

HARMONISING MEANINGFUL LIVING AND SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT THROUGH EDUCATION _ A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION

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Abstract

This study explores the growing need for a balanced approach to education one that equally emphasizes both meaningful living and sustainable employment. In many educational systems, there has been a noticeable shift toward preparing learners primarily for the demands of the labour market, often at the expense of personal development, ethical awareness, and lifelong purpose. This study, guided by a qualitative approach, examines the philosophical underpinnings of education as a foundation for holistic development. By focusing on the lived experiences, views, and societal expectations surrounding education, the study highlights how learning can be structured to serve both the practical needs of modern economies and the human need for meaning, character, and moral awareness. Central to this discussion are the concepts of ethics in education, strategies for achieving balance, and the role of lifelong learning as a bridge between technical competence and self-actualization. The study argues that a well-balanced educational system must go beyond preparing individuals for employment; it must also empower them to live consciously, contribute ethically, and continue learning in an ever-changing world. By drawing from philosophical thought and practical realities, the study proposes a framework that reimagines education as both a means of survival and a path to a meaningful life.

Keywords: Education, Meaningful Living, Sustainable Employment, Ethics, Modern Economies, Lifelong Learning

Introduction

Education stands as a central pillar in the advancement of individuals and societies. Across time and cultures, it has served both as a channel for intellectual formation and as a foundation for economic empowerment. Historically, educational systems have been designed to equip learners with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate their social environments and contribute meaningfully to their communities. In recent decades, however, the tension between education for meaningful living and education for sustainable employment has grown more pronounced. Many educational systems, driven by global economic competition and technological progress, now prioritize employability, technical competence, and productivity (Thompson, 2024). While this emphasis on vocational relevance is important, it risks overshadowing the broader, more humanistic role of education one that fosters ethical awareness, personal reflection, and responsible citizenship. The consequences of such a narrow focus can be profound. Students may graduate with impressive technical skills yet lack the critical thinking abilities and moral foundations necessary to navigate complex societal issues. The challenge, therefore, lies in balancing the demands of modern economies with the fundamental purpose of education, to cultivate well-rounded individuals who can think deeply, act ethically, and engage meaningfully with others. A balanced philosophical perspective can help reshape education to serve both purposes without neglecting either. True education must develop the full human being, preparing individuals not only to succeed in their chosen professions but also to lead thoughtful, ethical, and meaningful lives (Emmanuel & Hans, 2024). This comprehensive approach requires an examination of how education can integrate knowledge for survival with knowledge for personal growth. Current educational practices often present a false choice between these two dimensions, leading to an incomplete understanding of what it means to be educated.

Philosophical Foundations of Education

The philosophical foundations of education provide the framework upon which the aims, methods, and values of any educational system are built. Philosophers from ancient to modern times have reflected on what education should achieve, and their ideas remain relevant in shaping a system that balances meaningful living and sustainable employment. The exploration of these philosophical roots reveals a rich tapestry of thought that underscores the complexity of education's purpose. Plato viewed education as a process of nurturing the soul, guiding individuals toward truth, justice, and the good life (Cabiles, 2022, p. 32). For Plato, the role of the educator was not merely to impart knowledge but to facilitate a deeper understanding of the self and the world. Plato believed that through education, individuals could achieve their highest potential and contribute to a just society. The concept of the

"philosopher-king" illustrates the belief that true leaders must be educated in wisdom and virtue, further emphasizing that education is not just about vocational training but about cultivating a moral and intellectual framework that supports the common good. Aristotle, on the other hand, emphasized that education involved cultivating virtue and practical wisdom, aligning moral character with rational thought. Aristotle argued that education should develop the whole person, encompassing both the intellectual and the ethical dimensions of human life. Aristotle's emphasis on the development of character, as expressed in the concept of "areté" (virtue or excellence), illustrates the belief that education is essential for achieving personal fulfillment and participating actively in civic life (Okpara, 2023). This approach laid the groundwork for later educational theories that recognize the importance of character development alongside academic achievement

In contrast, John Locke and later John Dewey stressed the importance of experience and social context in the educational process. Locke viewed the mind as a "tabula rasa," or blank slate, upon which experiences could inscribe knowledge. Locke argued that education should focus on developing critical thinking and practical skills, equipping learners to navigate the complexities of the world around them. Locke's ideas underscore the belief that education must be relevant to the individual's experiences and societal context, ensuring that learning is meaningful and applicable (Yuldashevna, 2024). Dewey, particularly influential in the 20th century, emphasized that education was not just preparation for life it was life itself. Dewey believed in the principle of "learning through doing," which connects knowledge with practical realities and encourages active participation in learning. Dewey's advocacy for experiential education highlighted the importance of engaging students in real-world problems, fostering not only intellectual growth but also social responsibility. These ideas are particularly relevant today, as they support the integration of personal growth and real-world skills in educational practices. The insights from these philosophical foundations reveal that education was never meant to be limited to professional training alone (Francisco, 2024). It is, instead, a lifelong journey of discovery that includes moral reasoning, emotional maturity, and civic engagement.

