



INTRODUCTION

Re-visiting and re-thinking aims of education

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Education changes over time and place, and so do aims of education. Education was once exclusive and accessible for only a few, often for an elite of some kind. However, education has gradually become more inclusive and accessible or even mandatory for all. And that has not been the only major change that education has undergone in the course of time. Democratization of schooling in present times has often been paired with major modifications of curriculum content, enriched learning strategies and numerous reforms of pedagogical institutions. Nevertheless, a doubleness has accompanied the course of education all along: education has headed not only toward emancipatory and transformative aims but also toward reproductive and functionalist ones. Education is often geared to a conservative continuation of society, but it is also regularly activated as an agent of change related to the different challenges that people occasionally face and to their diverse responses to these challenges. It is thus evident and widely accepted that ‘the aims of education vary according to the context of the times in which they are enunciated and the political position of the enunciator(s)’ (Devine, 2017, p. 97). Since the conditions of education and its aims are so protean, it seems therefore that any dialogue on the aims of education cannot be conclusive and should not be suspended over too long periods of time. One of the lasting lessons drawn from, for example, the educational philosopher R. S. Peters and his legacy on the topic of aims is then, justifiably, that ‘the aims of education are fundamentally indeterminate and must be made relevant to each historical period’ (Katz, 2010, p. 106). As the educational philosopher M. S. Katz puts it, ‘for Peters, the aims of education are both indeterminate and matters of emphasis at a given time’; on the latter conclusion Peters echoes ‘John Dewey’s shrewd remark that the *statement* of aim is a matter of emphasis at a given time’ (Katz, 2010, p. 106). What is most important, and Peters’ reminds us that ‘we cannot afford to forget’, is ‘that we need to *justify* [emphasis added] the content of education not once and for all time, but over and over again with each new generation’ (Katz, 2010, p. 106).

Indeed, the justification of aims and, prior to it, the very identification of normative priorities worthy of the status of an educational aim are very complex operations that themselves involve ‘a number of taxing issues’ (Haji & Cuypers, 2011, p. 544). These issues merit careful consideration, especially when the aims in question are proposed as ultimate or primary (Haji & Cuypers, 2011, p. 544). Thus, any contribution to the discourse on educational aims presupposes, or departs from, a long history of ‘*identification* and *justification*’ of normative notions as ‘plausible candidates’ (p. 544) for the role of aims and what reasons can be given in support of their alleged privileged status as

the telos of education (Haji & Cuypers, 2011, p. 545). Moreover, questions about the identification and justification are closely linked to the problem of which groups and interests are voicing the aims of education at a particular time. As noted already, education changes over time and place, and so do the aims, the scope and the urging and justifying voices of education, not merely in policy, but also in philosophy of education. To illustrate the aforementioned variety and change from one era to another as briefly as possible let us comparatively consider moments in the historical narrative of educational aims.

In ancient times, the aims of education varied to cover a wide range of the needs of the citizen in city-states and the visions of philosophical Schools. It may not be a hyperbole to claim, as R. Curren (2014) does, that ancient philosophers 'invented philosophy of education with a view to explaining the educational value of the teaching in which they engaged' (p. 36). The educational aims that philosophers favoured reflected the spirit of those times and the diverse interpretations and emphases on what counted as the ideal city (e.g., for Plato, sharing in the world of ideas) and the virtuous citizen (e.g., for Aristotle, the eudaimonic citizen). For example, 'Aristotle regarded the ability to make sound judgments for oneself as a defining aim that unifies education at all levels' (Curren, 2014, p. 38) and, more broadly, 'wisdom, or "judgment," was the undisputed highest aim of education in the world of Greek antiquity' (Curren, 2014, p. 36). In medieval times, the aims of education revolved around the ideal of the pious Christian and thus differed drastically from those of Greek antiquity and from those that were gradually formed after the passage to the Renaissance and to early modernity. Consider as indicative of this passage from medieval to early modern times the fact that 'Descartes identified universal wisdom as the greatest good and proper aim of education' (Curren, 2014, p. 41). The aspiration educationally to escape from the bondage of parochialism and obtain greater knowledge is also manifested in the writings of Descartes' major opponent, John Locke, whose general advice was 'to work at overcoming the tendencies toward narrowness associated with one's place in the world, in order to achieve a well-rounded understanding of matters' (Curren, 2014, p. 44).

