

## The Aims of Education and Individual Life; Some Reflections (1) on *Education* by T. Percy Nunn

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### Abstract

In this article, in order to rethink “what are the aims of education for individuals as human beings?”, we try to describe the nature of Nunn’s philosophy of education and the historical origins of progressive education from his book, *Education: Its data and first principles* (thereafter *Education*),<sup>2</sup> particularly in chapters one to three dealing with the aims of education and individual life. We also consider some practical ideas in present day progressive education. In the conclusion we suggest that the aims of education in his philosophy of education are compelled to reflect the development of individuals as a whole. In terms of contemporary education we consider the development of IQ, EQ, SQ with reference to the 3D theory of intelligences. We consider that Percy Nunn’s view of the main aims of education is that children who learn to love learning are able to grow into an enlightened and civilized personality/character.

### Introduction

Sir Thomas Percy Nunn (1870-1944) was ‘From 1913, ... a professor of education, University of London. As early as 1908, Nunn had advocated that teacher training in London should be recognized as of university rank: the institution should act as a clearing house of educational ideas and provide for the further education of practising teachers. Nunn’s vision was realized in 1932 when the London Day Training College became the London University Institute of Education.’<sup>3</sup>(thereafter IOE) Additionally he contributed to the objectives of the informal group New Ideals in Education (1914-1939) which concerned itself with progressive education and educational freedom and, as a consequence, became the origin of New Education Fellowship (NEF, 1921-). He gave a special lecture to the international conference of the NEF at Elsinor in Denmark in 1929<sup>4</sup> and presented the Presidential Address about “The New Education and the English Tradition” (chairman: Mr. Frank Roscoe, M.A.) as the new president of the British section of the NEF at the University of London in January 1930.<sup>5</sup> His progressive thinking in his book *Education* was involved with the whole of the New Education Movement at that time.

In the beginning of the book, *Education*, he quoted Aristotle: ‘Every art is thought to aim at some good’ (p.1).<sup>6</sup> It is reasonable, then, to begin by asking at what ‘good’ education aims. His main object was to focus on the aims of education. According to Dr. Peter Cunningham, the book ‘... had been reprinted ten times in a decade, and whose values had been reflected in the Hadow Reports of 1931 and 1933 in their child-centredness and their reaction against conventional mass instruction.’<sup>7</sup>

In this article, in order to rethink “what are the aims of education for individuals?” we shall try to describe the nature of Nunn’s philosophy of education and the historical origins of progressive education from the book. We shall also consider some practical ideas in present day progressive education.

The responsibilities for the introduction and the conclusion belong with Yoko Yamasaki and in the other chapters with Gary Foskett mainly, but the whole article was developed through our working collaboratively.

### **The Aims of Education**

Three clear aims, which could be agreed on by everybody, Nunn suggests should be:

- To form character
- To prepare for complete living
- To produce a sound mind in a sound body

In terms of our commentary on these aims, it is important to note that within each of these aims are located multiple intelligences.<sup>8</sup> Intellect, spiritual intelligence, and social & emotional intelligence, are all required in order to 'form character', to 'prepare for complete living', and to 'form a sound mind in a sound body'. IQ, EQ and SQ inter-relate and reinforce one another's development.<sup>9</sup>

The key question that arises, we believe, is whether these objectives can be attained (and these intelligences developed) through direct TEACHING. Or – can they be best LEARNED through participating in a range of activities and educational experiences that are organised within certain educational contexts and settings, e.g. schools and universities?

The emphasis on LEARNING, and how best to promote effective learning, must replace the fixation on TEACHING, we believe. This is the key to understanding the educational revolution that was argued for by progressives like Nunn, and which for a while began to take root in England in many more Primary schools following the publication of the Plowden Report in 1966/7.

Nunn poses the questions:

- What kind of 'character' is it desirable to form?
- What sorts of activities and behaviours comprise 'complete living' ?
- What are the 'marks of a healthy mind' ?

Do we aim to produce adults who are obedient to authority, or do we want people to be questioning and assertive?  
Do we promote a *spiritual* or promote a *materialistic* approach to living?

Nunn suggests that among educators and makers of educational policy there are 'differences in educational faith and practice too radical to be harmonised, and too serious to be exposed to the public view', and it is for these reasons that the "aims of education" have been kept deliberately vague since the beginnings of compulsory public education.

