

Authority and Teaching

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IN OUR one-sided attention in educational psychology circles to the needs, the motives, and the conflicts of children and in our comparative inattention to the needs, the motives, and the conflicts of teachers, we have developed rather elaborate conceptions of the nuclear growth crises up to but not including that of mature adulthood: *the authority crisis*. As one student put it who was running out of her allotted examination time and was trying to say how Erik Erikson's theory could be related to learning theory: "Oh well, the chart goes on past the identity stage but learning stops there anyway."

I think that the overemphasis of developmental psychologists on childhood and adolescence and our comparative inattention to the adult years, which that statement reflects, have had an insidiously corrosive effect on the quality of professional teaching in two ways.

First, it has made it very difficult not to ground our professional reflexes in the wrong and harmful assumption that children must be actively taught everything that they should learn, that they will learn nothing of value unless we teach it to them; that is, that, when it comes to independent learning, children are simply not to be trusted. This is probably why, as John Holt is fond of pointing out these days, so many children develop psy-

chogenic reading disabilities, while so few develop psychogenic speaking disabilities, although learning to speak is several quantum jumps more difficult than learning to read. We *expect* that children will learn to speak the language of their parents just by being around, but we assume they will not learn to read that same language unless we teach them how to do it. And then when a child adopts the same assumption we say he has a psychogenic reading disability. This is only one of the more dramatic kinds of damage that we cause by our tacit assumption that children will only learn in response to being taught.

The second corrosive effect of our exclusively child-centered psychology is that, in drawing so much of our attention to the needs of the children and away from the needs of teachers, it encourages that spurious sense of authority which takes satisfaction in doing good rather than in doing well.

This is not the place to try to articulate a systematic psychology of adulthood, of the authority crisis. But I would like to identify what I think is one of the strongest needs of the adult years, as compelling in its effects on adult motives and conflicts as is the in-

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fant's need to be loved or the adolescent's need to be himself. It is the need to serve, and to serve well, to relocate one's selfhood (one's narcissism even) outside of oneself in the developmental needs of progeny—one's children and one's brain children. But there is more to this than merely serving youth. Oliver Wendell Holmes said it when he observed that a man must find a way to engage the passionate issues of his times or risk having to admit at his death that he never fully lived.

An adult then, if he is to realize his authority, must find a way to place the experience of his maturity simultaneously in the interests of progeny and of history. This is what it means to be an adult: to bridge the generation gap. Not to find it interesting that there is one, and not to *try* to bridge it, but to *bridge* it. And if we find that this requires all of one's capacities for hope, will, purpose, skill, fidelity, love, care, and dawning wisdom, then what have we discovered except that the sense of authority is no selfless thing but is the most wholesomely egoistic experience that life can offer to a person over 30.

Two Cultural Crises

Fortunately, we teachers need not look very far to engage the passionate issues of our times. They are right in our classrooms and, indeed, in rather close proximity to the needs of the children. They have to do with our two cultural crises, one over differences of race, the other over differences of age.

The first crisis we see expressed symptomatically in the increasing disorder in our schools. Last year, for example, the Junior High School in New Brunswick, New Jersey, through which I passed three of the most uneventful years of my life, was closed for a week because the teachers were unable to stem the tide of physical assaults by black children on white children and by white children on black children. Let me see if I can give the etiology of this disorder in epigenetic terms (if I may take the liberty of applying a theory of individual development to history):

As a nation (a white nation, that is) we zipped through our infantile crises with un-

common speed and good luck. We were not a half century old when we had stored up intoxicating amounts of trust, autonomy, and initiative. Thereupon, we astonished history with previously unheard of achievements in respect to our sense of industry. And by the beginning of the 20th century we had as a people (a white people, that is) developed perhaps the most distinctive and self-satisfied sense of identity ever. Then we went out to save the world for democracy and something happened. We emerged in a chronic state of isolation, then of depression.

In 1941 the needs of self-defense appeared to give us a second chance, but something got out of hand again and, after the Second World War: megalomania, paranoia, and our present borderline state.

What happened? With all that we had going for us, what kept us from going the next step and celebrating our deeply earned cultural resources by developing for the first time in human history a political ethic based on love, intimacy, and responsible authority rather than on suspicion, isolation, and power? Well, what happens when an *individual* breezes through the first half of his life cycle only to find himself as a grown-up somehow incapable of intimacy or authority?

As clinicians we usually look for some quite specific repressed experience in the early years of this person, something he was able to grow around for a long time but not forever. Now, when we ask what it was that got specifically repressed in our development as a nation, I think we must at least seriously entertain the notion that it was our *black* experience. I see evidence for this hypothesis in the very symptoms of youthful revolt which, for all their turbulence, do seem to conceal a healthy impulse toward resolution of that repression. One of the manifestations of this impulse is, I think, the growing impatience of black and white students alike with our traditional definitions of what it means to be qualified to learn, what it means to be qualified to teach, and what it means to have proper standards.

Whether you accept my diagnosis or not, I think you will have to admit that our national mental health hinges largely at present

on the question of whether our black people can at this late date develop out of their experience a normal human sense of autonomy, and whether our white people can at long last begin to relate to the black experience with initiative and imagination—instead of with IQ scores, S.A.T. ratings, and other defense mechanisms constructed against guilt. To the extent our work puts us into direct touch with these questions and affords us some influence over the answers that history will give them, I say, we can be very meaningfully engaged in the passions of our times.