In modern times, mass education grew in importance, and education was later elevated to the status of a human right that as such facilitated the demand for rights and societal democratization. During the 18th and 19th century, the aims of education were repeatedly linked to the Shibboleths of the Enlightenment and to nation building, national belonging and the growth of nation-states, as well as to increasing industrialization and corresponding technicist/technocratic ideals. However, strands of philosophical thought such as Hegelian idealism became the home of educational philosophies that identified and justified 'the concept of self-realisation and the concept of the expansion of rationality for its own sake' as ultimate aims of pedagogy (White, 1978, p. 5). Somewhat later and from a radically different perspective, John Dewey stressed the interplay between individuals and their society and envisaged 'as an ultimate aim of education the development of a highly rational, reasoning, autonomous individual' (Sichel, 1969, p. 20), though, let us clarify, Dewey's notion of rationality was more akin to the communicative one of a democratic and autonomous being rather than of a Cartesian rationalism. Ultimately, Dewey assumed growth to be the natural aim of education (Sichel, 1969, p. 18). Among analytical philosophers, there was a stronger emphasis on analysing the meaning of the notion of education, instead of arguing for specific aims of education (see for example, R. S. Peters, 1967). It is also significant that, according to Peters, liberal education 'is not nearly so clear-cut a concept as originally thought'; it 'needs extrinsic justification', one that can be found 'in the values which it is thought to promote. These in turn are expressed in aims, either implicit or explicit, and these aims in turn have implications for content' (Winch & Gingell, 2023, p. 37). In the second half of the 20th century, Peters' educational philosophy valued education as 'that which enables someone to see things from a broader perspective' (Ozoliņš, 2013, p. 158). His affirmative account of education attributed to it, as a key feature, the development of reason (though not divorced from passion) (Ozoliņš, 2013, p. 158). Peters claimed that education should be 'of the whole person' and that 'it is not sufficient that someone is narrowly

trained'. He emphasized, as Jānis Ozoliņš (2013) explains, that narrow training, as well as that of a scientist, 'will not necessarily mean that such an individual has been educated' (p. 158).

In late modernity and in the postmodern era we can discern ambivalence and substantial criticism but also a bothering silence with regard to aims and aims-talk in education. Philosophical discussions concerning the aims of education often reflected the complexities and even the contradictions of modern imaginaries informing education. Particularly after the WW2, education was actualized as an agent for democratization in states which wanted to move away from, inter alia, untamed nationalism, imperialism and the crimes against humanity that plagued the world of those times. Recently, the aims of education have largely been linked to economic globalization and the antagonism of states, apart from making people more or less loyal to practices, traditions and narratives within a nation-state. To an extent, states worldwide have been converging towards a globally structured agenda for education that revolves around imaginaries of a global economy and the upskilling of human capital that boosts the economy's competitive edge and the social privilege of the *homo economicus*, and to a design of education in terms of pre-school, compulsory schools, voluntary schools, and higher education. In fact, numerous sources in philosophy of education document that there has been an ongoing conservative movement towards more restricted outlooks that prioritize safety and security over well-being and openness. There are signs everywhere of such conservative agendas that are nurtured today. In many countries, education is no longer a means for democratization; rather, it is a means for autocratization. Societal aims have, therefore, and to a notable degree, been seen in substantive and static terms, as something to be achieved by means of education and reflective of what a hegemonic social imaginary promotes.

By contrast, within more intellectually oriented imaginaries, aims are viewed as being in a process of emerging or becoming and as advancing the ideals of autonomy, well-being, freedom, democracy and social change. The educated person thus becomes the locus of potentiality and creativity. It seems, however, that education has been largely geared to substantive and ossified aims rather than directed toward giving space for critique, creativity and reorientation of desired ends. Related assumptions have even occluded further discussion on educational aims (see for example, Kitcher, 2022; Noddings, 2013), since hegemonic policies treat questions about education as answered once and for all by market needs and directions. From a policy perspective, 'setting out, clearly articulating or changing the aims of education are three of the most fundamental changes that could be made to any education system' (Winch, 1996, p. 34). By implication, 'there is, therefore, a great temptation on the part of politicians and indeed of society as a whole to avoid or to put off such a discussion'. This temptation is further on 'made all the stronger where it is known or suspected that there will be widespread and substantial disagreement about what those aims should be' (Winch, 1996, p. 34).

