

# AIMS OF EDUCATION: DO TEACHERS NEED TO BOTHER ABOUT THEM?

Rohit Dhankar

*“There is nothing more practical than theory.” - Boltzmann*

Do teachers need to understand aims of education? And, further, does their teaching need to be informed by these aims? Asked directly most people, including teachers, will answer in affirmative. Experience of various teachers’ training programmes and that of observing classroom practices, however, suggest that the affirmative answers are left just there, and the actual business of teaching squarely ignores the aims. Therefore, it is a worthwhile exercise to explore the relationship between aims of education, teaching and teachers.

It must be stated at the outset that education, teaching and teacher are not descriptive concepts; at least not as far as I understand them. No description of what is going on in the schools at any given time, however accurate and authentic, describes education completely. At the most it describes what education is available to the children at the time and locale of research, not what education ought to be. Education always has an ‘ought’ part to it, it always refers to what ‘should be’. Education always points to a desirable state of mind that is to be brought about through planned and sustained engagement between student and teacher. This desirable state of mind may refer to criteria pertaining to achievements in the fields of moral behaviour, intellectual capacity and capability of action. To take a random example; one may include a commitment to be truthful, a certain understanding of country’s political situation and ability to do general household repair jobs in ones desirable state of mind to be brought about through education. In that case these abilities and attitudes will be part of ones educational aims. What states of mind are considered desirable is though influenced by current situation in the society and schools but by no means determined entirely by them. The desirability is concerned more with what we consider human beings to be and what kind of society we wish to live in. What Chomsky says about ‘any stance one takes on political, economic, social or even personal issues’ is equally true of any stance one takes on education and aims of education, that it “is based on some conception of what is good for people. This conception will tacitly presuppose a certain belief as to the constitution of human nature—human needs and human potential. You might as well bring them out as clearly as possible so that they can be discussed”<sup>1</sup>. Thus education is less a matter of what is and more of what ought to be, and precisely because of that, the conceptions of education held by different people differ a great deal. When one puts forward a particular notion of education he is also advancing a notion of human being and is recommending a particular organisation of society. As a result education is an essentially contested concept. Similar arguments could be built for teaching and the teacher.

Sometimes aims of education are stated in too general terms, like “all-round development of the learner”. Such statements do not really help the educator till “all-round development” is not defined more specifically, in terms of its various aspects and their relative importance. It is almost like saying “education is for the good of the learner”. Two people with wild difference of opinion can happily agree on such statements without compromising their freedom to run very different schools. One may think that the ‘good of the learner’ consists in teaching him to follow what the priest says as he represents the true path and the other may believe that the ‘good of the learner’ consists in teaching him to be atheists. This difference of opinion will come to surface only when the ‘good of the learner’ is defined more precisely.

Educating the whole child is one of the current slogans doing rounds in our educational circles. Hutchins wrote in 1943 “it hardly helps us ... to say, as many anti-intellectuals do, that education must educate ‘the whole man’. Of all the meaningless phrases in educational discussion this is the prize. Does it mean that education must do the whole job of translating the whole infant into a whole adult?”<sup>2</sup> Such statements serve only to frighten people away from taking aims of education seriously.

The reverse side of the coin is stating aims of education in too specific a manner, like ‘producing engineers, doctors and scientists to realise the national goals of economic development’. This type of statements are specific enough to generate doable programme of action, but are too narrow to encompass excellences in all worthwhile aspects of human life. Also they treat the individual as cannon fodder for market driven economy. The most suitable statements of aims are those that refer to general abilities and values as end states rather than job charts. For example: sensitivity to others, critical thinking, creative thinking, autonomy, aesthetic sensitivity, etc. Abilities like these are general enough to allow worthwhile choices in life, are also amenable to reasonably precise definitions, and can be related to actual classroom processes to help the educators make practical decisions. Sure enough, there would be plenty of disagreements between educators on their definitions, on their relative merits and on decisions about inclusion or otherwise of particular abilities in the statement of aims. But given the requisite preparation on the part of educators this disagreement will generate meaningful debates and not vacuous slogan mongering.

Teaching is intimately related to education. The desirable states of mind, we mentioned above as goal of education, can only be brought about by learning. And though a fair amount of learning is possible without teaching, even without the knowledge of the learner herself, a good deal of learning depends on teaching; particularly learning of the kind that contributes to the achievement of aims of education. Teaching is a concept dependent on learning; therefore, it would be in order here to have a look at learning before we consider teaching. Peters and Hirst<sup>3</sup> argue that learning necessarily involves mastery and experience of the learner. Mastery here is meant to indicate some standard. When learning, one always learns some X, and “to have learnt is always to have come up to some standard”<sup>4</sup>. Coming up to a standard itself is, however not sufficient, what seems to be demanded is “that the mastery, or the achievement, be the product of the persons own past experience”<sup>5</sup>. Hamlyn further argues that human learning necessarily involves change in understanding of the learner, to quote “at all events, on our ordinary conception of learning it would, I suggest, be impossible to suppose that someone could have learnt something if he had not in some sense acquired new knowledge, what ever form that knowledge may take (and it may of course include skills as well as factual knowledge)”<sup>6</sup>. To put these ideas together, then, learning means having acquired ability to do something on the basis of experience and effecting a change in the learner’s understanding.

