

A Discussion on Educational Aims: Towards Humanistic Educational Aims and What We Can Learn from the Original Aims of Compulsory Schooling

*DEBATE SOBRE LAS FINALIDADES DE LA EDUCACIÓN: HACIA UNAS
FINALIDADES EDUCATIVAS HUMANISTAS Y LO QUE PODEMOS APRENDER DE
LAS FINALIDADES ORIGINALES DE LA ESCOLARIZACIÓN OBLIGATORIA*

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ABSTRACT

Should we learn from the past when it comes to the aims of schooling? One is compelled to take a position on the issue of educational aims and on whether the direction of current educational practices should be based on the original goals of schooling. This article deals with the goals of introducing compulsory schooling in two contexts - Prussia and the United States. It then compares these contexts to the current aims of schooling as envisioned by humanists who are critically opposed to the newest educational approaches as well as to the classical ones. This article presents

the normative solutions of humanist authors, mostly building on the legacy of Nel Noddings, as well as examples and "anti-examples" in a historical context. Ultimately, the article reopens a neglected yet necessary discussion about educational aims by reaching conclusions about what sort of inspiration can be taken from the historical aims of compulsory schooling.

KEY WORDS

educational aims, compulsory schooling, humanistic education, historical aims, comprehensive schooling

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RESUMEN

¿Debemos aprender del pasado en lo que respecta a los objetivos de la escolarización? Uno se ve obligado a posicionarse sobre la cuestión de los objetivos de la educación y sobre si la orientación de las prácticas educativas actuales debería basarse en los objetivos originales de la escolarización. Este artículo aborda los objetivos de la introducción de la escolarización obligatoria en dos contextos: Prusia y Estados Unidos. A continuación, compara estos contextos con los objetivos actuales de la escolarización tal y como los conciben los humanistas que se oponen críticamente a los enfoques educativos más recientes, así como a los clásicos. El artículo presenta las soluciones normativas de los autores humanistas,

basadas sobre todo en el legado de Nel Noddings, así como ejemplos y “antiejemplos” en un contexto histórico. En última instancia, el artículo reabre un debate descuidado pero necesario sobre los objetivos de la educación al llegar a conclusiones sobre qué tipo de inspiración puede extraerse de los objetivos históricos de la escolarización obligatoria.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Objetivos educativos, escolarización obligatoria, educación humanística, objetivos históricos, escolarización global

1. Introduction: The Importance of Discussing Educational Aims

With the same intention that Alfred North Whitehead (1967) attributes to his essay *The Aims of Education*, the theme of the aims of education needs to be approached both prior to the implementation of teaching and retrospectively and continuously in the process of teaching. Defining aims that should govern education is considered crucial by Whitehead as well as others. In recent times, the awareness of the importance of talking about aims was formed and maintained to a large extent by the American author Nel Noddings (2012), who expressed the concern that pedagogical practice was failing to respond to the basic questions of educational aims and that the direction of education was increasingly determined by standardization, quantification, and the measuring of educational results. On some levels, rather an incomplete discussion about educational aims can be explained by the identity crisis of the corresponding field of study – the philosophy of education – which constantly struggles to maintain its interdisciplinary status in the sciences (Burbules, 2018).

At no point should a discussion about educational aims be considered finished or closed because the set of aims can quickly become outdated. In Noddings's (2004) view, without continual and reflective discussions on aims, education may simply become a poor embodiment of its finest vision. She understood that education – just like any other value-based concept – has taken on newer meanings as times change, and so the aims of education must also change alongside them. Noddings further observes that even if these value-based concepts could be stated in fairly constant general terms, the meaning of these constant words would take on a new shape as conditions change. She sees an important function of philosophers of education in critiquing the aims of education in light of contemporary cultures.

Conversely, some critics have advocated preserving the basic values and aims in contemporary schooling (e.g., Syamsul 2018). They base this on the premise that it is possible – and even necessary – to learn from the past. The central issue of this dispute lies in the dialectic nature of educational aims. This concerns the kind of educational values, norms, and goals of schools that were acquired by their very establishment with a consideration of current social values in education and of cultural and historical changes.