Much critique of the aforementioned temptations and consequences of instrumentalized education has been articulated, and much of this critique is also contained or advanced in the contributions that make up the present Special Issue. Most of the related critique in the contemporary literature on the topic emphasizes that 'reducing the aims of education to training and skilling individuals to perform needed functions in the workforce is simplistic and ignores the complexity of human needs and aspiration' (Ozoliņš, 2015, p. 872). Most contemporary educational philosophers who engage with the theme of educational aims deplore that both the institution of education and the discourses on educational aims become impoverished. For, example, Ozoliņš claims that 'the major problem with modern education is that it has forgotten that its main task is helping students to learn to be wise'; he then argues that, against tendencies toward training and unreflective skilling, wisdom should be 'the main aim of education' (Ozoliņš, 2015, p. 871). The main, ultimate or primary aims of education may vary, depending on the sensibilities of the scholar who joins the debates over aims, but, for most of those scholars who do not refrain from the aims talk, notions such as good judgment, well-being, 'critical thinking, autonomy, morally responsible agency, and the capacity for love and care' (Haji & Cuypers, 2011, p. 543), just to name a few, stand

out in related educational recommendations. 'These aims play a pivotal role in regulating and structuring moral and other types of normative education' (Haji & Cuypers, 2011, p. 543).

This Special Issue focuses on re-visiting and re-thinking the issue of educational aims. As briefly stated in the first lines of this introduction, education has evolved from being an exclusive concern for a few or an elite, to a concern or even an obligation for a mass or all, and it has gradually acquired the status of a social necessity and a human right. The shift in status, significance and scope of education calls for re-visiting and re-thinking the aims of education and for doing so particularly in the light of real-life diversity, different individuals and groups influencing education and the varying, widespread social imagination that informs education. Moreover, since education should not only be geared to the continuation or reproduction of culture and society, but also, self-reflectively, to education's own role as an agent for learning and for questioning cultural, social, economic, political and ethical norms and traditions, the re-visiting of aims of education is a continuous task, even if it is typically activated in times of change. The re-thinking of aims of education is relevant to many unresolved tensions pervading educational institutions such as schools. For example, a number of scholars have pointed out that education as an agent for social inclusion tends to incorporate problematic mechanisms of exclusion, and education as a promoter of competitive human capital tends to leave out other aims that are worth caring for.

It is also time to re-visit and re-think the very idea of aims of, or goals in, education since their meaning and significance depend on their contextualization in different philosophies, theoretical underpinnings, social imaginaries, educational traditions and views on governance that have been topics of constant debate, contestation and reformulation. For example, Dewey, as we saw above and most sources stress, argued that aims of education were valid and productive in so far as they were instrumental to a never-ending process of growth. Other views, by contrast, set out from economic conceptions of 'man' and classical notions of instrumental rationality that define reason as a strict means-ends relationship. However, some educational philosophers have not only questioned the latter positions within the standard aims talk but have even argued in favour of an 'ateleological education' or of the possibility of an education without aims (for a very informative consideration of such suggestions, see Yun [2014]). Therefore, some re-thinking and some re-visiting are important not only in terms of the scope, status and character of aims of education, but also in relation to the very idea of spelling out, or even assuming, 'aims of education' and to whether the answer to the dominance of instrumental and stagnant aims might be a set of alternative aims or aims intrinsic to an autonomous education or perhaps the option of no aims at all. Even if one opts for an autonomous education to avoid instrumentalism, as some new and interesting approaches claim (Yosef-Hassidim, 2021), what is also difficult to weigh is what counts as educational autonomy and what are the arguments for and against autonomy either as an aim of education (Wendelborn, 2020) or as an aimed status of education.

Evidently, a re-thinking and re-visiting of educational aims and the discourses that, as we saw above, have taken shape in the course of time is a challenge well beyond the scope of the present Special Issue, for it concerns an extremely wide spectrum of topics that cannot be covered within article-length and Special Issue-length endeavours. Indicatively and in a nutshell, amongst the broad topics on which a re-visiting and re-thinking of aims would be fruitful are ancient and past conceptions of aims of education and their possible relevance to present and future aims of education. There is also a need to examine aims of education and their relationship to visions of and governance in education, and their operations in schools and society or in emerging and challenging social realities. Re-thinking and re-visiting the aims of education call for a recognition of moral, ecological, socio-political and aesthetic sensibilities from a rich variety of philosophical legacies and philosophical perspectives on education and its theory. They also call for a critical examination of the very idea of aims of education which takes different shapes when we move from the *concept* of aims to several *conceptions* of aims. These are linked to different philosophies, theoretical underpinnings and social imaginaries. Some, though certainly not all, of the aforementioned topics are taken up or touched upon in one way or other by contributions to this

Special Issue. In what follows, we provide a brief account of how each contribution intervenes in the aims talk that has been evolving over the years.