From a 21<sup>st</sup> Century perspective we would probably replace the word "faith" with the concepts of 'philosophy' and 'ideology'. Nunn goes on to state, 'Every scheme of education being ... a practical philosophy, necessarily touches life at every point.' (p. 2) We believe we should understand all education as including social, emotional and spiritual aspects, as well as intellectual.

Nunn also points out, 'As ideals of life are eternally at variance, their conflict will be reflected in educational theories.' He then states, 'We must also recognise that among the nominal followers of an ideal there are always rival sections, doubtful adherents and secret rebels.' He concludes, 'The plain man knows not where to turn for truth.' "The plain man", as he calls it, we can take to mean the non-specialist, or non-educationalist, but possibly also many teachers and policy-makers.

So do we, those of us who have chosen education as our field of specialism and our profession, know where to turn for “the truth”?

Nunn implies that we individually have a duty and a responsibility to be clear about our ideas and our ideals, and about our aims and objectives, and their origins, even if we can't agree about them or reach a compromise on them amongst ourselves. Nunn points out that competing (“rival”) ideas and ideologies or philosophies generally arise out of the social and political conditions of the time, and therefore those conditions will tend to determine the educational practices that are dominant or prevalent.

A good example of this would be the case of Britain in the past 40 years. During the 1960's there were radical changes in the prevailing culture, from conservatism towards liberalism, libertarianism, non-conformism and anti-materialism. There was a corresponding shift in educational practice from passive knowledge-transmission and teacher-centred learning towards active open-ended enquiry and the fostering of a love of learning for its own sake. The purpose of schools was seen as not just to prepare students to gain exam passes and qualifications. A child's all-round development needed to be considered. Creativity was strongly encouraged, as was imagination.

When the prevailing political culture swung towards Thatcherism and New Conservatism (neo-conservatism in the USA) during the 1980s there was a reaction against the active engagement of children and students, against open-plan architecture and collaborative learning, against practices based on learning through activity and experience, and against putting children's individual wellbeing at the centre of our concerns.

When New Labour came to power in 1997 such conservative and reactionary ideas were extended and developed further, with more and more emphasis placed on the gaining of test and exam passes, on schools' positions in “league tables”, and on Local Authorities' positions in their own “league tables”.

There was virtually an end to wide-ranging discourses about, and concern for, children enjoying learning for its own sake, developing critical thinking skills, and developing social skills and emotional skills. Such development is often presumed to take place essentially within families, which of course does not happen in a great many cases, since parents themselves often do not possess high degrees of such skills.

For a thirty year period, therefore, there has been a return to a preoccupation with preparing children for test and exam success, in response to politicians' demands to raise test scores, on the basis of a presumed political mandate to make such practices the main educational aim.

Most teachers and educators were too concerned for their own professional survival in such a harsh climate (“no excuses for failure”) to point out that educational achievement is best developed when children enjoy school, when they develop a love of learning for its own sake, and when they also possess high degrees of creativity, and social and emotional intelligence.

Neither did most educators point out that the U.N.'s declaration of the Rights of the Child<sup>10</sup> was being contravened when children were denied opportunities for creative learning within a broad, balanced and stimulating curriculum.

Politicians also chose to ignore clear evidence that many children were bored, frustrated and de-motivated by this return to Victorian (19<sup>th</sup> Century) didacticism with an emphasis on pressurising children to prepare for tests.

Although shocking, it was no great surprise to many commentators that UNICEF published a report<sup>11</sup> in 2007 that placed British children near the bottom of a “league table” for wellbeing and ‘happiness’.

Returning to Nunn, he points out in his book that Hegel's ideas about the need for the State to indoctrinate children, and to strictly shape their thinking, can be blamed for the “Armageddon” of World War:

From the idealism of Hegel ... the Prussian mind derived its fanatical belief in the absolute value of the State, its deadly doctrine that the State can admit no moral authority greater than its own, and the corollary

that the educational system, from the primary school to the university, should be used as the instrument to ingrain these notions into the soul of a whole people. (p. 3)

Nunn then reaches his key point:

The most urgent question before the educators of today is whether they are to foster this sinister tradition or to help humanity to escape from it to something better. (p. 4)

Nunn clearly recognises that humans are, above all, social beings, and must develop what we might agree to call “social intelligence” to a high degree (empathy with and concern for others, and so on), but he goes on to state:

What is needed is ... a doctrine which ... reasserts the importance of the individual, and safeguards his indefeasible rights. (ibid.)

Such a doctrine we seek to set out in these pages and to make the basis of a stable educational policy. We shall stand throughout on the position that nothing good enters into the human world except in and through the free activities of individual men and women, and that educational practice must be shaped to accord with that truth. (ibid.)

