

Teaching Without Ideals?

Emily Robertson
Syracuse University

Teachers have goals of varying generality both for themselves and for their students. Some of these goals come from outside, as we might say, from the school system, the community, professional associations, schools of education, or the general cultural and political climate for education. Some outside goals may be endorsed by the teacher and others not. The teacher's rejection of particular outside goals may generate new goals, sometimes counter-cultural ones. And normally teachers have some discretion for creating goals unique to themselves without being regarded as subversive.

What space do ideals occupy in this normative landscape of teaching? David Hansen proposes a debate between those who believe that teachers should have ideals and those who think they should do without them. For this debate to make sense, ideals must be dispensable. But teaching surely cannot survive the elimination of all goals, all normative content. "Goal-free teaching" seems like a non-starter. Can a teacher conceive of herself as pure stimulus, equally content with all outcomes? So what sort of goals is it that the critic rejects in resisting "ideals?" I am not entirely clear how to answer this question. My intent here is not to press an analytic point about the meaning of "ideals," but rather to understand what concern it is that animates the critic of ideals and so to figure out what the problem is that needs to be solved. What is a teacher being asked to forswear in being challenged to teach without ideals?

Hansen appears to hold that ideals are the special province of reformers. He says that they are "images of goodness" that "point to territory beyond the familiar, the known, the previously attainable." Examples include "fueling societal betterment" and "producing caring persons." Sometimes Hansen's critic seems to be thinking of teacher ideals as not only reformist but as contrary to the culturally approved goals of teaching. For example, the critic complains that "teachers cannot create whatever they wish in the classroom" because they must fulfill their "publicly defined obligations." When ideals are understood in this way, one might expect the critic of ideals to emphasize the conservative function of education. For example, endorsing the view that education is "conscious social reproduction," Richard Rorty starkly declares: "If a teacher thinks that the society is founded on a lie, then he had better find another profession."¹

But many reformist educational ideals *do* receive wide cultural support, for example, wanting all students to learn, another of Hansen's examples. And the problem that really seems to concern Hansen's critic is not so much subversive activity by teachers, but rather that focusing on ideals might lead teachers to become blind to the situation of real students. Ideals might become ideological or an "obsession," distorting one's grip on reality, thus preventing effective thinking about how to improve the human condition.

If this is the critics' point, then they may be encouraging teachers to be "foxes" not "hedgehogs" in the sense made famous by Isaiah Berlin. "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing," reads a line from the Greek poet Archilochus. Berlin used this line to depict two contrasting intellectual styles — the hedgehogs, who use some central principle to organize all that they think and say, and the foxes, who pursue a variety of problems in a piecemeal fashion without attempting to fit their answers together into some coherent unitary vision.² Perhaps, then, the problem with ideals is that they encourage teachers to push round pegs into square holes in the attempt to make the world fit their ideal. Better, the critic might say, would be for teachers to recognize each problem for what it is rather than being guided by any *single* vision of the good.

Then there is the question of whether it is really true that only reformers can have ideals. In Frances Patton's 1950s novel *Good Morning, Miss Dove*, the townspeople of Liberty Hill "had all, for the space of a whole generation, been exposed at a tender and malleable age to the impartial justice, the adamantine regulations, and the gray, calm, neutral eyes of the same teacher — the terrible Miss Dove."³ The description continues:

By her insistence upon even margins and correct posture and punctuality and industriousness, she told them, in effect, that though life was not easy, neither was it puzzling. You learned its unalterable laws. You respected them. You became equal to your task. Thus you controlled your destiny.⁴

Some close to my age may have encountered a Miss Dove or two. It seems to me true that Miss Dove has a self-conscious understanding of what she is trying to accomplish that directs her teaching and can be thought as her ideal. Here the critic's complaint might not be with having ideals *per se* but rather with the ideal had. Hansen agrees that some ideals may be unworthy; they may, for example, harbor injustice. But now the complaint against ideals would have to be piecemeal against particular ideals because of one's judgment of the ends they promote rather than as a wholesale rejection of ideals.

However the critics of ideals may conceive of ideals and whatever their arguments against ideals may be, Hansen does not side with them. He holds that good teaching is not incompatible with holding some kinds of ideals. Without "ideals of human flourishing," he says, teaching might become mere socialization or efficiency in fulfilling externally imposed goals. Instead, he recommends "tenacious humility" as an ideal of character for teachers. Both tenacity and humility are admirable traits for teachers to pursue. I have one observation and then a question about this ideal. The observation is that the ideals the critic attacked seemed to be the ideals teachers had for their *students*, whereas tenacious humility is an ideal of character or personhood for the *teacher*. And that observation leads to the following question: How is tenacious humility related to the "big" ideals for students that the critic challenged?