A basic and underlying presupposition is that the re-thinking of the aims of education is a worthwhile thing. Marianna Papastephanou tackles this presupposition by exploring the general status of the aims as a topic in educational-philosophical discourses and the why of the necessity to rethink educational normativity and goal-setting with an eye to the current social context that, borrowing from Plato, she metaphorizes as feverish. Though Plato is often co-opted by conservative discourses, Papastephanou shows that his metaphor of a 'feverish society' provides important, and rather neglected, critical insights for combating neoliberal hegemonies that promote profit-making competitiveness and harm the talk on educational aims. Within our 'feverish' world, it is all the more necessary to reopen the dialogue on educational aims. The head-on engagement with this meta-critical presupposition and the reasons for a Special Issue on aims in the first place prepares the ground for a series of papers that provide innovative perspectives on various notions that merit inclusion in debates over educational goals.

One such perspective concerns the notion of self-control as an educational aim. Atli Harðarson re-reads and updates Spinoza's, Locke's, and Dewey's accounts of education as aiming to raise the capacity of individuals and groups for rational self-control. All three thinkers defended the relevance of self-control to a transformative education and constructed a notion of self-control that, as Harðarson pertinently claims, can be proven to be consistent with contemporary psychological and philosophical insights. Importantly, self-control emerges from Harðarson's handling as an appropriate aim not only for the life of the individual but also for collectivities and the political challenges that groups of people and the whole of society face. Harðarson finally shows that the significance of self-control as an educational aim also lies in its usefulness for outlining overarching aims of education that relate to democratic citizenship. In this way, self-control is extracted from a depoliticized and individualist context in which it is often found nowadays to acquire special value also as an aim towards better world politics.

Lia Bahizi sets out from a critique of the skills perspective on education to deploy an ethical outlook on dignity as an intrinsic educational aim. Standard educational discussions of aims tend to focus on narrow, instrumental and external goals. By contrast, more holistic approaches aspire to enlarge the scope of aims and avoid the marketization of education. However, also critiquing such approaches and taking into consideration that even holistic aims run the risk of stagnation and reification, Bahizi addresses the ethical challenge at the core of the aims talk: what lies beyond extrinsic aims of education? In critical dialogue with writings by Gert Biesta and Sharon Todd, Bahizi develops the concept of an intrinsic rather than attributed dignity in such a way that its aspect of moral awareness and its qualities as a regulative ideal stand out and promise a rethought education. To metaphorize the value that dignity should have in educational aims discourses Bahizi engagingly and helpfully employs the trope of dance. Dance in this context becomes the ever-changing and provisional movement as a choreography that tensions between desires and aims create.

Not only the notion of dignity but also that of solidarity has been neglected in modern discourses on educational aims. Mark Murphy dynamically tackles this lacuna in the relevant literature and emphasizes that the reimagining of public policy from the viewpoint of solidarity is long overdue. He describes the talk on solidarity as a welcome rejoinder to overly individualist accounts of policy outcomes and defends the great relevance of solidarity to education and to the hope for a better world future, especially in times of growing ethical and political pressures. Murphy's revisiting of Hegelian pedagogical insights then leads him to addressing the 20th century debate between Richard Rorty and Nancy Fraser, a debate that is most informative concerning the entanglement of solidarity with personal freedom, social justice and endless struggles over such ideals. Murphy argues that solidarity can be rethought as constitutive of education and paramount in addressing the issue of social fragmentation. In rethinking solidarity, one also rethinks the solidaristic nature of education, and solidarity becomes something to be valuably learned.

Klas Roth also thoughtfully addresses the need critically to broaden the educational set of aims beyond materialistic priorities and instrumentalism. He grants that the material reproduction of societies requires that some due attention should be paid to related aims, but he points out that the over-emphasis on such aims blocks the re-thinking of education that is crucial for approximating more demanding ideals. For Roth, imagining a higher human potentiality directs educational thought to the vision of a moral community of a realm of ends, one that reflects Immanuel Kant's insights critically adapted to contemporary education. By 'end', Roth means that which people generally value as a worthwhile thing to pursue and they try to make possible with the necessary means available. Such ends should come under critical moral scrutiny. They should not stand alone but should be qualified by, and harmonized with, moral law, striving toward moral perfection. Indeed, by mining the Kantian line of thought and its inexhaustible arsenal of moral resources, Roth argues that, despite its being an ideal of hardly attainable height, moral perfection should be the highest end of education, one on which each and every important normative notion converges.