According to Nunn we must ‘reaffirm the infinite value of the individual person’, and also ‘reassert his ultimate responsibility for his own destiny’. We must then accept all the practical [educational] corollaries this assertion implies.

A key passage then follows:

It follows that there can be no universal aim of education if that aim is to include the assertion of any particular ideal of life; for there are as many ideals as there are persons. Educational efforts must, it would seem, be limited to securing for every one the conditions under which individuality is most completely developed – that is, to enabling him to make his original contribution to the ... whole of human life as full and as truly characteristic as his nature permits; the form of the contribution being left to the individual as something which each must, in living and by living, forge out for himself. (p. 5)

He maintained, ‘Even the unheroic soul will best serve society by becoming more fully and truly himself.’ (p. 7)

Nunn then writes about the importance of teaching children to “esteem the individual life” (p. 8), which we take to mean the precious gift of life itself – the awesome power of conscious and creative beings, and the wonder of the human mind and spirit, let alone the complexities of the human body and its phenomenal brain. To have proper regard for this precious entity that is the human mind/body/spirit ‘is the strongest bulwark of freedom and the firmest guarantee against the rule of violence.’ (ibid.)

In our terms, and in terms of the 3D theory of intelligences ( $3DI=IQ/EQ/SQ$ ),<sup>12</sup> this can be taken to mean that a fully evolved human being, who is complete in terms of intellectual and also personal, social, emotional and spiritual intelligences, must be the ultimate goal of our educational systems.

Nunn then deals with those who might claim that these are impossible aims – those who might believe that to achieve these aims would require a “separate curriculum for every pupil” in order to produce students who have developed their full individuality in an atmosphere of freedom and self-direction.

Individuality develops only in a social atmosphere where it can feed on common interests and common activities. (p. 8)

In our parlance this means that social and emotional and spiritual intelligences (empathy, self-control, intuition, etc.) are best learned, and in fact can only be learned, through interaction and collaboration with others through common activities and experiences, in this case-educational activities.

Young children in particular learn by DOING – that is, they learn best through taking part in meaningful and stimulating activities. Above all they learn more productively when participating in creative experiences and activities. This is not only true for learning social skills and emotional skills. Even our individual minds are best developed through interaction – through discussion and debate – with others. This stands in sharp contrast to approaches to teaching and learning that insist pupils remain silent while focusing all their attention on the teacher, who is supposed to “transmit” knowledge.

In any case, social and emotional skills cannot be “taught” as such – they must be learned in a proper context of active, purposeful and collaborative learning. As must thinking skills, leadership skills and creativity. As for spiritual intelligence – it must be obvious that the various aspects of spiritual intelligence-our capacity for intuition, our respect for ourselves and for others, and for life itself – cannot be *directly* taught. Human values, indeed, cannot be acquired through didactic teaching. They can only be developed in institutions which themselves embody those values, where those values are demonstrated every day by the individuals who work and learn together in those places.

In the words of Nunn, again, ‘Freedom [to become one’s true self] is ... the condition, if not the source, of all the higher goods.’ (p. 9) ‘Freedom to conduct life’s adventure in his own way and to make the best of it, is the one universal ideal sanctioned by nature and by reason.’ (ibid.) ‘It offers the one possible foundation for a brotherhood of nations, the only basis on which men can join together ... Hunger for it is the secret source of much of the restless fever of our age.’ (ibid.)

Then as now. Clearly, for Nunn, freedom to learn and to become our true individual selves is the highest ideal for us to take as our aim, our “inspiration and guide in education” .

### **Individuality and Life**

Nunn begins Chapter 2 by re-stating the main idea in Chapter 1 – Individuality is the ideal of Life.

It is something that may be approached indefinitely yet never reached. What, then, is its precise character? (p. 10)

... autonomy ... is the essence of man’s ‘freedom’ as a self-determining agent. (our underlines) (p. 11)

But life also “constantly strives after unity” (p.10). (By ‘unity’ we take it he means the integration of an individual’s intellectual, emotional, social, instinctual, physical and spiritual capacities – all of the intelligences.) ‘This unity, whether shown in action or in understanding, is always a partial expression of the individual’s unity, and is felt by him as a pulse of the energy which is the very stuff of his life.’ (p.11)

Nunn appears to be saying that within each of us there are various elements which combine to produce the life-force, and a mind/body/spirit whose totality is greater than the sum of the individual parts. He argues then that every human being has a soul, and is a multi-dimensional being – not just ‘an exceedingly complicated physico-chemical machine’ or a ‘very cunningly fashioned automaton.’ (p. 13) ‘Physics and chemistry are insufficient to

explain even the simplest forms of animal life', which is capable of learning from experience and therefore able to give direction to its experience, according to its "likes" and "dislikes". (p.15) 'Even a protozoan escapes beyond the conception of a physico-chemical machine. In short, even the humblest creature is autonomous.' (ibid.)