This article is an effort to reopen the discussion about the aims of education, and it asks what can be applied to today's humanistic educational aims from the past by taking a specific look at compulsory schooling in Prussia and the United States. In other words, in setting current educational aims, the question is explored whether it is possible to turn to the function assigned to schooling at the time of its conception – specifically when this concerns mass education achieved through compulsory schooling. The choice of these two particular cases was due to two criteria - primacy and contrast. The choice of the case of Prussia is prompted by its pioneering role in introducing a state system of compulsory schooling in Europe. The choice of the US education system is brought about by the fact that it was a contrasting state system to Prussia at the time of the introduction of mass compulsory schooling. Bringing the two cases closer together, it is possible both to understand the first compulsory schooling initiatives and to have a greater possibility of generalization by paying attention not only to the absolutist but also to the decentralized political context.

1.1. Aims

In *Happiness and Education*, Noddings presents a critique of contemporary tendencies favoring aim-less education:

Today, educators cut short the thinking process by answering the “why” question with “Because it’s on the standard test.” If we ask why “it” is on the test, we are referred to the experts who constructed the test; aims-talk thus ends in authority. (Noddings, 2003, 258)

Noddings I refer here to the phenomenon of insufficient discussion of educational objectives that creates room for external determination of the direction of schooling.

Depending on the group of critics, there is thus a one-sided direction of education toward industrial or intellectual growth. Both are closely related because – under the neoliberal tendencies of schools (Davies, 2015) – one type of skill is preferred at the expense of others. From the point of view of critical pedagogy, this is caused by the fact that the interests of individuals and economic growth overshadow social needs and social justice, while the state school system is a means to push ideological interests in the discourse governed by the market (Giroux, 2011).

Noddings is one of the most notable proponents of the philosophical critiques of approaches favoring the intellectual part of the psyche (Haidt, 2006; Marcuse, 1970), extending it to the education process. The continuing expert criticism of favoring the academic skills of pupils and students (Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014; Doležalová, 2011; Noddings, 2003, 2004, 2005b; Loudová, 2011) over the development of their moral, social, emotional, civic, sporting, and aesthetic skills and qualities recommends focusing more on these very areas (Noddings 2005b).

In addition to the recommendations for increasing the hours and the quality of character education and other types of non-cognitive scholarly training, new kinds of curricula and didactic approaches are being devised along with a push to change the relationship of teachers towards students. According to some scholars, classes that strive to develop students' character traits should have leading positions in the curriculum (Zelina, 1994); other authors support a curriculum that helps develop civic skills (Thornberg, 2009); while others advocate for a curriculum that promotes education for happiness to be an integral part of the school curriculum (Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014); and yet others place more emphasis on the social dimension of the curriculum.

The dominant opinion within this last group is that positive social development in childhood and adolescence demands an investment beyond the academic curriculum, taking the form of a social curriculum that strengthens the formation of pro-social values at an earlier age (Olsson et al., 2013). Of all the educational tools emphasizing the development of the social aspect, relational pedagogy¹ (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004), the ethics of care (Soltis, 2005; Noddings 2004, 2005a), and liberal education (Nussbaum, 2003) are all worthy of mention.

Ultimately, the varied range of approaches (methods, forms, approaches, strategies, and environments) promoted by humanist authors are all directed towards one thing: comprehensive education and the wide-ranging aims of education – also known as “the education of the whole child”.

¹ Relational pedagogy is a concept that includes several approaches with the central premise that a meaningful educational process can only be achieved if interpersonal relationships are understood and carefully developed (Bingham & Sidorkin 2004). One of them is an ethics of care, which was made well known within pedagogy by Noddings. Jonas F. Soltis (2005) considers her effort to be the return of a human outlook to an educational system that had become dehumanized.

1.2. What Are Humanistic Educational Aims?

The humanist-oriented school is a heterogenous concept, complicating the ability to properly define humanistic educational aims in general; however, the effort to understand and introduce this term is necessary to navigate how humanist educators and theorists can be influenced by the former initiative of mass compulsory schooling. What characterizes humanistic education, and, on the contrary, what does not constitute humanism in schooling?

