



## CHAPTER 3

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# What Is “Education”?

**Abstract** Analytic philosophy of education focuses on clarifying such key terms as: “education”, “aims”, “goals”, “objectives”, “overt curriculum”, “covert curriculum”, “null curriculum”, “pedagogical content knowledge”. The understanding of these and other concepts is critical to enable contemporary education to be regarded as a truly professional domain.

**Keywords** Aims • Goals • Objectives • Pedagogic content knowledge

The world of education—like law, medicine, business, and other spheres—has its own unique language. A discussion of this language is important for principals and teachers, parents, and students in order to facilitate a clear understanding of what education is. In this chapter, I analyze and clarify some key terms with a view to promoting a coherent and more precise educational practice.

### THREE WAYS TO ANALYZE THE TERM “EDUCATION”

There are three kinds of definitions of “education” (Scheffler 1960). The first type is called *the descriptive*. It is a statement that proposes to denote or explain the nature of the meaning of the word called “education” by using a variety of words to explain either what the phenomenon is or how

the term is to be understood. This type of definition claims to describe precisely how the word denoted as “education” is most prominently used.

The second type of definition of “education” is *the programmatic*, which comes to advocate for or prescribe a belief of what education *should be* or *should do*. A programmatic definition is less preoccupied with what the phenomenon or language of education is and more concerned with promulgating a particular practice of education that is regarded as desirable. Sometimes prescriptive definitions are expressed in short, clipped sentences such as Pink Floyd’s “We don’t need no education” or the title of Jonathan Kozol’s description of education as *Death at an Early Age* (Kozol 1985). Programmatic definitions are ultimately short slogans or deeply felt preaching about the way education *should be*.

The third type of definition is *the stipulative* and its purpose is technical and utilitarian. It is basically a linguistic agreement or pact that enables a discussion to proceed smoothly without forcing a person to each time state, “This is what I mean by the term ‘education.’” It is essentially is a linguistic shortcut, in which one person’s explanation of the word “education” is called Version 1; a second person’s explanation is Version 2, and the third interpretation is called Version 3. This is a kind of a shortcut that enables the discussion to precede at a decent pace.

My concern in this chapter is the descriptive mode, namely, the endeavor to arrive at a clear and generally agreed-upon statement of what the word “education” means. My aim is to refer to terms that are generally used in everyday speech and to attempts to search for viable and relevant definitions that reflect as accurately as possible the common language usage of the term. There is a technique that students and some academics use in the attempt to understand the term, namely, to trace it back to its original linguistic roots. There are times when this is helpful, but very often this can be misleading, since the way it once was used does not necessarily help us understand the way it is used today. The contemporary word “education” is sometimes traced to the Latin root *educare*, which means “to train” or “to mold”. Based on this linguistic root, some people like to argue that training or molding is what education today should be. At the same time, the Latin word *educere* means “to lead out”, which suggests a totally different understanding of “education” as a process aimed at that freeing the person from the prison of ignorance. Generally, it is my sense that the technique of tracing back to former linguistic roots is more useful for understanding ways in which terms were understood in the past rather than helping us to grasp what they mean today.

### SOME CONTEMPORARY MEANINGS

Let’s now look at some diverse definitions of “education”. One understanding of the term is the conscious effort to equip the unequipped young with facts, knowledge, and skills that will enable them to function as adults in a specific society. This is often called the *socialization* model.

A second usage of the word “education” understands it as exposure to, understanding of, and practice in skillsets that a person needs to be able to function in contemporary culture. This notion is sometimes called the *acculturation* model.

A third notion of education focuses on the development of reflective thinking and feeling abilities so that the young will be able to carve out how they wish to exist. This model is sometimes known as the *liberal* or *person-centered* model of education.

