

EDITORIAL

The Complexity of Educational Interrelationships

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This issue of the *Journal of Educational Thought* explores the complex relationships which exist among the teacher, the students, the parents, the school, and the community, not to mention the subject matter or "what is to be learned." To a lesser degree it explores reflexive relationships, namely, those between an educationally important category and itself. Thus the self-reflection of a teacher or of a student or of a parent with respect to educational concerns would be a form of reflexive relationship.

In our day the relationship between the school and the wider community has been the subject of public concern and legislation. Governments want to know how schools are doing, relative to one another. Consequently notions like "accountability" and "standardized testing" across large school jurisdictions have been linked in the public eye. Such concerns are by no means confined to North America. European and Asian school systems have been equally concerned. To take one European example, Sweden, which brought in a completely new school system in 1968, has been following the progress of that new system for more than 30 years employing standardized testing across an entire national population and with a view to educational accountability. Among other things, in the Swedish case, the responsibility for national education was taken from the church authorities, on the grounds of greater public accountability, and placed in the hands of the State, a first step in the disestablishment of the Swedish Lutheran Church.

However, whatever the merits of a system of school accountability, there are good arguments both for and against the view that standardized testing of all students is the way to proceed.

In the first place, standardized testing presupposes a standard curriculum taught in the same way to all students and on approximately the same time-table. Since the Revolution in France, over 200 hundred years ago, it has been a matter of pride that on the same day all over France students at the same grade level are studying the same curriculum content. This means that selections for university places and to the prestigious *Grandes Ecoles* proceed according to a standardized picture of students, teachers, and curriculum delivery and content. The danger is that individual differences are ignored and bright students are shunted aside due to perhaps a concentration of special abilities, while students with difficulty learning or with modest natural powers may be simply left behind by their peers. "Mainstreaming" is hard to support in such a system, so the handicapped, the chronically ill, or the temporarily injured may find themselves outside the system entirely.

Happily, there can be room for flexibility in such a system. When the future great mathematician Henri Poincaré applied to be admitted to *École Normale Supérieure*, his examiners discovered that he could not draw with any skill at all with either hand, and drawing was a necessary entrance requirement. But his results on the rest of the examination were so superior that they concluded that either they had to not admit him at all, or else they had to admit him first over all other students. They admitted him first. Can the systems that we are presently devising take account of a Poincaré?

Each of these poles of concern (teacher, student, parents, school, and the wider community) have direct and indirect relationships with one another and with or among themselves. Sometimes we understand such relationships rather well. Sometimes we understand them poorly or merely cope with our troubles by means of legislation, perhaps based on nothing but whim or will. For example, for at least 150 years most of the school systems in the West, at least those of Europe and North America, have presupposed that the place of parents was at home or at work, but not in the school and not helping with the education of their children. That was the teachers' job. Such an assumption about the role of parents had a point 150 years ago. Most parents of children in publicly funded school systems were illiterate or practically so. Many parents of the children required by law to attend school lived in extreme poverty, in ignorance, and perhaps of vice. So the assumption that such children, would be better off in school for eight hours a day learning to read, write, and do arithmetic certainly had point. And the discouragement

of parental influence probably also had a point, as that influence may very well have been detrimental both to the best interests of the child and of the society in which the child was growing up.

But we can ask the explicit question today: To what degree should parents have a direct role in educating their children, not only in extracurricular activities, but also in curricular ones? And the reason we can ask it is that the previous presuppositions, and the arrangements which followed upon them, served us well, both individually and collectively. Our populations in the West are better than 95% literate at nearly any level of literacy you care to suggest except, perhaps, at the specialist level. Of course we have not produced a population of intellectuals. But we have produced parents who can read, write, and speak very well – who can carry on an intelligent conversation. Who can make sense of income tax forms, mortgages, and their own health. And who are capable of strong, but usually supported, opinions about nearly every aspect of collective society. Our teachers and our schools and our collective curriculum have been tremendously successful in producing a population educated beyond the wildest dreams of the school promoters of the 1820s, or the 1840s, or 1870s. Because of the very success of our publicly funded education systems we have produced an educated population which no longer can be stigmatized, as it was in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s as unfit to educate their own children. Although we no longer use the rhetoric of a century and a half ago, our practices take it for granted, deeply presuppose it to be true even if we no longer notice that we are doing so.

