync in much of the world with the current demands for standardization, accountability, and testing.

Social transformation theorists, including critical theorists, claim that the aim of education should be to transform and emancipate the individual, not to perpetuate the existing social structure. They argue that schools help the rich and powerful maintain their wealth and power. Education should be a liberating dialogue between teachers and students. Students and teachers are to be active participants in a critical dialogue that transforms the oppressed, liberates the oppressor and thereby, achieves social justice. Education is the vehicle for change within society. However, many critics see this theory as reinforcing the value of individualism at a time when a more collective understanding of the ecological and interdependent nature of the world is needed. As a practical matter, other critics see this theory and its educational aims as inoperable and anachronistic in the functioning of mainstream public education.

There is a direct link between the theories regarding the purposes of education and the definition of the aims of education. Depending on the theory espoused by policy makers

at the local, state, or national levels, aims are handed down to teachers in the public school classroom, and indirectly influence the educational aims of private schools. The current aims of education drive the curriculum. Teachers are expected to incorporate these aims into their teaching philosophy. Since theory is affected by the historical, social, and political context of time and place, espoused educational aims are in constant flux with personal teaching philosophies. The aims of education are a reflection of the prevailing or dominant values of the culture and the society. As dominant values change or evolve, aims of public institutions, including schools, change. Even though such changes may be subtle at times, they exist nevertheless.

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Biographical Sketches

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