### A PROPOSED DEFINITION OF “EDUCATION”

I have found the discussion of diverse meanings of education to be very fruitful because it helps me see the world through different lenses and, particularly, enables me to think about and consider diverse meanings and practices of the dynamics of education. At the same time, since I believe that education is a practice, and in practice we need some very specific tools and toolkits to help us proceed, I have searched over time for a definition of “education” that I regard as both descriptively and programmatically useful for the educational practitioner. Ultimately, the definition that I regard as the most useful was shaped by Lawrence Cremin, who is regarded as the most distinguished historian of twentieth-century education:

Education is the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, provoke or acquire knowledge, values, attitudes, skills or sensibilities as well as any learning that results from the effort (Cremin, *Public Education*, p. 27)

This broad-based definition indicates that education is a purposeful activity. The word “education” is reserved for frameworks created with the considered and conscious intent to educate. This definition also understands education as a process and not a place. It is a purposeful activity that can happen within a wide range of frameworks and not only in buildings called schools. Moreover, this intentional activity does not only transmit

knowledge, but it also is concerned with values, attitudes, skills, and sensibilities. Education is an activity which takes place in many diverse venues and is intended to develop knowledge, understanding, valuing, growing, caring, and behaving. It can happen “when you sit in your house, and when you go on the way, and when you lie down and when you rise” (Deuteronomy, 6:7). While contemporary societies have denoted schools as the agency responsible for education, in fact, education far transcends the certificates of achievement received from pre-school, elementary, secondary, and collegiate frameworks.

### “AIMS”, “GOALS”, “OBJECTIVES”

The concept of education invites the question “Education for what?” What is the purpose of education? While the terms, “aims”, “goals”, and “objectives” of education are sometimes used interchangeably, philosophers of education describe three distinct activities related to “purpose”: Aims, Goals, Objectives = AGO (Noddings 2007).

“Aims” refer to the most general ideals, values, or principles, which a person, institution, or society regards as the ultimate desideratum of education. Aims are value statements which designate certain principles or values as the ultimate aspiration. Aims describe both the ideal target of an educational institution as well as its ultimate desired outcomes or achievements. Educational aims ultimately frame the overall direction of an educational system or institution.

“Goals” refer to a second stage, which is derivative from aims and focuses on contents and topics that should be studied so as to enable students to understand and actualize core ideals explicit in aims. Goals translate aims into specific contents or stepping-stones that should be part of the educational process. If one of the aims of twentieth-century American schooling was to teach a set of shared values for its diverse populations in order to socialize them into a core American society, then its goal was to provide them with skillsets such as language, science, and mathematics, which were then regarded as contents critical to enable realization of the larger shared American creed.

The word “objectives” refers to the most practical stage, which is the actual teaching materials—books textbooks, maps, videos, and visual aids—used in the classroom each day, week, and month in a year. These are the infamous “lesson plans” which are an hour by hour mapping out of how teachers will spend every single day in the classroom.

This AGO framework can be a useful structure for analyzing education, from its most abstract goals to its most immediate daily application. Moreover, if implemented properly, it would seem to reflect a useful dynamic from theory to practice. Unfortunately, in reality, what often happens is that aims and goals are skipped over and objectives—daily blueprints, and lesson plans—become the main preoccupation. Because of a multitude of exigencies, the thoughtful paradigm of aims, goals, and objectives is often neglected at the expense of “getting through the day” in practice.

### THREE NOTIONS OF “CURRICULUM”

An important term in the study of education is “curriculum”, which popularly refers to the overall subjects or contents of schooling. As the field of curriculum studies developed into a rigorous academic area of study in schools of education, broader understandings of the term were to emerge (Pinar et al. 1995).

One of the important sophistications in the study of curriculum has been the notion of overt, covert, and null curricula. The “overt curriculum” refers to the clearly stated and enunciated objectives, contents, subjects, topics, books, and resources, which are the official frameworks, and requirements of a school and its teachers. It is the approved and mandated contents that shape a school’s operation.

The “covert” curriculum refers to attitudes, values, and behaviors that characterize the norms of daily life in schools beyond the subjects formally taught in a classroom. The covert curriculum is the unspoken “culture” shaped by a multitude of forces and factors. What is the décor of the school? What do the halls look like? What type examinations are given? What is the nature of student interaction? The covert curriculum refers to the multiple features of a school culture very much shaped by the lives, habits, and “lingo” of students which have significant impact on the actual rhythm and flow of daily school life.

The “null” curriculum refers to the books, subjects, topics, and artifacts that are consciously and purposefully *not* part of the school curriculum. This may include partial or no discussion of the history of indigenous populations in the teaching of American history. It includes the list of books, sources, and ideas that have very consciously *not* been chosen in the formal curriculum. All education requires selection, and the topics not chosen—and why—are just as important as those that have been chosen.

Indeed, there are political, racial, gender, aesthetic, moral, and spiritual issues that significantly shape the overt, covert, and null curriculum of each and every type of schooling.