Clearly Nunn is aiming to build his argument and his case for an education system that equips individuals to live their lives autonomously, according to their own preferences, living freely but collaboratively within a social framework or a community.

These ideas correspond with a 3DI framework of analysis and practice, whose essential idea is that there are 6 distinct intelligences within each of us, and all 6 must be well developed (particularly by parents and our education system) if we are to live our lives autonomously and spontaneously, and contentedly. 'These biological studies give [us] a lively sense of a solidarity in nature ... and its powers.' (p.17) Unlike the lower-order animals, however, human beings have highly complex senses and intelligences, which allow us all to develop 'a much higher degree of individuality' – especially when our intelligences, including the senses, are well-developed by parents and by education in schools.

'Finally we reach a man in being who can shape his course by reference to the ... invisible objects of the intellect, can look before and after, and must nourish his life with spiritual as well as material realities.' (pp.17-8) 'This view is as remote as possible from materialism ... It refuses to regard perception and thought, feeling and will [emotion], as [mere] additions to a machine that would be complete without them. [This view] spiritualises the body; it does not materialise the soul.' (p. 18) 'To sum up this way of interpreting life ... it comes to view the history of life as a striving towards the individuality which is expressed most clearly and richly in man's conscious nature.' (ibid.)

Two important consequences immediately follow.

- 1) The type of education that aims at fostering individuality is the only education which is 'according to nature' .

We may compare this with an education whose aim is to benefit the State, or a particular political ideology, or the needs of industry, business, commerce and finance.

- 2) Individuality is an affair of the whole organism or 'body/mind' .

3DI theory, of course, would extend "body/mind" to body /mind /spirit /soul (emotions) /instincts /empathy.

In the final part of this chapter Nunn focuses on human "drives" or "urges" (p. 20) which direct our behaviour, including the ability to learn from experience-which he calls 'coherent adaptiveness and progressiveness.'

Nunn is clearly very concerned to base his views on education on a 'scientific basis' for his 'view of life' . (p. 12) and in this chapter he discusses in great detail some esoteric and pseudo-scientific concepts which he believes support his views. We, however, do not regard these points as essential to this article, and do not, in any case, have the space here to consider them properly. Readers of Nunn's book should note, however, that his attempts to utilise and popularise certain terms – horne, conation and mneme – were unsuccessful in that they have not become embedded in educational and psychological discourse and are unknown to the vast majority of English scholars and educationalists.

### **The Will to Live**

In Chapter 3 Nunn continues to stress his idea that “the will to live” is driven by our individual desires, urges and drives, which, when frustrated, usually cause us to malfunction, as it were, or even break down. ‘... Every animal, so long as it is alive, continues to affirm or assert itself against the world ...’ (p. 23) He then continues that:

Even the least ‘assertive’ of us must recognise that ... in every act we say to our world, openly or implicitly, “I am here and to be reckoned with; I go a way that is ... my own way and not merely yours.” And our bodies say the same thing after their own manner. (p. 24)

Nunn says that self-affirmation or self-assertion of the organism in the face of the world is shown in both “conservative” and “creative” activities. The desires and urges that drive us towards acts of creation and conservation have the effect of building up “the whole fabric of civilisation” (p. 27). ‘Social organisation, laws and government, the arts and sciences, have all sprung from restless creative power ...’ (ibid.).

The relevance of this idea to the aims of education is summed up by Nunn in one sentence:

The whole meaning of education is missed unless we think of it as a process in which this creative power is to be given the best possible chances of developing and expressing itself. (ibid.)