There are several basic types of humanistic approaches in pedagogy that relate to differently emphasized sub-goals² (Hadzigeorgiou, 2005). Fundamentally, the humanistic school is characterized by virtues such as wisdom, justice, humanity, harmony, and peace (Aloni, 2011). Nimrod Aloni contrasts the aims of the classical humanistic educational process – refined character, reflexive thinking, a lack of prejudice, good taste, social responsibility, friendliness, and kindness – with the humanism of the twenty-first century. The latter is characterized as a cosmopolitan ideology and moral code that problematizes human progress, personal well-being, and a person's dignity as the ultimate goals of any human thinking and acting. This essentially means giving preference to values such as equality, growth, and solidarity before a different set of values – be they religious, ideological, economic, or national (Aloni, 2011). According to Aloni, this also includes a commitment to pluralism, democracy, and human rights. It is possible to approach the conceptual definition of a humanistic educational process from another angle, which is that “a student is not just a learner, but a human being” (Hadzigeorgiou, 2005); however, in the twenty-first century, more emphasis is put on academic results, standardization, and testing (Soltis, 2005), which seems to further advance the dehumanization in education. Contemporary forms of dehumanization in education are listed by Aloni (2011) through examples in which a person, based on their education, can be considered a tool – a “fanatical soldier”,

² Hadzigeorgiou (2005) offers the following typology. The liberal approach puts an emphasis on goals and values such as intellectual freedom, moral autonomy, critical thinking, creative imagination, and initiation into the various forms of knowledge. The progressive approach accentuates problem-solving, experience, and democracy. The existentialist approach stresses freedom of choice, authenticity, and responsibility. The humanistic/therapeutic approach emphasizes self-concept, personal fulfilment, self-actualization, and interpersonal relations. The critical approach highlights identity, dialogue, problem-posing, social responsibility, social justice, critical consciousness, and participatory democracy. The transformative approach promotes vision, transformation, and ecological thinking.

“submissive worker”, or “dependent consumer” – to be “used and abused” to reach even more wealth and dominance.

The primary factor of humanistic approaches in the school environment is the “human element”, which can be interpreted as embracing both the personal and the social dimensions (Hadzigeorgiou, 2005). The central concept in all humanistic approaches is the “self” and as Yannis Hadzigeorgiou asserts, that is the basis for developing the imperative of the proper tension between individuality, personal growth, autonomy, authenticity, and commitment to social goals – even in the context of education in school.

The goals of humanist-oriented schools are critical and creative thinking skills, independent judgment, cognitive development, moral judgment, communication and social skills, and a lack of prejudice (Hadzigeorgiou, 2005). The consensus on the ethical and pedagogical goals of humanism concerns the idea that the end does not justify all means (Aloni, 2011). According to Aloni, humanistic education primarily builds on an atmosphere that is supposed to protect pupils and students from pushing academic content and convictions through corporal punishment and belittling.

2. The Historical Aims of Schooling

Historically, there have been various reasons for establishing educational institutions. The aims vary depending on the school type, level, and system. The following section considers the original aims of compulsory institutionalized education in Prussia and the United States to learn what drove early compulsory school reformers and whether any of the aforementioned humanist aims featured among the initial aims of compulsory schooling.

2.1. The Initial Aims of Compulsory Schooling in Prussia

Murray Rothbard presents the radical opinion that the Prussian government had introduced the first compulsory education system to ensure that the teachings of the established church were followed and to suppress dissent spreading through schools (Rothbard, 1947). The tendencies to generate “healthy public opinion”, inculcate “proper virtues”, teach “proper subordination”, and confide in and revere rulers

were, in Rothbard's words, all characteristics of the early attempts to establish compulsory education.

The fact that some early modern reformers had theocratic purposes for establishing compulsory schooling was not surprising and is evident in the religious foundation of church schools and universities. James Van Horn Melton (1988) states that in the sixteenth century, Protestant and Catholic princes, prelates, nobles, and magistrates had sought to make religious education compulsory for their subjects. Why did the government perceive a need to expand the range of schools and change the nature of education? To a large extent, this decision was driven by the historical circumstances at the dawn of the Enlightenment and the accompanying religious, economic, and political changes, and it aimed to solidify the rulers' power.