The second crisis we see expressed symptomatically in the mounting complaints of students that school is now not only boring but irrelevant. More realistically we see it expressed by the increasing numbers of students who either want out of school altogether or want into the decisions that determine what goes on in school and how. An understanding of this crisis is, I think, less in need of psychodynamic analogies. We have simply evolved to a point where as a society we know too much and must change our collective minds much too often to base a child's education realistically on the assumption that we know better than he does what should be known in order to live a fulfilling life and how it should be learned.

What, you may ask, would be a more realistic assumption? Certainly not the converse—that they know more than we of these matters and should therefore write their own curricula and hire and fire us at will, as some of their more disaffected number insist is the only solution. I submit, rather, that in a society which will soon regard the books and catalogs of its research libraries as more decorative than functional—its primary functions being served by microfilms and computer programs—in a society, that is, in which no one can hope to assimilate even an inadequate sample of all others have learned—in a society therefore in which the quality of an education must be measured in terms of *how* it is acquired rather than of *what* it consists—a better guiding assumption would be that the best education will follow from the pooled resources of both

generations in respect to determinations of content and process. The perspectives of teachers and the visions of students: we must find ways of achieving this merger.

In other words, I think we need less of the kinds of educational research that show us how to do to children more cleverly, more artfully, or even more humanely. I include my own research in that estimate. Not that it was not important to search for ways of bringing the fantasies and feelings of schoolchildren into happier concert with their thoughts and actions, and not that this kind of research will not continue to be important. But *more* important for the foreseeable future will be the kinds of experiments which find new ways of bringing the visions of students and the perspectives of teachers into fruitful contact in prescribing what should be learned in schools and how.

Outmoded Assumptions

In the hope of freeing our imaginations to confront this challenge as openly as possible, I should like to question three basic premises of our existing educational system, which it seems to me have gone unquestioned for too long:

The first is that there is something supremely and exclusively good about the earning of a doctorate, and the consequent homogenization of curricula which this causes all the way back down the line. Do not misunderstand me. I am not claiming that the kind of dispassionate scholarship which doctoral programs teach has no place; only that the doctorate has taken over the whole educational show and insidiously predefined success, and therefore qualifications and standards, in too narrow a view.

The second outmoded assumption is that we streamline the learning process by first compartmentalizing knowledge and then directing students to it along certain standardized routes of curricula, concentration requirements, breadth requirements, comprehensive examinations, and the like. This despite our observations that these routes lead more often to boredom and apathy, that even if they did not, the knowledge explosion

has made them nearly obsolete and, most of all, that they erroneously define education in terms of *what* must be known rather than in the more realistic modern terms of *how* to learn what one wants to know.

The third outmoded premise is that we aid the teaching process by departmentalizing it. This despite the fact it has led to perceiving teaching responsibilities as "loads," which, when carried long enough, can not only prevent a teacher from becoming an authority but can actually cause him to unlearn what he once knew. In a recent article in the *New York Review of Books*, Paul Goodman focuses his critical eye on these same outmoded assumptions and suggests that their correction lies in disabusing ourselves of our one-century-old infatuation with pedagogy and in returning to the more time-tested practices of incidental learning. In short, we must stop all this infernal teaching of things and return to letting the children learn.

I do agree with Goodman's criticisms and his objectives, and would like to suggest what I think could be a plausible way toward the achievement of these objectives: Take the emphasis off pedagogy and place it rather on incidental learning. But not by closing the schools and not by dislocating our national economic reflexes. And not even by stopping all the teaching. Rather, I suggest we turn most of the teaching over to the students. If there is anything a teacher knows with absolute authority, it is that the single best way to learn a thing is to teach it. So, if *how* to learn what one wants to know is to be the primary objective of modern schooling, I do not see how we can go far wrong if we simply resolve to be good models by spending our time on the job learning what we want to know—by teaching it. So much for the curriculum. It would be what the teachers wanted to learn. As for departments, what rationale could there be for them under such an arrangement? As for prestige, I think we might find some university professors opting for work in elementary and secondary schools because of the greater academic freedom to be found there.

What of the students? What would they be doing? Some of the time I suppose

they might be enjoying the spectacle of watching their teachers learn and thereby seeing what they have to look forward to when they become "authorities." Some of the time they could be doing the same thing: learning what they want to learn by teaching it. Is it reading? Then teach it. Arithmetic? Teach it. Plato? Teach it. Rock lyrics? Teach it. The black experience? Teach it. American history? Teach it. And so on.

Would some children opt for less than a broad education? So what? Truthfully, how many are getting one now by constantly having it "taught at" them? And some of the time the students would be submitting to being taught, as they now do all of the time, but being taught by other students who are engaged in learning by teaching. Am I advocating anything more than everyone's merely doing his thing? I think so. I have never learned anything unless I wanted to know it, and I have never learned anything responsibly until I undertook to teach it. Whether it was tying shoelaces or flying a kite or grasping the structure of psychoanalytic theory or the intricacies of a neurosis or the nature of authority. There is something about teaching a thing that leads not only to being able to respond to it, but also to being able to respond to other people's responses to it. There is much more in that process than merely doing one's own thing.

Is this an impossible utopian scheme? I do not think so. Everyone would stand to gain except the curriculum coordinators and they could usefully be set to work on logistical, space, and scheduling problems. Otherwise all that are needed are some imaginative redefinitions of what it means to be qualified to learn, what it means to be qualified to teach, and what it means to have proper standards. And these, as we see every day, are begging for redefinitions anyway. Imagine it: overachievers teaching underachievers, underachievers teaching overachievers, black children teaching white children, white children teaching black children, good readers teaching poor readers, poor readers teaching good readers, older students teaching younger students, younger students teaching still younger students, and so on. Imagine it. □

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