No longer can we claim, with very much conviction, that the state must systematically alienate the children from their parents for eight hours a day, in order that the children receive a good influence to counteract the bad influence of the home. It is probably too soon to see whether the media revolution will permit families to work gainfully out of their homes in the vast majority of cases. But if the media revolution does permit this, then we will have reversed the main impact of the industrial revolution on our families, the effect of which was to take work out of the home or the home-quarter and locate it at a distance in a factory setting. Most of our citizens today have successfully spent 12 or more years in school, and greater than 40% of the population entering school are expected to continue on beyond the first 12 years to do post-secondary education at college, university, or technical institutes, or in an apprenticeship program. This means that nearly all parents today have an education which is

more extensive than most elementary school teachers had for the past 150 years or so. While it does not follow, by that very fact, that they all can teach easily and well, certainly it is an argument for letting those who wish to do so try. This could ease the burden on our publicly funded school system enormously if, say, 25% of the parents at any one time were home-schooling their own children, and perhaps those of some of their neighbours.

Of course teaching is an art. But it was an art which enough parents managed well enough for the better part of four million years. We now have over six billion people on this planet about one third of whom are educated according to the norms and standards prevailing in Europe and North America. Where those norms are not prevalent, perhaps there is room for state intervention of the kind which prevailed in the West over the last 150 years.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of the present methods of schooling, especially if the home-schooling revolution is to be successful, is the fact that education for students and for teachers is rarely, if ever, self-reflective. But it is only the self-reflective student (and here I am assuming that all teachers are also students) who is able to adjust to new educational needs and so be the life-long learner of fable and song.

Self-reflection can, of course, be many things. Just looking in a mirror is one of these, a technique which is very useful for dance or muscle building, or for those whose balance organs are faulty. Robbie Burns noted, long ago, the importance of being able to look at ourselves from the vantage point of another – because of the danger of self-deception in self-reflection, when he wrote:

O wad some Power the giftie gie us

To see oursels as ithers see us!

(*Ode to a Louse*, 1796)

Training in self-reflection is at least this: to gain the power to see ourselves as other see us. This may not give complete immunity from self-deception in self-reflection, but the vantage point of another is often more secure than our own.

Sufi educational traditions (that is, the educational traditions of the mystical side of Islam) make much of the importance of a teacher to help us to see ourselves from an outside vantage point, but without explicit criticism. Among the eight duties of a teacher suggested by al-Ghazzali is the fourth duty “to use sympathetic and indirect suggestions in dissuading students from bad habits, rather

than open, harsh criticism. Open criticism often incites defiance and stubbornness." Part of the art of self-criticism is to be honest, but not harsh with oneself.

Finally, the most complex relationships among teachers, students, parents, and community are the relationships amongst these and what we might term "educational paradigms," whether these be paradigms for teaching, for research, for wider community relationship, or for just organizing our thinking about any of these. The essential thing about educational paradigms is that they sometimes have a short half-life, or perhaps better, a shelf-life. Education is on the one hand a perennial activity with perennial problems and situations, an activity as permanent as can be. But on the other hand it is also just about the most faddish human concern there is, perhaps because educating (both oneself and others) is so difficult and we keep hoping for a quick fix. One year we are to see everything and everyone according to the latest psychological, sociological, or biological theory. (For the moment "brains" are in, psychology is out.) Another year and these become passé and we are to ignore such theorizing for much more practical matters like emphasis on "basics," on memorization of content, or of the study of "great books," or timeless models of knowledge, or the coverage of a carefully selected list of world literature.

Sometimes these "paradigms" last a long time. The IQ paradigm, for example, lasted from the time of the First World War, until just about now. The notion was that 19th century ideas of "intelligence" as meaning "what somebody knows" were outdated. For thousands of years we cared a great deal about what people actually could accomplish and what their proficiencies were. But, our IQ testers assured us, what we were really interested in was not people's actual accomplishments, but what potential they had. Thus we judged, admitted, and sorted according to how well people did on special exams designed to tell us how clever or stupid people were relative to a statistical norm. Somebody with a score in the 90-110 range was supposed to be "normal." Somebody in the greater than 110 range was considered "bright," and if high enough "genius." Woe betide she or he who did not actually learn to do anything very well if they scored high. For they were "underachievers." And woe betide she or he who scored less than 90, the sub-normal – for if they were to actually accomplish or know anything then they were labelled as "overachievers," as if it was somehow cheating to be competent or proficient, given their IQ.

Thanks to Howard Gardener of Project Zero at Harvard, we have moved however briefly into an era in which “multiple IQ’s” are fashionable. Many schools now organize around the assumption that all students have multiple intelligences and that it is not necessarily bad to have a poor “academic intelligence” if your physical or artistic or emotional intelligence is high. Though this just appears to be an opportunity, in the long run, for much more complex labeling of failures to match up to one’s new, if more complex, IQ, EQ, PQ, and so on. Imagine the poor devil who underachieves on ten distinct intelligence scales, or worse, who over-achieves on ten of them.

Such reflections make one think that perhaps we ought to keep many “paradigms” in mind when we think about educational questions and not get too fixed on any of them, so long as we handle the perennial educational questions pretty well.

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