In Prussia, the intermingling of premodernity and Enlightenment thinking gave birth to compulsory education in an absolutist political context and to the aims of public education. Early modern Prussian absolutist reformers sought to re-engineer the social order, "master social, economic, and cultural change", and "redefine the manner in which power was displayed and exercised" (Melton, 1988, p. xix). Schools became a means of achieving obedience in a less coercive fashion:

[...] absolutist social policy in Prussia and Austria sought to strengthen moral pillars of authority by refining its exercise. Central to this refinement was a shift in the technology of social discipline, whereby the locus of coercion was to be transferred from outside to inside the individual. Implicit in this attempted transformation was the belief that the extraneous, visible, and objective forms through which authority has traditionally been exercised were no longer efficacious. (Melton 1988, xix)

The Prussian educational reforms of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries enabled absolutist rulers to wield power through religion and morals and impose an advanced and more modern form of discipline upon their citizens. As Joel H. Spring (1947) put it: men would no longer commit criminal acts or lead immoral lives because, within the schoolroom, they would learn to be righteous.

2.2. The Initial Aims of Compulsory Schooling in the United States

The emergence of compulsory public schools in the United States in the latter part of the nineteenth century followed a somewhat different pattern. Authority was more diffuse and decentralized, and the aims were more utilitarian than was generally the case in Prussia. In the United States: "Schools were [...] designed to play a critical role in the socialization of the young, the maintenance of social order, and the promotion of economic development" (Katz, 1976, p. 383).

The compulsory public school system was shaped by the changing social, economic, and cultural conditions. With the shift towards a capitalist mode of production, a disciplined urban workforce was required. According to Spring (1947), schools were needed for the production of workers to meet the needs of the developing corporate state; therefore, the workers had to be trained and selected for their particular places within the industrial system.

Alongside this were parental concerns about children's misbehavior and "anxiety about cultural heterogeneity [...] From the very beginning public schools became agents of cultural standardization" (Katz, 1976, p. 394). The government declared it would take care of society's interests, and it did so in a novel manner – by promoting a system of public education and compulsory schooling.

In addition to these aims, schooling was associated with promoting a literate culture; any discussion of aims could not, therefore, omit the acquisition of cognitive skills:

Very simply, the cultivation of skills and intellectual abilities as ends in themselves did not have nearly as much importance in the view of early school promoters as the problems which I have outlined. Public school systems existed to shape behavior and attitudes, alleviate social problems, and reinforce a social structure under stress. In this context, the character of pupils remained of far greater concern than their minds. (Katz 1976, 399)

Several scholars have argued that early public school reformers did not view literacy as an autotelic end. As has been noted here, the aims of compulsory school systems were instead driven by new social needs prompted by the redefinition of society. In the United States,

the new institutional framework generated by urbanization and industrialization was the impetus for transforming individuals into members of the newly emerging society (Boli et al., 1985); henceforth, public schools would be required to provide the cognitive skills needed in the modern and redefined system. However, cognitive skills and the other personal characteristics that schooling was supposed to foster were secondary to the primary aim. The introduction of compulsory schooling in the United States aimed mostly at utility.

3. Was Humanity an Initial Aim of Compulsory Schooling?

The Prussian and American examples of the introduction of compulsory schooling are instructive in helping us understand the essence of institutionalized public education. Schooling can be viewed as a social instrument used by an initiator intending to influence, shape, cultivate, transform, control, manipulate, and create groups of individuals within larger units. The school can thus be described as an institution that consciously attempts to “turn men into something” (Spring 1947).

The two historical case studies of schooling aims related only to those schools whose mission was to ensure individuals became more disciplined as a group in order to achieve greater utility for the benefit of the nation-state. Early modern rulers and politicians were not particularly concerned with improving the mental state or welfare of individuals. Other previously mentioned values characteristic of humanism in education – e.g., dignity, equality, justice, and reflexive thinking (Aloni, 2011; Hadzigeorgiou, 2005) – were neglected in earlier educational policies and the practice of compulsory schooling.

On top of not reflecting basic humanistic features, the described instances of compulsory schooling implementation seem to demonstrate elements of practices typical of non-humanistic education – promoting religious, ideological, economic, and national values (Aloni, 2011). While acknowledging the reasoning presented below, although early compulsory schooling initiatives were not humanistic, they were ultimately driven by goals that can still serve as inspiration for contemporary educational theorists and practitioners.