On their part, Claudia Schumann and Eric Larsson cast aside the goal of broadening the educational spectrum of appropriate aims and shift their critical attention to the new trend in philosophy of education that resists all sorts of politicized and extrinsic educational aims. Schumann and Larsson wish to critique functionalist and reifying understandings of education; to this end, they explore post-critical attacks on educational instrumentalism that promote as an alternative the self-standing and intrinsic value of education. In reflective distance from extremes, a mediatory approach is then promoted, one that differentiates instrumentalization from reification and sides with social change and justice as desirable ideals. In doing so, this approach hopes to avoid neo-conservative risks of soporific effects and of reproducing the status quo, namely, risks lurking in the educational purism that depoliticizes education. Therefore, the aim of this contribution is to preserve the benefits of paying heed to educational autonomy along with the merits of an education that is sensitive to social inequalities and pathologies.

A common thread of all the contributions up to this point is their critical stance toward existing discourses and realities of education and its aims. In its critical and meta-critical prisms, the Special Issue relies on the implicit assumption that critique and critical thinking are crucial to revisiting the contemporary, operative aims of education as well as the debates over such aims. The self-reflective aspirations of the Special Issue would be limited, however, if this reliance remained unexplored. Niclas Rönström undertakes precisely this task of rethinking the critical thinking that is considered so fundamental to discussions of educational aims and is usually treated as an ultimate end or intrinsic good in education. Instead of taking the value of critical thinking for granted, he innovatively argues, we must also consider its dark side, especially as far as utopian energies and future possibilities are concerned. Rönström explicates the dynamics of a dark side of critical thinking that robs the cherished practice of its status as an ultimate end or intrinsic good in education because of its self-crippling, existentially alienating and dystopian tendencies. Instead of either exalting or dismissing criticality, Rönström invites us to investigate its complex social and political operations, and to re-imagine its role, in educational goal-setting and in discourses on educational aims.

In the light of the contributions described above, and in the years' hindsight since Peters' singling out of the topic of educational aims as paramount in philosophy of education, we emphasize that, then as now, the re-negotiation of aims (and the aims-talk generally) appears indispensable and, therefore, all the more in need of constant rethinking. Peters 'moved from awareness of the need to justify education to the realisation that different forms of liberal education could be derived from different aims' (Winch & Gingell, 2023, p. 38). In other words, he came to recognize that 'what we call a "good education" will depend on what aims we have and these will affect its content' (Winch & Gingell, 2023, p. 37). Later, Peters added to the complexity of his aims talk the insight that further differentiations are needed 'between the values that inform fundamental educational choices, the aims that reflect those values, and finally the programme of education capable of putting those aims into effect' (Winch & Gingell, 2023, p. 39; see also p. 44). In

fact, Peters acknowledged the relevance to the aims talk of categories that are still highly debated today and revealed how complex and intricate an endeavour to discuss aims of education is. In his more mature writings on the topic, he claimed that even 'liberal education', which was once thought to be a 'monolithic structure', should be understood in its different forms 'as related to different aims', and saturated with 'instrumental as well as intrinsic aims' (Winch & Gingell, 2023, p. 45).

As Katz pertinently commented some years ago, 'Peters reminded us that we not only need to think clearly about what education means, but also need to justify what we regard as its worthwhile content. If we take his charge seriously, we will reinvigorate the dialogue over the aims of education in the 21st century' (Katz, 2010, p. 108). In the virtue of this comment, the present Special Issue aims to contribute to a re-invigorated dialogue on educational aims. Given the recent decline in the interest in educational aims and the conservative political agendas that this decline ultimately serves, we hope to have also reinvigorated B. Sichel's view that 'it might be advantageous to drop the facade of horror at ultimate aims, especially if these aims seem implicitly present within the philosophy' (Sichel, 1969, p. 26) that guides educational policy. We have done so in awareness that dropping the façade of horror does not entail one's downplaying how daunting the philosophical enterprise concerning educational aims is. We also endorse that, as Nel Noddings (2013) has remarked, one should be aware that the 'discussion of aims, in contrast to that of objectives and goals, centers on the deepest questions in education' (p. 332). We think that we are expressing also our contributors' aspirations by stating that we have all hoped, through this Special Issue, to have touched, even if tentatively and fumblingly, on some such deepest questions.

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