

Bertrand Russell's Educational Theory

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Russell's educational theory was my first encounter with the broad topic of "educational theory", which deals with questions such as "what is education," "whom is it for," "what are its objectives," and "how should it be practised?" I have been studying education for some time, but mostly the focus has been on very narrow and specific areas concerning the children and their tasks, namely, "what to teach and how to teach." It is, however, self-evident that the actual teaching can only exist in the broad trend of educational theory and practice such as Russell's educational methodology and theory. It may sound hackneyed, but I think renowned scholars like Russell and a novice educator have one thing in common; their desire to provide better education for children. In this essay, I will consider the questions "what is better education", and "what constitutes good education" based on the theory of Russell.

The first question to be considered is: for whom education is? Until the nineteenth century, education was reserved for the children of aristocratic and/or wealthy families. Teachers were erudite scholars. Each teacher was teaching only one child at a time. Ordinary children, i.e. the vast majority of children, were obviously not given such an opportunity. Education in this era was exclusively for children of the aristocracy and of wealthy families. Russell strongly criticized it, saying, "Such method of education is only available to the privileged class. It has no place in an

egalitarian society." He goes on to say: "Education should take a form that enables it to be available to all children ?? or at least all children capable of benefiting from it. The education system we should aim for is one in which every boy and every girl are given the opportunity to attain the highest level of education in this world." I imagine Russell's ideal was very radical for his time and that he must have suffered criticism. Yet his message retains its thrust even today.

"Children capable of benefiting" are obviously not limited to children of the aristocracy; working class children are also included. Also included are children with special needs, such as handicapped children. Russell argues that, not only should all children be given equal opportunities to receive the best possible education, but individuals with special needs and opportunity should be given specific education. He was aware of the danger of equal opportunity leading to inequality and the necessity of individual education where individuals with special needs were concerned. It may be too idealistic, but this focus on individual needs, rather than a blanket equal opportunity, is what most parents keenly desire.

Almost eighty years have passed since Russell proposed his idea of education, but it is still far from being achieved. Education systems in developed countries may resemble Russell's ideal in some ways, but those of the so-called underdeveloped countries are

full of children who are working, not being able to afford education. Also, it is only recently that handicapped children have been given similar educational attention.

There was a time when handicapped children were not even regarded as human beings. They used to be put into institutions where they were deprived of loving care and treated like animals.

Even decades after Russell's proposition, the world is not providing the same education to all children. However, his idea that "education should take the form that enables it to be available to all children ?? at least to all children who are capable of benefiting from it" is now shared by almost everyone. There is also a new trend that aims at education tailored to suit every child's specific needs. I imagine education is going to develop further towards Russell's idea.

"What is education for?" "What sort of knowledge would good education give?" "What are the objectives of teaching children?" We rarely consider these questions. Every day, we go to school, learn literacy and mathematics, do some physical exercise, chat with friends, and go home. Education is part of the daily routine; hardly anyone questions it. It is not, however, like that in other parts of the world. Some nomadic peoples oppose education in the form of sending their children to town where they go to school and learn literacy and mathematics. They oppose such form of education as being meaningless. Worse, they fear that sending their children to town exposes them to alien cultures and that the introduced culture will destroy their traditional way of life. Their idea of good education is to pass on the herding skills and the traditional way of life. They regard this as "better"

than sending them to school for meaningless lessons in literacy and mathematics, together with inevitable exposure to alien cultures.

The reason for the disparity in opinion as to what should be learned through education lies in the fundamental question of "what is education for?" Russell points out the dispute "whether education is for practicality or for embellishment; whether education should focus on technical skills that would train a merchant or a professional as quickly as possible. We are faced with the problem whether education shall aim for packing the children's brains with practical knowledge or giving them intellectual treasures." Russell's answer to the question "whether education should be practical" is "of course it should," because "the educational process is a means to an end, and not an end in itself." He goes on to say, "the essence of practicality is that it benefits something that is not purely practical. A 'good' final result sometimes requires a long series of results." Education should aim for the happiness of each student. Therefore, Russell opposed dividing the society into practicality and embellishment. He argues that both types of knowledge should be provided. Children should acquire knowledge for material gain as well as knowledge for intellectual pleasure. Education should have both utility and humanity as components. I totally agree with Russell. No knowledge is meaningless in the quest for happiness. Education must not be a way of controlling children for specific purposes. Rather, it must encourage the children's natural inquisitiveness and help them to solve problems and gain happiness on their own initiative.

Sadly, it is easy to use education for imposing specific beliefs on children. In Japan during the Second World

War, children were given very lopsided knowledge and philosophy for the purpose of aggrandizing the nation. Similar characteristics were evident in Nazi-era education. Such educational systems were very effective, but the tragic result is known to all. What was harmful in these situations was that the children were not the purpose of education but was a means to achieve a specific purpose. Russell writes, “children are not the means but the purpose. Educators must love children more than the nation or the church. What is required of the educators and what the children should acquire is ‘knowledge dominated by love.’” The problem of bullying that is a major problem nowadays cannot occur if the children are taught “knowledge dominated by love” as Russell proposes.

Russell is prescient in pointing out the importance of early education. He emphasizes the importance of the role of parents in that. In order for the education for

happiness to work, the recipient of such education must be ready, too. The formation of a child’s characteristics starts at the point of birth. The role of parents as educators in the formative years is vitally important. It is the foundation and the first step of the education for happiness.

In this essay, I contemplated the question of good education. I am overwhelmed by Russell’s educational theory and am in complete accord. His concept of education remains the ideal education throughout the generations. No matter how society changes, Russell’s theme of education for children’s happiness and for creating happy society will be upheld.