These three terms alert us to the complicated nature of curriculum development. While there is a popular phrase that refers to an individual “writing a curriculum”, in fact, curriculum development has become a specialized domain that involves subject matter experts classroom teachers, and educational leadership, and requires extensive deliberation, field testing, revision, and production. It is one of the most exciting and, at the same time most demanding of fields in contemporary education.

### PEDAGOGICAL CONTENT KNOWLEDGE (PCK)

An important dimension of education is what is commonly known as “pedagogy”, which is understood as the methodologies or the ways in which teaching should happen.<sup>1</sup> This is obviously a critical dimension of education because it is about what educators teach and how students learn—which are the ultimate domain of education. Pedagogy (sometimes called the “science of teaching”) is the assumption that there are universal patterns and procedures in teaching which should constitute an important part of academic teacher training. There were, and there still are, some general courses on pedagogy in university departments of education which reflect the assumption that there is a core set of methodologies generally appropriate for all sorts of teaching. Twentieth-century philosophers in multiple fields of study—for example, physics, mathematics, literature, and economics—began to focus on the notions of “realms of meaning” or “spheres of knowledge”, which led to the general consensus that there is a diversity of pedagogic methodologies that derive from the many different spheres of knowledge. This kind of thinking made it clear that because of the significant differences between science, mathematics, history, literature, and philosophy, there could be no one overall pedagogy appropriate for all subjects; consequently, such courses as “principles of pedagogy” were misleading. In the 1980s, through the innovative work of a group of educators of whom Professor Lee Shulman was a central figure, an important concept was to emerge which has had a profound effect on styles of teaching (Shulman 1986). This research led to the term “pedagogical content knowledge” (PCK). PCK refers to the fact that diverse spheres of knowledge utilize diverse methodologies of researching and understanding and therefore require diverse practices of teaching. In other words, the

way a teacher teaches the subject depends on the nature of the subject and that all subjects are not the same. Just as it is clear that the ways we teach someone to drive a car or to learn how to swim have their own characteristics, so it is clear that the teaching of mathematics must differ from the teaching of literature, which differs from the teaching of civics, which differs from the teaching of languages. This notion indicates that one must be wary of general principles of “how to teach” and that quality teaching begins with and is related to an understanding of the subject matter being taught. To teach chemistry or physics one has to understand the role of experimentation. In teaching literature, one has to understand the importance of simile, metaphor, plot, and theme. PCK was to have a major impact particularly in the experimental subject areas, although there were also important implications for teaching literature and other areas. At the heart of PCK is the notion that methodology or “what to do” flows from the content one teaches, and the content one teaches ultimately flows from the “why” of education. In other words, education is an integrated dynamic in which the “why” affects the “what” and the “what” affects the “how”.

I learned about the importance of PCK during my travels over the years to all sorts of Jewish schools. One of the most prominent subjects (typically in the early years of elementary school) I observed was the teaching of Genesis Chapter 12 which describes a conversation between God and Abraham in which God makes a covenant—a legal agreement—with Abraham, that if he follows God’s ways, Abraham will be given a certain body of land for himself and for his children in perpetuity. How one teaches this section depends upon how one understands the nature of this ancient source. If this text is a verifiable history book (which was the mode that I observed in so many schools), it will be taught in one way; if this text is not a history book but rather a philosophical or theological work with profound religious, moral, and human messages, it will be taught in a totally different way. These two understandings result in dramatically diverse pedagogies and messages, depending on whether the text in Genesis 12 was presented as an authoritative history or a profound philosophy.

## CONCLUSION

The contemporary language of education includes some key concepts—“schooling”, “aims”, “goals”, “curriculum”, and “pedagogy”—whose meanings are very important to the practice of education in schools and beyond. This conclusion suggests that the fields of education and Jewish education in the twenty-first century are sophisticated domains which call for serious deliberation and study by prospective educators. The educators of our young deserve the same level of training, investment, and rigor that we expect from the doctors who treat our bodies or from the engineers who build the bridges on which we travel. Education in the twenty-first century is a critical sphere that calls for deep reflection, training, and passion.

## NOTE

1. Adult education specialist Malcolm Knowles suggested that the term “pedagogy” be used to refer to the teaching of children and that the term “andragogy” be used to denote adult learning. (Knowles 2020).

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