

# Purposes of Public Education

## Philosophical Reflections

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In his book by the delightfully ambiguous title *The End of Education*, Neil Postman observes that when people talk about public education, the conversation is usually on “means” and rarely on “ends”.<sup>1</sup> There is an element of truth to this. Unless we believe that purposes of public education are utterly uncontroversial or entirely settled, or perhaps irrelevant, a host of questions will come to mind. *Are the purposes of public education what they should be and how might we know?; how are they arrived at?; whose purposes are we talking about anyway?; could public education do without purposes or is this an incoherent notion?; and so on.*

In this essay I shall assume that “public education” means “public schooling”, ie, schooling (K-12) funded and controlled by government, universally accessible, formally concerned with learning and bringing it about in others. I shall also assume that talk about “purposes” in the present context is understood to be talk about what schools are *for*, that is, about the “ends” schools serve, or their primary reasons for being.

In broaching this topic I thought it useful to determine what various ministries of education in Canada regard the contemporary purposes of public schooling to be. My informal survey included seven provincial and two territorial ministries.<sup>2</sup> In what follows I present a sketch of the findings, then offer a short critical commentary and conclude with my own analysis of how purposes or goals of schooling could be characterized.

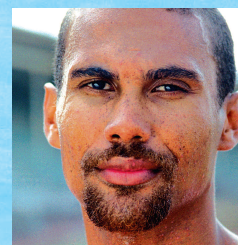


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Four of the ministries in my sample (Manitoba, New Brunswick, Northwest Territories, Nunavut) use the language of *mission* rather than *goals* in identifying what they believe schools are for. Despite the diversities in history, geography and culture of the regions these ministries represent, their mission statements are remarkably similar. To paraphrase New Brunswick’s, which is typical, the purpose of schooling is to have each student develop the attributes necessary for life-long learning, achieve personal fulfilment, and contribute to a productive, just and democratic community. One ministry in this group, Manitoba, specifically includes a reference to producing “an educated citizenry” and a “skilled and adaptable workforce”. Another, Northwest Territories, includes a goals statement (in addition to its mission) in which the physical, emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual dimensions of growth are identified as goals for schooling to achieve in partnership with families and communities.

The other five ministries in the sample (Alberta, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Ontario and Saskatchewan) use



the language of *goals* exclusively. Alberta’s (overall) goal is to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will prepare students for “life after school”. British Columbia identifies three goals: intellectual development, human and social development, and career development. Nova Scotia and Ontario express basically similar goals: all-round development of students, cognitively, affectively, socially, culturally, morally, and physically, and the acquisition of skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary to find gainful and satisfying employment and to be active and valued or contributing members of society. Saskatchewan’s ministry lists nine goals ranging from basic cognitive skills, career and consumer decisions, growing with change and membership in society to self-esteem, positive lifestyle and spiritual development.



**EN BREF** La plupart des ministères de l'Éducation présentent leurs buts de manière relative, c'est-à-dire, sans spécifier de buts individuels ou des catégories d'objectifs à atteindre. En présentant tous les mandats de l'éducation sur un même pied d'égalité, ils ignorent la possibilité que certains de ces mandats puissent être incompatibles. Le but premier de l'éducation devrait être de favoriser l'apprentissage des enfants et des jeunes, et ce, d'un point de vue transformateur et habilitant. Si nous arrivons à bien remplir cette fonction, les autres objectifs – social et professionnel par exemple – seront atteints par défaut puisque ces autres dimensions du développement humain sont fondamentalement cognitives.

All the ministries in this second group go to varying lengths to spell out their goals statements in more detail. B.C.'s ministry, for example, identifies the abilities to reason and think independently, to analyze information critically, and to acquire basic learning skills and knowledge under its goal of "intellectual development"; and a sense of identity and social responsibility as citizens, workers and potential parents, an understanding of diversity, and respect for other's beliefs, all under "human and social development". Saskatchewan places the abilities to make informed consumer choices and adapt to shifts in employment patterns and technology under its goal of "career and consumer decisions"; personal responsibility, duties of democratic citizenship, the moral virtues of honesty, compassion, fairness and respect for others' rights, and working for greater social justice, all under "membership in society"; and, understanding the purpose and worth of human existence and developing a knowledge of God under "spiritual development". Nova Scotia features six areas of learning "essential" to achieving its goals – aesthetic expression, citizenship, communication, personal development, problem solving and technological development. And Alberta's expanded list of goals includes an understanding of the academic disciplines, the virtues of respect, fairness, honesty, caring, and loyalty, a commitment to democratic ideals, critical and creative thinking, competence in using information technologies, respect for cultural diversity, healthful lifestyles, and managing time to complete a task.