I thought I found two possible suggestions in Hansen's essay. One possibility sees tenacious humility as a rival to or replacement for the big ideals. Hansen says that tenacious humility "helps teachers hold at bay the tempting lure of ideals." A

difficulty with the replacement theory concerns whether tenacious humility does, as Hansen says regulative ideals are supposed to, describe “both a destination and how to conduct oneself in striving to reach it.” It does not appear to me to set any specific destination for conduct — rather it is more a way of getting there, wherever “there” may be. Humility means attention to reality while tenacity means not giving up on the possibility of change — but change in what direction? The role of tenacious humility might be to mediate between the ideals of human flourishing that guide educational practice and the real conditions the teacher confronts. And this is the second possibility I find in the essay. Hansen says that tenacious humility can “guide both big ideals and inner reflection, keeping them in the service of teaching and learning.” The tenacious teacher does not give up on her ideals when confronted with reality, though she may revise and adjust them. Nor does she distort the reality by viewing it through the lens of her ideals because her humility allows her to see what is there.

It struck me that tenacious humility is a cousin of John Dewey’s growth ideal. If that is right, then I have just rehearsed a parallel argument to that of Dewey’s imagined critic of growth as the ultimate educational aim. Dewey’s critic proposes that one could grow as a burglar and hence that the direction of growth required for genuine education must be specified. Mere growth itself is not a sufficient guide for educational practice.⁵ Dewey resisted such arguments. In *The Public and Its Problems*, he made abandoning fixed ends a characteristic of progressive philosophy of education that distinguishes it from the views of both conservatives and reformers.⁶ And that leads me to one final thought about what the critic of ideals might be up to.

Dewey’s articulation of the growth ideal might be viewed as one attempt among others at trying to escape the paternalistic character of education as traditionally conceived.⁷ To have ideals, however worthy, is to attempt to shape people according to some supposed end — the critical thinker, the caring person, the social activist — and all such attempts can seem to fail to respect the essential personhood of the student. As Elizabeth Ellsworth says, such “pedagogies address me ‘perversely,’ as if they already know what is good for me.”⁸ Currently this line of thought is expressed in an insistence on student-centered learning where students-teachers construct their own knowledge with the mutual help of teachers-students. Hansen’s critic of ideals might be taking this view.

But not everyone agrees that educators can or should forego having aims for their students that are grounded in an understanding of what is valuable. Hannah Arendt writes scathingly of what she sees as progressive education’s denial of responsibility in this regard. Arendt holds that teachers are mediators between old and new. On the one hand, they must introduce students to a world that pre-exists them. On the other hand, teachers must not

strike from...[children’s] hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but...[rather] prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world....Our hope always hangs on the new which every generation brings; but precisely because we can base our hope only on this, we destroy everything if we so try to control the new that we, the old, can dictate how it will look.⁹

Both the conservative defender of the status quo and the revolutionary bent on using education as a way of building a new world attempt to dictate the future and deny the young their proper political role in creating it, Arendt holds.

Here I think there is a challenge to which the ideal of tenacious humility might be applied. On the one hand, we have to assist children in developing themselves in light of our conceptions of the good because children do not begin life with any such conceptions. On the other hand, we have to increasingly respect their plans and conceptions for their own lives, as well as for the future of the world.¹⁰ If tenacious humility is an ideal of character that helps teachers to deal with the tension between these two demands, then perhaps it can, as Hansen suggests, bring “conservative and progressive aspects of teaching...into a working...accord.”

1. Richard Rorty, “The Dangers of Over-Philosophication — Reply to Arcilla and Nicholson,” *Educational Theory* 40, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 42.

2. Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy’s View of History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966).

3. Frances G. Patton, *Good Morning, Miss Dove* (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1954), 1. As quoted in Sari Knopp Biklen, *School Work: Gender and the Cultural Construction of Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995), 116.

4. *Ibid.*, 116-17.

5. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1938), 36.

6. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press, 1927), 200-1.

7. I do not in fact think this interpretation of Dewey’s account of growth is correct, but the view is sometimes attributed to progressive education.

8. Elizabeth Ellsworth, *Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy, and the Power of Address* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 1.

9. Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1961), 196, 192.

10. For a similar argument, see Anthony Appiah, “Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 158.