Demands of Modern Economies

The modern world is shaped by fast-changing economies that demand new kinds of skills, knowledge, and adaptability. As industries become more digital and interconnected, education systems are under pressure to produce graduates who can meet these complex requirements. Employers increasingly seek individuals with technical expertise, communication skills, and the ability to think critically and solve problems in real time. This shift has led many educational institutions to adjust their curricula, focusing more on STEM fields, digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and job readiness (Thompson, 2024). While these changes are understandable and necessary to align education with current labour market needs, they often come at a significant cost. Subjects that foster reflection, ethics, and critical thinking such as literature, philosophy, and the arts are sometimes pushed aside in favour of more "practical" subjects that emphasize technical skills. The emphasis on measurable outcomes and employability risks turning education into a process of skill certification rather than personal development (Emmanuel & Hans, 2024). In this environment, students may graduate equipped with the technical tools to enter the job market but lack a clear sense of self, purpose, or ethical grounding.

Furthermore, the rapid pace of change in modern economies means that the skills in demand today may quickly become obsolete. This reality underscores the need for education to instill a mindset of lifelong learning, equipping individuals with the ability to continuously adapt and evolve. Modern economies indeed require skilled labour, but they also depend on individuals who can adapt, lead, and uphold values (Natarajan et al., 2022). A society's long-term well-being cannot rely solely on its productivity levels; it must also be supported by individuals who can think deeply, act responsibly, and engage meaningfully with others. Moreover, as globalization continues to blur national boundaries, the interconnectedness of global economies demands that individuals possess not only technical skills but also cultural competency and ethical awareness (Okpara, 2023). In such a diverse environment, the ability to communicate effectively across cultural lines and to understand the ethical implications of one's actions becomes increasingly critical.

The Role of Ethics in Education

Ethics in education serves as a guide for both personal behaviour and collective values. It involves teaching learners not only how to think critically but also how to act responsibly, how to distinguish right from wrong, how to treat others with dignity, and how to live with integrity. The cultivation of ethical awareness is essential for fostering a generation of individuals who can navigate the complexities of modern life with a moral compass. Without ethical

grounding, knowledge can be misapplied, used in ways that harm others or destroy trust within communities and organizations. In today's competitive world, the role of ethics in education is more important than ever (Thompson, 2024). The rapid advancements in technology, the interconnectedness of global economies, and the prevalence of information overload present unique ethical challenges. Issues such as data privacy, environmental sustainability, and social justice require individuals to approach their decisions with a keen ethical awareness (Zhunusbekova et al., 2022). Ethical education, therefore, becomes critical not only for individual character development but also for cultivating responsible citizens who can contribute positively to society. Ethical education does not necessarily require separate subjects, although courses in civics or moral philosophy can provide a valuable framework for discussion. Rather, it should be woven into the very fabric of teaching and learning across all subjects. In science classes, discussions about the ethical implications of research and technological innovation can help students understand the responsibilities that come with knowledge. In literature classes, exploring the moral dilemmas faced by characters can enhance students' empathy and critical thinking about real-life situations. Teachers play a crucial role in this process by modeling ethical behaviour and demonstrating the values they seek to instill in their students. The classroom should be a space where fairness, respect, and inclusivity are upheld, and where students feel safe to express their thoughts and question their beliefs (Agisilaou & Harris, 2022). By creating an environment that encourages ethical dialogue and reflection, educators can empower students to take ownership of their moral development.

Challenges to Achieving Educational Balance

While the need for balanced education is clear, several challenges stand in the way of achieving it. One major challenge is the overemphasis on economic outcomes, often driven by national policies and global rankings that prioritize employment rates and test scores. These metrics shape how institutions set priorities, sometimes leaving little room for creativity, critical thought, or ethical engagement. The pressure to produce quantifiable results can lead to a narrow focus on standardized testing, which may undermine deeper learning experiences and reduce the richness of the educational process. Another significant challenge lies in the unequal access to quality education. In many parts of the world, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are often offered only basic vocational training, with limited opportunities for broader intellectual or moral development. This creates a system where only a few enjoy a full, balanced education, while others are trained only for immediate survival. Such disparities perpetuate cycles of poverty and limit social mobility, reinforcing existing inequalities within society (Francisco, 2024). The gap in educational resources, experienced educators, and supportive learning environments further exacerbates this issue, leaving marginalized students at a disadvantage.