The goal of education is to help boost a child’s powers of self-expression and creativity, and to “create and cultivate ‘interests’ (p. 30). These interests ‘determine the form of the man’s individuality and are the measure of his life’s achievements.’ Education ‘enables him to express himself in activities that have an ever-increasing value.’ (ibid.) ‘It means not that the school should be made a place of pleasant entertainment, but that it is a place where the child should be tempted to throw himself into the worthiest forms of activity [in order to become] firmly established in his nature ... and [subsequently] develop them further in the greater world beyond school.’ (p. 30) Nunn, therefore, recognises the importance of our inbuilt creative drives and urges – ‘the activities that spring from them become not only more complex but also more *expressive*.’ (p. 31)

### **Conclusion**

In the opening chapters of his book *Education* Nunn outlines what he believes should be the main aims of education. These stand in strong contrast to the present-day aims in many countries, which are almost entirely related to preparing children to attain high marks in tests of “academic excellence”, in order that they might progress to places in the best universities and to well-paid positions in the professions, and in business, commerce, industry and finance.

Nunn believed that the best way to prepare young people for “complete living” and to form good characters with sound bodies and minds was to reform the school system in order to develop all of our children’s intelligences, plus their creativity, imagination, and love of learning for its own sake.

In countries where more and more children and young people have become alienated from what schools offer, and where their well-being is threatened by boredom, frustration and the stress of participating in a highly competitive exam culture, Nunn's ideas about the aims of education should be a reminder to us that we have a duty to be very specific about how we organise learning in our schools, colleges and universities, and what we are aiming to achieve.

Nunn believed that education should be of intrinsic benefit to all learners, and should help them to become (and to live) as free citizens who contribute to their society in ways chosen by themselves. He was strongly

against manipulating pupils and using them to satisfy the demands of the State and its various stakeholders, including the professions and businesses. He foresaw that in any case a good society needs people who are free, independent, confident and well-balanced; who are socially, emotionally and spiritually intelligent; who are creative and imaginative; and who are mentally, emotionally and physically strong and healthy. The prevailing school culture of his time certainly did not, on the whole, develop such people. His ideas surely still carry weight and resonance.

Above all, therefore, according to Nunn's progressive thinking we are able to interpret the main aim of education which he advocated related to developing multiple intelligences-intellectual, physical, emotional, spiritual. We should now move on to rethinking or more closely examining the teaching methods used in schools, in order to realise still Nunn's philosophy of progressive education.

**Note:** This article contribute to the research project based on GRANT-IN-AID for Scientific Research (C, No; 19530734) in Japan, a representative Yoko Yamasaki, terms in 2007-2009, titled 'Progressive Teaching and Professionalisation of Teachers during New Educational Movement in Britain 1890-1930'. Gary Foskett, Second author, is a co-researcher in Britain in this project.

#### (Notes)

- <sup>1</sup> This school was opened in Bermondsey, London Borough of Southwark in 1966, was one of demonstrations' school of Plowden Report (1966).
- <sup>2</sup> T. Percy Nunn, *Education: its data and first principles*, London: Edward Arnold, 1926. First publishing for this book was in 1920.
- <sup>3</sup> Richard Aldrich and Peter Gordon, *Dictionary of British Educationists*, London, England; Totowa, N. J. : Woburn Press, 1989, p. 187. It will be worthy to pay attention that there is an academic who express "Percy Nunn is my hero" like Emeritus Professor Richard Aldrich in IOE. In an interview by Yoko Yamasaki at IOE on Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> August in 2009.
- <sup>4</sup> Percy Nunn (Professor of London University): The Basic Principles of the New Education. (Lecture delivered at Elsinore, 19 August 1929), New Education Fellowship, *The New Era*, October 1929, pp. 205-8.
- <sup>5</sup> New Education Fellowship, *The New Era*, January 1930, p. x.
- <sup>6</sup> Works cited page from *Education* is only embedded the page with parentheses after the quoted sentences.
- <sup>7</sup> Peter Cunningham, *Curriculum Change in the Primary School since 1945*, London: The Falmer Press, 1988, p. 96.
- <sup>8</sup> See Yoko Yamasaki & Gary Foskett, The Study and Theory on Child-Centred Schooling in the Progressive Education: What does Eveline Lowe Primary School Propose?, Naruto University of Education, *The Research Bulletin of Naruto University*, 2003, pp. 133-47.
- <sup>9</sup> See Gary Foskett, Naruto University of Education, Report of GRANT-IN-AID for Scientific Research (A(1), No: 12308009) on Integrated Studies.
- <sup>10</sup> See UNICEF; <http://www.unicef.org/crc/> (08/08/2009)
- <sup>11</sup> See UNICEF, Report Card 7 2007, Child poverty in perspective: An overview of Child Well-Being in Rich Countries. PDF: [http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc7\\_eng.pdf](http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc7_eng.pdf) (05/08/2009)
- <sup>12</sup> See 3Di associates; <http://www.3diassociates.com/> (08/08/2009)