



The North Wind: A Critical Perspective on the Purposes of Education



Steen Nepper Larsen argues that successful education teaches how to take a small step to the side and ask questions, bravely, insistently, and without hesitation. Steen's thinking is introduced by Carly Boreland...

In this relationship the most interesting thing is not me or you (i.e. the teacher and the student), but the issue that we are going to explore together – whether this is plankton or the teachings of Plato. The relationship between you and me is deprioritised in favour of the object being studied, which should make us both wiser as we study this object together.
(Larsen, in Henriksen, 2020)

In 2021 an Australian teacher might be forgiven for assuming there is a common set of values and purpose informing activities around education in the developed world. Whilst they might not necessarily agree in the correctness of these values or purpose, this sense of a tide moving in a singular, global direction can appear more and more real through increasingly common language, policies and ideology shared through organisations such as the OECD and especially between English-speaking education departments in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia.

However, recent experience in Denmark suggests that culture still counts for much when it comes to how education might be thought about and experienced by children born into 21st century nations with values we might consider to be quite similar to our own. Steen Larsen is a Danish academic working in the fields of educational sociology and philosophy at Aarhus University who thinks quite differently about pedagogy and the purposes of school education. In this article, Larsen (2017) explains the German concept of *Bildung*, the notion that education might lead to ‘the edification and the eloquent formation of the individual’s character, wisdom, judgment, and fertile curiosity’ (p. 175), inviting ‘the reader to ponder two fundamental questions that are seldom posed and even more seldom result in unexpected answers: *what* and *why* education?’ (p. 172).

Pedagogy: Counting to three in two ways

First, good learning processes teach us to look beyond ourselves, instead of just thinking about what the educator or teacher wants, spun into a psychosocial and learning goal-driven or curriculum-controlled spiral circle consisting of two actors, the teacher/educator on the one hand and the learner on the other. Real pedagogy is curiosity-licensing and freedom-creating. It is not competence-written, evidence-proscribed and box-ticking.

Secondly, we leave home and private space when we enter a kindergarten, school or university. Will we then become the property of the play and learning institutions? The children of the state, malleable clay and investment objects? No, when we step over the threshold of a social institution, it is not just a question of learning and practising working with other people: we are now about to see ourselves as equal citizens in the rule of law and as equal participants in the political debate and structure of society. We are



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not only interested private individuals and consumers of education and pedagogy, nor are we merely the benevolent objects of the competitive state. Ideally, we are brought up and civilized to become citizens and not just users to be serviced, 'formatted' and 'designed' in the right way. What we need to learn must not only match the current and future needs of the labour market or meet the requirements for a national display of great PISA test measurements.

In the best of all worlds that do not exist, but which we have to struggle to realise every day, educators can, in glimpses, create the opportunity for humans to practice counting to three in two different ways, while almost imperceptibly bursting free of both our own and external bonds.

Education: *What and why?*

Today, it is common to find hegemonic educational narrative discussions of means and ends, as if the educational system were a pool table with legislators and school leaders as cues, teachers as balls, and students as pins. It would be an exceptionally rare occurrence if the *purpose* of education were to be discussed in public. The question: “why education?” simply is not asked. Educational economists and politicians are generally content to demand greater effectivity and efficiency for their investments into the system.

However, the perpetual plurality of people (*in pluralis*) beseeches us to avoid conclusions based on singularity. For this author, it seems both impossible and incongruous to reduce the purpose of offering and undertaking an education to means (technologies of control, compulsion, enrolment procedures, economic incentives, scholarships and so on) and ends (to produce employable and competitive individuals). Not least due to the at once general and specific character of educational purpose: historically created, constitutive, idea-generated, and guiding. Critically investigating discussions of purpose elevates the phenomenon of education to a sphere in which it becomes possible to clarify *why*.

Moreover, critical thinking can contribute to and qualify public debates in society (*res publica*), and philosophy, with its courage to both create new concepts and reinvigorate outmoded ones by adding new layers of meaning, can serve to generating previously un(fore)seen analytical mappings.

