

## THE VIRTUE OF EDUCATION

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*The ethical paradox of the postmodern condition is that it restores to agents the fullness of moral choice and responsibility, while simultaneously depriving them of the comfort of the universal guidance that modern self-confidence once promised.*

(Bauman 1992:3)

### **Introduction**

Every educational research community is infused with the sensibilities of intellectual epochs and movements that anteceded it and that gave rise to it. In the decade approaching the end of the 20th century educational researchers are becoming increasingly aware that there are insistent humanistic, romantic and critical sensibilities that subtly pervade our present day search for a self-conscious way of thinking, which in turn supplants the performative demands of a technological rationality which emphasises a competency-based approach in education. These sensibilities are evident in that interest which is akin to a fascination with openness and indeterminateness, and revealed in educational debates about norms, values, truth and the epistemology of reflective practice.

In what follows I would like to identify with these present day sensibilities as I examine the notion of *the virtue of education*, and especially as it relates to that quest which seeks to locate educational discourse in more personal meaning-centred and ethically engaged epistemologies.

In this endeavour I shall argue:

- that education involves itself with the individual person in that virtuous action which finds expression in human agency;
- that the education of the individual person is something much more interesting, more extensive and more challenging than a basic, professional or vocational training which are espoused as the guarantee of human progress and wellbeing in a technocratic world;

- that education, in reaching out beyond the parameters of basic, professional and vocational competency is fundamentally and quite profoundly concerned with the self-empowerment of the individual person.

### **On the concept of virtue in education and teaching**

The notion of virtue is a common translation of the Greek word for *excellence*: *arete*. The *aretai*, the excellences or virtues, were simply the qualities that made a particular life exemplary, good, admirable, or excellent. The interesting point about virtues, however, is that they were not reducible to rules or moral principles. In other words, virtues were not perceived in a restricted moral sense, but rather as an enduring excellence of character with respect to any given human action.

Seen in this light, virtues reveal the educated character of a person. They answer the question of whether a person is well prepared for certain life tasks and responsibilities. Aristotle (1962:45) argued that virtues were commonly acquired through the formation of good habits or customs that parents instil in children. Good parents and educators taught children good habits that were becoming of the well educated and the good person.

However, Aristotle also argued that virtues could not be strengthened or advanced in the absence of what he called "practical reasoning". Practical reasoning does not tell us which virtues to embrace; it is, rather, a means of determining how to act virtuously in this or that situation. In other words, the problem is seldom whether or not to be compassionate or courageous, but what it means to act courageously or compassionately in this or that particular situation. These are the deliberations in daily life that take place around the possession and exercise of virtue, that are highly responsive to emotions, feelings, purposes and desires and require a finely developed capacity to reason and judge.

At first sight this proposition may seem conventional and old fashioned, reminiscent of what Kohlberg (1985:18) calls the berated "bag of virtues approach" of yesteryear. However, every age has its politically correct or philosophically correct language and knowledge forms. And even though the concept of virtue is being revived by contemporary philosophers interested in the practical import for everyday life of virtue ethics, it may be difficult at the end of the 20th century to warm educators to the relevance of thinking about their

professional practices in terms of virtues. The term *virtue* still possesses old-fashioned associations of pious obedience to some prevailing morality. Virtuousness seems to imply the opposite of a vigorously critical reflective personality. To talk of the virtues of teaching could call forth memories of servile teachers trapped in the suffocating atmosphere of small-minded, patriarchal and intolerant communities. However, we need to remind ourselves that the ancient notion of a virtue referred to the quality of strong personality. The modern notion of virtue, as employed by virtue ethicists, also explicates the enabling practice of personal choice and self-responsible agency that virtuous action requires.

Consequently, the ancient notion of virtues may be much more helpful for the image of the excellent educator than either the moral principled or the rational principled concepts of teaching. The moral principled model conceives of teaching as practical reflection on moral principles and dilemmas that inhere in certain practices. The rational principled model conceives of the interactive phase of teaching as deliberative decision making and strategic use of principles of curriculum and instruction in practice.