## II

There is of course much that could be discussed here with respect to what is included in the ministries' goals and what is not, the degrees of concurrence or disparity across the ministries' goals, what procedures or processes are followed in framing the goals, whether any rationale is provided for the goals



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selected, and so on. For instance, more than a few eyebrows will be raised over the inclusion of "spiritual development" as a goal of public schooling, and some will wonder why there are no references in the goals to "national identity" and none or very few to "care and concern for the natural environment". Others may want to know to what extent democratic procedures were actually followed in framing the goals. Were any of the constituencies public schooling serves – parents, communities, employers, post-secondary institutions – consulted, and if so, were their views taken seriously, and how was it decided what weight should be given their views? Were others such as philosophers of education whose professional training lends itself to an analysis of goals and their justification brought into the picture, or was the process a wholly internal affair within the ministries themselves?

Interesting and important as these questions are, they are not the focus of my immediate concern. Instead I wish to comment specifically on the "relativistic" way in which the goals of schooling appear to be conceptualized by the ministries. Invariably the goals are presented as though they are of equal importance or worth and therefore all equally central to what schooling is for. This way of thinking is problematic.

For ease of discussion, suppose we place the goals the ministries present into broader categories to which they naturally seem to gravitate. These we may characterize as follows: (a) *the good or well-being of the individual* (eg., life-long learning; development of individual potential intellectually, socially, emotionally, physically; self-esteem; healthful lifestyles: etc); (b) *the public good or the good of society* (good citizenship; commitment to democratic ideals; respect for law and legitimate authority; respect for cultural diversity; etc); (c) *vocational preparation* (a skilled and adaptable workforce; technological literacy; etc); and (d) *the economic good* (a competitive economy within a

global market). In a relativist world, all four categories would be deemed equally valid. We would not be able to prioritize the categories or claim that some are more critical or vital to what schooling is about than are others – for instance that category (a) could be more important than categories (c) or (d).

This situation will not bear critical scrutiny. It first of all glosses over the possibility that some of the categories may actually be incompatible or at odds with others and thus not mutually achievable. It has been argued, for example, by the Canadian philosopher of education, Kieran Egan, that the societal goal of schooling ((b) above), especially if characterized as "socialization", would be a barrier to the achievement of a goals category like (a). The assumption here is that socialization, with its intent of teaching children and youth to conform to societal norms, beliefs and practices, would conflict with the achievement of independent thought and judgment or open-mindedness which are central to the achievement of the "individual good" (category (a)).<sup>3</sup> If true, how both goals could be equally important is unclear. On the other hand, the post-modern philosopher, Richard Rorty, has argued that of all the available candidates for goals of schooling, socialization can be the only legitimate one.<sup>4</sup> This too plays havoc with the parity question.

The relativist approach would also seem to deny the possibility of having rational and equitable grounds for adjudicating the various competing demands that are placed on schooling. Nor does it seem to square with actual practices of schooling in which unequal time, effort and emphasis is intentionally devoted to the pursuit of different goals. I think most teachers have a good sense of the prioritization of which I speak. Otherwise it would be difficult to explain their oft-expressed frustration at being unable to do what they have been trained to do – which is to teach and help bring about learning in students that promotes their



individual well-being and the social good. This frustration stems largely from external pressures placed on them to deal with various personal, familial, and justice issues students bring to school, and which teachers are ill-equipped to handle, diminishing the time and energy left for their primary mission.

The popularity of relativism with ministries is most likely due to their desire to avoid judgments of value that are necessarily involved in any prioritization process. In this way, ministries not only escape the more difficult task of having to justify why some goals of schooling may be more important or central than others, but also to escape the criticism to which they would be subjected were they to favour some goals more than others.

### III

I shall argue in this section that the primary goal of schooling is the *education* of children and youth, and that if we get this right the other goals will more or less take care of themselves.

In saying this, I am drawing upon a conception of “education” as transformative and empowering. It is one that implies the development and enlargement of human consciousness or awareness of the world, of “seeing” or looking at the world with new and enriched perspectives that transcend the local and particular, and that enable individuals to achieve a greater meaning and sense of who they are and how they relate to the world. If “education” then is the primary goal, it would follow that the chief reason for schooling is to heighten each learner’s consciousness or awareness of the world; and since “mind” or “intellect” is characterized essentially as consciousness or awareness, one could conclude further that the chief end of schooling is the development of mind or intellect.

I am well aware that this way of putting the matter can be easily misinterpreted; but I hasten to add I am *not* arguing that schooling is or should be an elitist institution or that it should concentrate on the intellectual development of children and youth at the expense or to the exclusion of their social, emotional or moral development. Nothing in fact could be further from the truth, for these other dimensions of human development all are

characterized as having a cognitive core.

In the case of emotion, for instance, the cognitive core is associated with our appraisals of situations. My feelings of jealousy are precipitated by my “seeing” someone else as possessing or receiving something to which I claim a right; my feelings of fear, by “seeing” situations as dangerous or threatening. In experiencing emotion, cognition is necessarily present, though its presence clearly does not exhaust all there is to the experience. A “feeling” side is very much present too. As for the case of moral development, unless one has a concept, for example, of “other persons” as possessing beliefs, desires, aspirations, and as capable of forming plans, being hurt or disappointed, etc., the scope of moral-social growth is decidedly limited as well.