Unlike our English-speaking colleagues, as speakers of Germanic languages (Danish and German), we are privileged in our ability to distinguish between ‘*uddannelse*’ [education] and ‘*dannelse*’ [coming to being or culturedness], between ‘*Ausbildung*’ [education, instruction and teaching] and ‘*Bildung*’, as is distinctly possible in the ‘germanophile’ part of the world (Kosselleck, 2002, pp. 170-207). It is a much more difficult task to advocate such a distinction in English, where ‘education’ is often linked to concepts such as ‘culture’ and ‘edification’, or French, where *éducation* is commonly used to denote the moral or practical aspects of child-raising (for example, *l'éducation morale* as the formation of character, as, for instance, the English philosopher John Locke also wrote about back in 1693 in the classic *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*).



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What we referred to earlier as *Bildung*, is essentially a matter of training one's attentiveness, developing the art of decentralisation and focal reorientation. Successful educational processes teach you how to take a small step to the side and ask, bravely, insistently, and without hesitation:

- where do we come from?
- how have we become who we are?
- why do we think as we do?
- what would happen if we began thinking and living differently?

Well aware that not all students are engaged in the study of philosophy, the history of ideas, and/or critical humanities or social sciences, I maintain that, in an ideal scenario, any carpenter, chef, doctor, or dentist will also be challenged to think and use their imagination during the course of their education.

Bearing this distinction in mind, we are in a position to more clearly perceive what we otherwise risk losing sight of when education is embroiled in questions of functionalistic servility and efficacy to secure a productive workforce for the future of society (human capital). What is at risk are the 'inner' elements of education... that always reaches beyond contemporary educational agendas (Batchelor, 2008). We must endeavour to retain these 'inner' elements; using the Germanic expressions, to protect '*dannelse*' in '*uddannelse*', '*Bildung*' in '*Ausbildung*'.

Final thoughts

Undertaking an education is always a matter of experiencing.

Educational life is first-hand phenomenology for those living it; education presents itself as something that shapes your working life, but also your self-image and imagination. You are introduced, so to speak, to new ways of perceiving yourself the moment you devote yourself to an education. In this sense, an educational life is – ideally, at least - at once a creative and unpredictable process which, to the dismay of the most tenacious and unbending among us, risks plunging the student into a highly challenging and even painful transformation (or complete rejection) of her existing worldviews.

It is inherently risky to expose oneself to radical transformational processes. Returning home afterwards to old friends, places, or family can, for example, be difficult and challenging, with an air charged of mutual alienation. All of a sudden, one has become unrecognisable and unable to communicate on the same wavelength.

Ideally, at least, education can only occur through the self-transcending and self-realising conquest of new areas of knowledge and through the acquisition of new ways to think, speak, learn, analyse, and write. Some of these words might even find their way into the occasional toast at casual get-togethers; much unlike the pragmatic appropriation of job-ready and applicable *lingua productiva* within the current, dominant discourse in education policy and politics.



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The French philosopher Jacques Rancière would agree and proclaim: *Whoever teaches without emancipating stultifies* (1991, p. 18).

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Other suggested resources in English

Turnbull, S. (2020, June 14). [Review of the book *The purposes of education: A conversation between John Hattie and Steen Nepper Larsen* by John Hattie & Steen Nepper Larsen]. *Schools Week*.

<https://schoolsweek.co.uk/the-purposes-of-education-a-conversation-between-john-hattie-and-steen-nepper-larsen/>

World Education Summit. (2021, April 5). *The purposes of education – Steen Nepper Larsen & John Hattie* [Video].

Steen Nepper Larsen (b. 1958) is Associate Professor in Education Science at The Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, Denmark, and has published numerous academic books and journal articles, including The Purposes of Education. A Conversation Between John Hattie and Steen Nepper Larsen (Routledge 2020), and together with sociologist Inge Kryger Pedersen edited Sociologisk leksikon (Hans Reitzels Forlag 2011). He is a critic connected to the Danish newspaper Information and has worked on several popular philosophy and sociology programs for Danmarks Radio P1.

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[https://pure.au.dk/portal/en/persons/steen-nepper-larsen\(e2adfe2-212f-4742-b93c-a27e1008efbe\).html](https://pure.au.dk/portal/en/persons/steen-nepper-larsen(e2adfe2-212f-4742-b93c-a27e1008efbe).html)

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A note on the text: The sections of this article 'Education: What and why' and 'Final thoughts' are selected text from Larsen S. N., 'What is Education? – A critical essay'.