Important for the present discussion then, is the suggestion that the practice of teaching actually relies more appropriately on the unique and particular features of virtues. The thoughtfulness and tact that good teachers learn to display depends upon the internalised values, embodied qualities and thoughtful habits that constitute education as a virtue. Thus, it can be said that virtues are the learned and evoked educational qualities that are necessary for education, as the outcome of human agency, to take place. Virtues form the content that makes much educational reflection practical and possible in the first place. Even in reflective moments, when we wonder, "How should I have acted? What should I have done? How should I have responded?" we usually are appealing to practical knowledge that is best accounted for in those experiences of being human as they are contextualised in particular, unique and concrete human situations. For MacIntyre (1981:148) this means that virtues are precisely those qualities the possession of which will enable the individual person to achieve their *telos* as human beings and the lack of which will frustrate the individual person's movement toward this *telos*. No doubt several questions present themselves: "How do we know what these qualities may be? Can the virtues of education be taught? What is the relation between virtues and critical reflection?"

In response let me suggest some human actions that would be morally neutral in the general population and that could be seen as educational virtues bearing in mind, that virtues, as the outcome of human actions, are never morally neutral - they are always normatively desirable. Human actions that would have to be contextualised and that might well be perceived as the virtuous manner in which educators would be called upon to act in response to the deliberations in daily life may include the following: patience; trust; having special knowledge; and the ability to understand the meaning and significance of difficulty and personal suffering; love and caring; a deep sense of responsibility; moral intuitiveness; self-critical openness; thoughtful maturity; tactful sensitivity towards the other person's subjectivity; an interpretative intelligence; an understanding of the other person's needs; improvisational resoluteness in dealing with other persons; a passion for knowing and learning the mysteries of the world; the moral fibre to stand up for something; a certain understanding of the world; active hope in the face of prevailing crises; and, not the least, humour and vitality.... These qualities, though obviously contestable, might well be perceived as the manner in which educators would act in response to the deliberations in daily life that take place around the possession and exercise of virtue.

This consequently means that the formation of one's educational identity is not only dependent on the acquiring of competencies and skills; it is ultimately dependent even more on the evocation of virtue-like acts of education that each individual person should learn to interpret and embody into a form of knowing that contributes to her educational thoughtfulness and tact.

But the problem of an individual person's educational identity, however, requires further elaboration by way of a critical consideration of the nature of education, for it is education that provides such an identity with both form, content and vitality.

### **The nature of education**

Education is a contested concept. In entering this contestation I would at the outset argue that education is not an abstract or substantial phenomenon as asserted in certain discourses in education. Rather, education is the outcome of human agency, which is, differentiated in those deliberations in daily life that take place around the possession and exercise of virtue.

This notion of the nature of education is far removed from that crude idea that the mere acquisition of knowledge and skills is education. Education is not the same thing as the acquisition of knowledge and skills, though it is recognised, that the mastery of knowledge and skills is an inherent feature of education. The empowerment of individual persons with knowledge and skills does not necessarily make for an educated person. What is important, is the use that individual persons make of their knowledge and skills, their value to them personally in their thinking and living; it is what the acquisition of knowledge and skills has done to their minds, to their attitudes, their ideas, their values, their ideals, their motives and intentions that will allow them to be considered as educated persons.

Education should, therefore, not be regarded as the mere acquisition of knowledge and skills, but rather education should be seen as that attempt to bring influences to bear that will empower the individual person's character, abilities and capacities with a sense of personal meaning. Education is consequently an activity directed at self-empowerment whereby individual person's are equipped for the task of living meaningfully and guided in their aims and actions by their differential experience of human agency.

In focusing attention on human agency, education concerns itself dynamically with the formation of ideals, thereby fostering an appreciation of the highest standards in motive, judgement and action. As a result, education encompasses the individual person's total experience of existence, of the arts, of the finer achievements of technology and science, and of beauty. In being responsible for the formation of ideals, education contributes to the formation of character which includes, the promotion of a respect for, and the valuing of individuality. Education means leading out the individual nature in each man and woman to its true fullness and so bringing about the expression of their individual uniqueness.

These observations would indicate that education has certain ethical implications for the individual person; it has criteria built into it that something excellent should be transmitted. All that is implied is a commitment to what is thought and experienced to be valuable and meaningful. Education, therefore, has to do with living life meaningfully and this involves much more than the acquisition of knowledge for the sake of knowledge or skills for the sake of professional and basic competency. Rather, education involves personal transformation and change, a continual becoming more

than the present. In this education reveals itself to be a process in which education and change are dynamically dependent, for without education there can be no change and without change there can be no education. In the educational encounter between the individual person and other persons, knowledge and understanding are passed on in such a way that they develop a life of their own in the unique experience of the individual person, while at the same time bringing about a transformation of how the individual person sees the world, and hence feels about it.