4. Conclusion

Spring (1947) maintains that from the historical point of view, schooling means shaping the total character of the individual to meet the political and economic demands of the state. According to Spring, as soon as compulsory schooling was implemented in Prussia, the school was viewed as a means of shaping the right character and implanting the proper morals with the intention of fulfilling the goals of the state. While social welfare was a priority in the historical case study of Prussia and the US, humanist scholars today primarily praise individual welfare alongside social and civic aims.

In interpreting the primary institutional features under which all modern systems of mass education have emerged and expanded, Boli John, Francisco O. Ramirez, and John W. Meyer (1985) came to the simple conclusion that society produces education to make society work better. Within this framework, they identified a direct connection between education and the cognitive and normative base “needed” for members of a complex society to play their different parts successfully. In their opinion, mass education arose as a purposive project reconstructing individuals in accordance with collective religious, political, and economic goods and purposes in order to equip citizens with the skills and worldview required for them to be able to contribute productively to the nation’s success.

Apart from the moral homogenization required to ensure a better functioning state, there is another significant common feature of the chosen state initiatives for compulsory schooling that concurs with the thinking of contemporary education theorists: this is the joint effort to stress the nurturing feature of schooling. It is also the most inspiring element for the current education system, which critics say neglects this aspect.

In contrast with the belief about the collective welfare of a nation-state as the primary goal of school, Noddings (2003, 2013) saw a legitimate aim of education in life adjustment education. Her philosophy emphasizes making the lives of individuals better through focusing on everyday occupations that are significant in personal life – i.e., practical skills in

areas with the highest value for individuals. In addition to happiness³ and care, these skills include homemaking and parenting. The private spheres of aesthetics, sports education, and emotionality in Noddings's work add to the spheres of moral, social, and civic development and awareness:

One purpose of schooling should be to develop the intellect, but that does not mean to stuff the heads of children with material arbitrarily chosen by experts and designed to rank and sort them. It means rather to guide students toward the intelligent use of their intellectual capacities in both personal and public life. It means equipping them with the power to evaluate and direct change, to resist harmful changes and promote those that contribute to human flourishing. (2003, 260)

John Dewey also criticized the "traditional school" of the time for focusing on the intellectual side of human essence and not on the impulse and tendency to act, do, create, and produce – either in the form of utility or art. In this sense, Dewey is part of a larger group of experts whose opinion, along with that of Richard Stanley Peters (1996, 2010), is that learning is not simply a cognitive activity but also an activity that should modify a student's perception of the outside world and their own self as such. According to Dewey, the school curriculum should therefore be related to human activity and social dimensions relating to life and the progress of humanity. He suggests that the forms of exploring and learning should combine practical and academic components: "Learning? – certainly, but living primarily, and learning through and in relation to this living" (Dewey, 1900, p. 15).

Apart from searching for an inspirational element of historical case studies, it is necessary to answer the fundamental question of whether it is possible to learn from history when it comes to the aims of schooling. Within the framework of language education, Phil Cormack (2011) explains his position regarding the fluid nature of educational

³ To justify happiness as a valid educational aim, Noddings (2003) argued that happy individuals were rarely violent or intentionally cruel – either to other human beings or to animals. In her opinion, moral education contributed to building a world in which children were not only happy but "good" as well.

aims in time by perceiving the achieved skillset as a contingent process involving relations between a teacher, a learner, and the subject matter within the context of the uses of texts in broader social settings. He points out that the subject of education (as well as the lives of those being educated and those educating) is constantly changing. Given that social and individual life circumstances from the time of the first initiatives for mass compulsory schooling have gone through many fundamental changes – just as the curriculum has – the inclination of values towards progressive educational aims in contrast to conservative ones seems more legitimate. Even though many of the aforementioned philosophers of education lean towards this solution, the question of the value orientation of schooling needs to be constantly revisited and addressed.

Space has been given in this article to introduce the initial motivations for the establishment of mass compulsory education in order to be able to draw conclusions and point out the inspiring elements for contemporary school systems that operate upon the basis of a humanistic orientation. More specifically, the historical case studies and the theory of the humanistic school are utilized to reopen the discussion about the current aims of schooling and the importance of the nurturing part of schooling and related initiatives.

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