

## COMMUNICATIONS

### The Urban School of Education as Bad Samaritan

It was easy for the Good Samaritan. As he cleaned and dressed the wounds of the man attacked by thieves he could tell whether or not his bandages were effective and adjust them accordingly. He was also quite certain that food and rest at an inn would help the victim to recover his health.

So the Good Samaritan's course of action was clear. He was confronted with an immediate human need. He felt ethically obliged to serve that need. As a would-be *helper* he had available most of the diagnostic data relevant to deciding how to help, and the technical skills which enabled him to behave helpfully.

What if he had not known what was wrong with the victim, but had gone on ahead to help, killing the victim with his fumbling? Would he then be morally culpable for the consequences of his actions — a Bad Samaritan — or just a well-meaning but guiltless Stupid Samaritan?

Traditionally, moral philosophers have asserted that provided one's motives were to do good and one was unaware of possible harmful consequences before committing an act, one could not be held morally culpable. But should one willfully remain in ignorance of the harmful consequences of an act, one would be culpable.

Schools of education have had a dismal record during the 1960's as "helpers" of Black and Brown poor people. National studies of all the major "compensatory education" programs initiated under the War on Poverty and related efforts show that *not one* of the programs has measurably improved the performance of Black children.<sup>1</sup> Most of these programs were university related.

It seems that education professors have not had much skill in diagnosis, much less with techniques for the remedy of problems in urban education. Yet we in schools of education continue to try to "help" the urban ghetto (this "help" is enabled by large federal grants — available to the university professors, not to the ghetto resident). Often the "help"

---

<sup>1</sup>David K. Cohen. *Racial Isolation in the Public Schools*. (Washington: United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1967). Also Personal Communication, February 23, 1969.

provided by the university involves the establishment of relationships with urban public schools, either to train teachers or to work directly with public school students.

If the public school should be injuring the child in some way (even though inadvertently) and we of the university work with that school, we become morally culpable for that injury.

Why culpable, if our motives are pure? Culpability is suggested by the application of an analogous principle in medical ethics; the principle that the consent of the patient must be obtained for therapeutic procedures involving risk.<sup>2</sup> (Also, ethical field work in sociology and anthropology requires at least the implied consent of the informant, and the most productive research relationships have been those in which the informant acts as the researcher's colleague; never as guinea pig<sup>3</sup>.)

Children and parents in ghetto public schools, however, are not free agents, because of the nature of the public school, which is a governmental agency. Impoverished urban children are required by law to attend school, and by economic necessity to attend *public* school. We experiment on a captive population in the urban ghetto school.

But if our intentions are good, how can we in the university be held accountable, even if we do not receive the consent of the experimented upon? Because, given the infant state of our knowledge of the processes of education, the consequences of our interventions in the public school (helpful or harmful) are presently unknowable. All we know is that given the record of the past ten years, the consequences are likely to be very risky.

In such a situation the immediate perceptions of the "patient" about the helpful or harmful effects of our therapeutic procedures become the only available data from which we can extrapolate an estimate of the ultimate consequences. The ability of the patient to withdraw his consent to our experimentation on him is the only available "insurance policy" against harm in a highly probabilistic situation. If we try to operate in a ghetto school without such information from children and parents we are willfully persisting in ignorance and are culpable for the harm that we do. Our good intentions become irrelevant.

Thus when we in the schools of education enter into relationships with urban public schools we should do so only if the school's parents and children are written into the governance structure of the project with

---

<sup>2</sup>Herrman L. Blumgart, "The Medical Framework for Viewing the Problem of Human Experimentation," in *Daedalus*, Vol. 98, No. 2 (Spring, 1969) pp. 248-273. See also Hans Jonas, "Philosophical Reflections on Human Experimentation." *op. cit.*, pp. 219-347 .

<sup>3</sup>Margaret Mead. "Research with Human Beings: A Model Derived from Anthropological Field Practice," *op. cit.*, pp. 361-386.

veto powers. Their ability to guide us by saying “ouch” when it hurts and “stop” when it hurts too much insures the feedback of information to us. By refusing to establish a channel to provide that information — by choosing to ignore the ghetto resident — the school of education chooses to persist in ignorance; to practice education in the urban ghetto as a Bad Samaritan.

Frederick David Erickson  
University of Illinois at Chicago Circle

## School Without Chairs

Suppose that the role of the university today is not the same as its role a generation ago. Suppose that if the university was once conceived on the model of a community of scholars, an institution of “higher” learning, today this is only *part* of its role; that knowledge exists in action as well as in hard covered books, and that a pertinent academic question is “How will it help clean up Lake Erie?” Suppose, that is, that because of man’s growing dominion over nature ideas today have discernible consequences and must meet the test not only of consistency but of applicability.

Suppose further that because of the moral decisions which this dominion imposes, education is equally to be cultivated; and that, were he alive and well today, Socrates might be teaching, if not in Argentina, at Esalen in the Big Sur — having been ostracized from the professional academic community (no Ph.D.). Suppose that in fact the university now serves as a midwife to many of society’s crunch problems. Suppose, too, that education is a process involving the total environment, which can only occur in a total community, in which each individual participates equally in making the decisions which importantly affect his life; that the class character of age in our society subverts education, and that the young are not too young to teach nor the old too old to learn.

And finally, suppose that the goal of education is to develop a society in which people can live more comfortably with change than with rigidity, that the capacity to face the new appropriately is more important than the ability to know and repeat the old. Suppose that colleges today are producing surrogate computers, turning out people who can give answers to questions which have already been posed, not teaching them to pose new questions. Were we to include the supposition that the natural state of man is ecstatic wonder, we would have an educational package with something in it to offend everyone.

But just for the practice, pretend for a minute that these suppositions are not outrageous, that they represent the thinking of a growing minority.