Furthermore, there is a growing disconnect between what is taught in schools and the real needs of life. Learners may excel academically but struggle with communication, decision-making, or understanding their role in society. This disconnection highlights the importance of integrating life skills, ethical reasoning, and critical thinking into curricula. Educators must be aware of the skills and competencies that will be valuable to students in their personal and professional lives beyond the classroom. Teachers also face significant challenges in delivering balanced education, often due to large class sizes, rigid curricula, and limited professional support. The demands placed on educators can inhibit their ability to implement innovative teaching methods that foster a holistic learning environment. Professional development opportunities that focus on integrating life and livelihood into teaching practices may be scarce, leaving educators ill-equipped to address the diverse needs of their students (Cabiles, 2022). Furthermore, systemic issues within educational institutions, such as inadequate funding and support, can hinder teachers' efforts to create a more balanced and engaging educational experience.

Strategies for Achieving Balance

To create a more balanced educational experience, certain strategies can be put into place that prioritize both technical skills and personal development. Curriculum design must reflect a commitment to integrating technical competence with personal growth. This means combining academic knowledge with opportunities for self-reflection, ethical dialogue, and social responsibility. Courses in the sciences can incorporate ethical case studies that prompt students to consider the moral implications of scientific advancements, while humanities subjects can connect abstract ideas to real-world applications, fostering critical thinking and empathy (Agisilaou & Harris, 2022). Again, project-based learning can be employed as a strategy that blends academic rigor with real-world relevance. Engaging in projects that require collaboration, problem-solving, and creative thinking allows students to see firsthand how their knowledge applies to everyday life. Such projects encourage teamwork and communication skills, essential competencies in both

personal and professional contexts (Emmanuel & Hans, 2024). Moreover, they provide opportunities for students to explore complex societal issues, encouraging them to think critically about their roles as informed and active citizens. Ongoing professional development of teachers is another vital strategy, equipping them to guide students not only in subject matter but also in life skills and values. Teachers play a critical role in shaping the character and outlook of learners, and they need support to fulfill this role effectively. Professional development programs should focus on pedagogical methods that promote a balanced education, emphasizing the importance of fostering a supportive and inclusive classroom environment. Training in social-emotional learning and culturally responsive teaching can help educators connect with students from diverse backgrounds and address their unique needs. Schools and institutions may create environments that support collaboration, discussion, and community involvement. This may be achieved by fostering partnerships with local organizations, businesses, and community leaders to enhance educational opportunities and provide students with real-world experiences. Activities such as debates, service learning, and mentorship programs help students see the link between knowledge, action, and purpose (Yuldashevna, 2024). Service learning, in particular, allows students to engage with their communities while applying their skills in meaningful ways, reinforcing the value of social responsibility.

Lifelong Learning as a Bridge

Lifelong learning offers a practical and philosophical solution to the challenge of harmonizing meaningful living and sustainable employment. In a world that is constantly evolving, individuals must continue to learn not just to stay competitive, but to remain connected, thoughtful, and fulfilled. The pace of technological advancement and societal change necessitates an ongoing commitment to education, which empowers individuals to adapt to new realities and seize emerging opportunities. Lifelong learning encourages people to pursue knowledge beyond formal education, engaging in personal study, community involvement, and professional development. This kind of learning is not confined to traditional classroom settings; instead, it flourishes in a variety of environments, including workshops, online courses, volunteer experiences, and informal mentorships. Such learning supports both personal growth and economic adaptability. As job roles change due to automation and shifting market demands, individuals can retrain and acquire new skills that enhance their employability. Moreover, lifelong learning allows individuals to explore new interests and passions, deepening their understanding of themselves and broadening their horizons (Benavot et al., 2022). By engaging in diverse learning experiences, individuals find meaning in different stages of life, whether they are pursuing a new career, navigating a major life transition, or seeking personal fulfillment.

Lifelong learning becomes a bridge that connects early schooling with adult responsibility, merging career development with self-discovery. It fosters an understanding that education does not cease after formal schooling but continues as a dynamic and enriching process throughout one's life. This ongoing commitment to learning nurtures resilience, enabling individuals to face challenges with confidence and creativity. Furthermore, lifelong learning promotes inclusion, giving people of all ages and backgrounds a chance to participate in education. It recognizes that learning is not solely for the young or the elite, but for everyone, thereby reinforcing the notion that education is a fundamental human right. In a society where rapid changes are the norm, embracing lifelong learning cultivates a culture of curiosity and adaptability (Agisilaou & Harris, 2022). Individuals become more capable of handling change, contributing to society, and living with purpose. They develop a mindset that values continuous improvement and sees challenges as opportunities for growth.

Conclusion

This study has shown that education must be reimagined to serve both meaningful living and sustainable employment in a harmonized way. While modern economies require skilled workers, societies also need individuals who are ethical, thoughtful, and personally fulfilled. Education that focuses only on employment is incomplete, just as education that ignores the realities of work risks irrelevance. A balanced philosophical perspective brings together these two goals: economic survival and meaningful living. Through strong philosophical foundations, attention to ethical development, and support for lifelong learning, education can become a force that not only builds economies but also builds people. The challenges are real, but so are the opportunities. With intentional design and a renewed understanding of its purpose, education can prepare individuals not only for a job, but for life itself.

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