Rediscovering the meaning of education:
The aims of teaching in an era of "learnification"

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Ritrovare il senso dell'educare. I fini dell'istruzione dell'era della "*learnification*"

The aim of education is a key question; in a certain sense it is a traditional question — viewed by some as a given. Indeed, perhaps because it appears to be self-evident, it has long since ceased to be a focus, with a number of undesirable consequences. Education invariably remains an action that is explicitly or implicitly imbued with intentionality, but if it loses sight of its goals (or, worse still, does not acknowledge them expressively), it risks becoming ethically and politically ambiguous, if not downright corrupted or distorted.

Quella dei fini dell'educazione è una questione essenziale, in un certo senso tradizionale – agli occhi di qualcuno perfino scontata – che forse proprio per questa apparente ovvietà ha perduto da tempo la sua centralità, con alcune implicazioni non del tutto desiderabili. L'educazione continua inevitabilmente ad essere un'azione esplicitamente o implicitamente dotata di intenzionalità, ma se perde di vista i suoi fini (o, peggio, non dimentica di dichiararli apertamente) rischia di diventare un'operazione opaca dal punto di vista etico e politico, se non addirittura di corrompersi o snaturarsi.

Keywords: Aims of Education; Values; Evidence-based education; Phenomenology; School.

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The problem of the aims and purposes of education, which is often taken for granted, has been obscured in the last decades by an educational culture and policy which tends to avoid the question of values, that are necessarily involved in educational discourses and practices.

We are indebted to Gert Biesta (2009; 2010) for a critique of the bureaucratic and efficiency-oriented paradigm that comes to us from the world of economics and business and that increasingly conditions not only the production sector, but also healthcare, social services, and essentially education too.[1] Especially persuasive are Biesta's reasons of discomfort for the current obsession with measurement, whereby measurement is all too hastily equated with the culture of *accountability* but in reality, is nothing other than a modern version of the (anti-phenomenological) culture of *objectivity*. Indeed, it may be even more insidious than the previous versions that we have known, because it feeds into the anxiety surrounding security and control that — understandably indeed — characterizes our contemporary society of uncertainty.

Today, so-called *evidence-based education* not only informs policies for evaluating the quality of educational action, but consequently conditions educational action itself, and even a certain type of research on educational action. Of course, such an approach offers certain advantages (for example, it allows us to discuss outcomes based on data and not simply on opinions); but, at the same time, it has other repercussions that should be examined critically. The first of these is the *objectification* of the processes of education — and even more importantly, of the subjects of education — which stands always and ever in opposition to any kind of phenomenological approach; the second is a lack of reflection surrounding the aims of educating and, ultimately, a *deresponsibilization* with respect to the question of values, although values constitute the backbone of educational work (Colicchi, 2021).

This recalls Jerome Bruner's admonishment that education policies need to make clear, above all, the aims and values informing them:

> Of course we need standards and resources to make our schools work well in solving the myriad tasks they face. But resources and standards alone will not work. We need a surer sense of what to teach to whom and how to go about teaching it in such a way that it will make those taught more effective, less alienated, and better human beings. [...] What we need is a school reform movement with a better sense of where we are going, with deeper convictions about what kind of people we want to be (Bruner, 1996, p. 118).

Placing the emphasis on standardized techniques and procedures, on what works or does not work, keeps the focus on "using what-one-knows" rather than "using what-one-is" (Iori, 1988, p. 162) and thus distracts us from what is ultimately the great, irreducible, dual unknown in educational work: the *subjectivity* of each experience and the *intersubjectivity* of the encounter. In other words, objectification fools us into thinking that we can reduce the personal to the impersonal, and that we can get around the ever-unpredictable stumbling block of the educational relationship, which however continues to play the most decisive part in shaping the very outcomes that we pride ourselves on measuring objectively.

In a complex and plural society, focusing our discourse on evidence offers a further advantage of no little account: the *illusion of neutrality*. And indeed, the question of aims and values is potentially divisive. Hence, it seems easier to talk about contents, tools, performance and results, so as to avoid the challenges inherent in asking what the point of it all is.

And yet expunging the question of ends and values from the education debate does not mean that we have resolved it, because, as we know, ends that are not openly manifested are not *absent*, but simply *latent*. Education is "an intrinsically teleological event" (Agazzi, 1950, p. 189): we cannot go about educating without asking ourselves what purposes we are pursuing (*de jure* or *de facto*) and whether these purposes are just, or at least desirable, and above all what is the source of their normativity.

According to John Dewey (2008, p. 38):

> Education is autonomous and should be free to determine its own ends, its own objectives. To go outside the educational function and to borrow objectives from an external source is to surrender the educational cause. Until educators get the independence and courage to

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insist that educational aims are to be formed as well as executed within the educative process, they will not come to consciousness of their own function.

In short: any discussion of aims demands a position statement. The alternative is to delegate responsibility for decisions in this sphere to others: to politicians, to ideologues or — as is increasingly common — to market forces. This option, however, bears serious dangers, given that (as cautioned by von Hayek) those who have the means determine the ends, or will at least attempt to.

Are there goals or "directions of action" (Dewey) that may be viewed as *intrinsic* to education? We are obliged to ask this question, unless — as sometimes happens –we understand pedagogy as a purely instrumental discipline, one that deals not with ends, but with the means to achieve them and, at best, with the degree of effectiveness of these means. The alternative before us — in my view — is between *autonomy* of the educational system based on normative knowledge and *instrumentalization* of the educational system based solely on technical knowledge. As a consequence, I see all contributions to teasing out and exploring the potential for a phenomenologically-based axiology (De Monticelli, 2021; Caronia, 2022) as of the utmost salience to education, given (as we are taught by Maritain, 1943) that the most common educational mistakes stem largely from a "disregard for the ends" or from "false ideas concerning the end" of education.

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