Putting this accent on the development of mind recognizes and acknowledges that mind is basic or fundamental to human development in its various dimensions and that, if schooling is to be primarily an institution of “education”, it needs to place a concerted effort on heightening the consciousness or awareness of individual learners, and empowering them with greater meaning. It is also a reminder that to achieve a greater differentiated-ness of consciousness (or meaningfulness), a progressive “initiation” of learners into the achievements of the human mind and spirit that are available to us will be required.

Many of these achievements are embodied in what are variously called “traditions of thought and feeling”, “forms of knowledge and understanding” or “the conversations of humankind”.<sup>5</sup> They include: the natural sciences and technology, the human or social sciences, mathematical understanding, the expressive or fine arts and literature, moral capacity and understanding, philosophical reflection, and so on. Moreover, each of these traditions or conversations has its own forms of discourse, that is, its distinctive languages and concepts, judgments and claims, sentiments, methods of inquiry, evaluation procedures, etc, and the more progress schooling makes in getting our children and youth on the inside of these “conversations”, the greater the awareness and understanding they will have of the world, themselves and others, and thus the more fully human they

will become.

This task of “educating” the young is not an easy one (though no one to my knowledge has ever said it was). The “conversations” of our human inheritance may initially seem strange and remote to children, and not easily accessible. The skills of literacy and numeracy, the intellectual and moral dispositions and attitudes involved in the conversations are themselves challenging and require steady guidance and practice. Educating requires time and patience. It is truly a life-long, enriching endeavour of which schooling is one of the most critical legs of the journey.<sup>6</sup> The ministries who identified “life-long learning” as a goal of schooling – if by that they mean the development of dispositions and attitudes necessary to keep learning going – have recognized a truth.

Earlier I claimed that if the “education” of children and youth is being adequately addressed, the other goals of schooling will more or less take care of themselves. It is time to clarify what I mean.

Let us consider the public good or the good of society first. As we have seen, it is normally understood to incorporate the notions of preparing young people to be decent citizens and contributing members of society, concerned for social justice, committed to democratic values and principles and to respecting cultural, racial, gender and other forms of difference. But the social knowledge, the skills of literacy and numeracy, the abilities to think critically and independently, to be empathetic, to be co-operative and care about the well-being of others that are among the components required to be decent citizens and contributing members of society are themselves part of the learning objectives that are integral to “educating” in the transformative sense. In other words, as schooling addresses its primary purpose of “education”, it is at the same time addressing the social good or the good of society.

A similar line of thinking applies to the goal of vocational preparation as well. In this case it is important to bear in mind that most new recruits into the workplace will be trained by their employers on the job, and as a result there is no expectation that the skills necessary for specific types of work ought to be honed by the school.





What employers seem to want is a *basic* vocational preparation that will dispose young people to be open and willing to learn on the job, be adaptable, co-operative, treat others civilly, stay on task, persevere and (of course) meet acceptable levels of literacy and numeracy. Once again these are among the concerns of “educating”, and to the extent they are being attended to in that respect, so is the goal of basic workplace preparation.

One caveat I wish to enter here concerns the question of health and fitness, including nutrition and recreation. While it is understood to be an aspect of individual “well-being” and therefore a legitimate part of the “educational” goal of schooling, there are good reasons why “healthful lifestyle”, as one of the ministries put it, should be more prominently emphasized or underlined and given “goals” status, even though most of the content involved is “educational” in nature. The most recent considerations supporting this claim are the mounting concerns over child obesity and physical inactivity.

In summary, I have argued that “educating” children and youth, which entails development of a differentiated consciousness and of the qualities of

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mind and character entailed in such development, is the primary goal of schooling. The other named goals – the social, the vocational and health – are secondary goals in the sense they are essentially derivative of the primary goal. They are singled out to remind us they have an importance in public schooling and must not be overlooked, but they are not in themselves on a par with the school’s central mission of “educating”.

There is still hope for the ministries of education. They succeeded in mentioning many of the constituents of “education” (in the transformative sense). But seldom if ever is the term education mentioned in their goals statements, and ironically, there seems to be no consciousness of the transformative sense of education, let alone any sustained attempts to pull the various components together into a more coherent conception of education, nor to realize that *this* is basically what schools are for. ★

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#### Notes

- 1 Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).
- 2 Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut. This selection covers the four major regions of Canada – Western, Central, Eastern, and Northern. Goals statements for these jurisdictions proved to be fairly accessible on ministry websites (enter Education@Canada) unlike those of Quebec, for example.
- 3 Kieran Egan, *The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).
- 4 Rorty, Richard. “Education Without Dogma: Truth, Freedom and our Universities” in William Hare and John Portelli (eds). *Philosophy of Education: Introductory Readings*, Revised 3rd Edition (Calgary: Detselig, 2001): 107-16.
- 5 The metaphors of “initiation” and “conversations of humankind” come from political philosopher, Michael Oakeshott. See Timothy Fuller (ed.) *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
- 6 Elsewhere I have argued that schooling is an integral phase in what I call the journey of humanization. See my “Schooling as a Journey in Humanization” in William Hare and John Portelli, eds. *Philosophy of Education: Introductory Readings*, 51-68.