Peters and Hirst in the above mentioned book suggest three logically necessary conditions for what they call ‘the central cases of teaching activities’: “(i) they must be conducted with the intention of bringing about learning, (ii) they must indicate or exhibit what is to be learnt, (iii) they must do this in a way which is intelligible to, and within the capacities of the learners”<sup>7</sup>.

In spite of teaching being intimately related with education, it “is not necessarily educative”<sup>8</sup>. The teaching will become educative only when it is related to aims of education. For example, say, a school or a teacher has ‘development of rational thinking’ as one of its main aims. Now, suppose he ‘teaches’ how to write table of 9 by first writing digits from 0 to 9 and then again writing next to them on right hand side digits from 9 to 0, beginning by first writing 9 next to 0, and so on. This method surely will give a correct table of 9. Suppose

further that our ingenious teacher has such 'methods' to write all the tables, (fortunately that does not seem to be the case). Her children may pass the examination, as they are passing today, with reasonable ease, but does this kind of teaching add much to the children's rational thinking? No, actually it hampers the children's rational thinking. This teaching, then, is patently anti-educational. One can think of numerous examples like this. Peters and Hirst give one concerned with second language teaching. To Indianise that example: suppose a teacher is teaching Bengali to Rajasthani children. To make meaningful decisions about content and methods of his Bengali lessons he has to be clear about his aims of teaching Bengali. 'Is his aim simply to enable his pupils to rub along all right during holidays in Bengal? Does he aim to teach them eventually to write Bengali? Does he envisage that the learning of language is the best way of coming to understand, from the inside, the form of life of another cultural region? Or is his aim just the non-educational one of getting through an examination that will open the door to a range of opportunities? Unless he asks himself questions of this sort he will have no clear guidelines for determining the content and methods of his teaching'.

These decisions are too close to the classroom practices. They cannot be made by the curriculum developers, textbook writers, and the like. They have to be made by the teacher herself. Therefore, her understanding of aims of education and relationship between the aims and teaching will determine the quality of education to a very great extent. The lack of such understanding will render her to be a mere instructor of some sort and will strip her engagement of all worthwhile aspects of education, even though she could still be teaching something.

The present day thoughtless rush for the innovations is fast approaching the proverbial jumping from the frying pan into the fire, mainly because of inadequate attention to the philosophy of education in general and to aims of education in particular. Barth, while writing on open education in America, commented: "endemic to education and to educators is a disposition to search for the new, the different, the flashy, the radical, or the revolutionary. Once an idea of a practice, such as team teaching, nongrading or paraprofessional is so labelled by the establishment, teachers and administrators are quick to adopt it. More precisely, educators who are quick to assimilate new ideas into their cognitive and operational framework, often distort the idea or practices from the original conception without recognising either the distortion or the assumptions violated by the distortion."<sup>10</sup> Barth's diagnosis suggests that this happens because the "vocabulary and rhetoric are easily changed while the practices, people and institutions often remain little affected." These words, thirty years after they were written, give a succinct description of the Indian situation today. Only, Barth's diagnosis itself stops short of pinpointing the problem. He lists assumptions in open education related to children, learning and knowledge and hopes that it will help generate a comprehensive theory that will in turn help the educators examine practices more seriously. He pays no attention to the fact that no educational theory shorn of a social philosophy and aims has the strength to stand on its own feet, and therefore, cannot provide a sound basis for reasonable solutions for the problems confronted.

The open education of Barth's description and the present day powerful trends in the Indian education both preach sensitivity and love for the child. Bertrand Russell has a word of advice for them both, when he states that "it is not enough that the educator should love the young; it is necessary also that he should have a right conception of human excellence. Cats teach their kittens to catch mice, ... The cat loves the kitten, but not the mouse; ... Even those who love all mankind may err through a wrong conception of the good life."<sup>11</sup> The pointer here is in the same direction of well-formulated aims encapsulating human excellences and

notion of good life, and awareness of such aims amongst those who are responsible for teaching.

If we go by these considerations, then, a reasonable understanding of aims of education seems to be a necessary condition to be a good teacher whose efforts could contribute towards education of the children. Further more, he should have a reasonably clear idea of and requisite knowledge and know how to connect each classroom activity to the highest educational aims. This seems to be the only reliable way of making classroom activities meaningful for both the teacher and the child.

\*\*\*\*\*

<sup>1</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Human Nature*, in conversation with Kate Soper, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Maynard Hutchins, *Education For Freedom*, 1943.

<sup>3</sup> P. H. Hirst and R. S. Peters, *The Logic of Education*, p.74, RKP, 1970.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> D. W. Hamlyn, *Perception Learning and the Self*, (p.134), RKP.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> P. H. Hirst and R. S. Peters, *The Concept and Aims of Education*, in *Curriculum Design*, Edited by M. Golby, J. Greenwald, and R. West, The Open University Press, 1977.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Roland S. Barth, *Open Education: Assumptions about Children, Learning, and Knowledge*, in *Curriculum Design*, p. 58.

<sup>11</sup> Bertrand Russell, *On Education*, UNWIN, Reprint of 1989.