It is thus evident that the ethical nature of education means that education is fundamentally concerned, not with the acquisition of knowledge, nor with professional and basic skill competence, but rather with assisting individual persons in learning how to think, how to understand, to appreciate, to make use of knowledge and to discover its inherent values, its usefulness, its clarifying and revealing powers, its insights, its truth.

The primary task of educators should, therefore, be to inspire, and when asked to inspire what, the reply may be: to inspire excellence, to seek it and in all things, to strive and achieve it. In the execution of their commitment to education, educators should exercise their faith, and put education first, and knowledge and skills second. Above all, they should seek to arouse curiosity, develop judgement, encourage perseverance and independence in the pursuit and application of knowledge; in short they should seek to inspire creativity. Educators need to be those leaders who will inspire men and women to clearer insight and greater adventurousness. They should reach out beyond the practice of producing competent technicians, efficient imparters of knowledge and capable instructors of skills. If they are to succeed in this educational venture, educators will need to ensure that they become educationally mannered and this will require a breadth of vision and imagination, as well as hope and a generosity of spirit - the nature of education demands this.

### **An educational mandate for educators**

Educational discourse will in the next decade break into the world of the twenty first century, a world which is already making its demands on individual persons and society as a whole. In this world, individual persons are confronted by the demands of a technocratic dispensation which requires of men and women that they be trained competently for the maintenance and development of scientifically,

technologically and sociologically determined functions, as well as the promotion of the national economy. Such a technocratic dispensation regards individual persons in terms of their pragmatic value for the advancement of the technocratic order which it is believed represents the symbol of humankind's advancement toward a more efficient and better world. In such a technocratic world, education is directed at the attainment of pragmatic ends. And as a result, education is reduced to mere training and vocational preparation, that is, to the technocratisation of the individual person without due regard for the individual person's quest for self-empowerment.

What is the response of those involved in education to this situation? What role can educators play, what consuming purpose can motivate educators, in such a technocratic world?

It may be suggested that educators rise to the challenge of that educational mandate which is fundamentally concerned with the individual person's self-empowerment as a human being. This will mean that educators will not be concerned primarily with the acquisition of a subject competence or of skills for professional and vocational preparedness, but rather they will be concerned with a competence for life in the individual person's experience of existence as a person in relation to other persons.

The practical implications of such an educational mandate would indicate that educators should take contextual cognisance of the individual person as:

- a person whose worth is vested in his or her inter-subjective experience of being human and not in being treated as an object or thing which is evaluated in terms of its utility value and productive capacity;
- a person, who needs to become someone with an own unique and differentiated identity and not merely some useful or productive thing;
- a person, whose dignity and uniqueness is acknowledged and respected;
- a person, who requires an interpersonal relationship of love in action to be established in order to invest his or her existence and experience of life with personal significance;

- a person, who needs to be supported in the responsible expression of his or her freedom;

In being guided by such an educational mandate, educators will perceive their fundamental task as assisting both themselves and individual persons in that exclusively human endeavour in which they together are completely engaged, struggling to give form, character and meaning to the experience of their own unique existence. If educators are true to this educational mandate, then they will empower individual persons to develop their own voice while at the same time acquiring their own personal and virtuous disposition that will allow them the opportunity to change themselves, as well as others and by implication society as a whole. In other words, in the act of self-empowerment education will be directed at assisting individual persons to become autonomous persons, engaging in thought and activity which is their own, in the sense of not being determined by causes beyond their control. Such persons in acting independently will aspire to that most noble possible view of education, namely, that of the educated person.

Finally, a discourse in education, which focuses on the individual as a person, will also be seen to take seriously relations of race, class, gender and power in the legitimisation of personal meaning and experience in that it will be directed at education as a self-empowering practice directed at the creation of a society of shared human values.

### **Education and the twenty first century**

The decade ushering in the twenty first century witnesses to continuing and accelerating change in all spheres of human endeavour. In this climate of change, educators are compelled to seek new and more meaningful ways of understanding their place and task in society. In this search educators should be guided continually by their educational mandate, a mandate which bears testimony to those human virtues which mark the individual's existence as a person. Humankind desperately needs to work toward a renewed consciousness about the future of human existence. Unless humankind develops the wisdom to manage its societies, its environment and its existence, then more people will suffer in the coming decades than ever before.

The dilemma facing educators is not one of too little knowledge. If anything, it is one of too much knowledge, or rather



transforming knowledge into wisdom. There is a growing concern that the amount of knowledge available is outstripping humankind's intellectual and ethical capacity for handling its growth and complexity.

Humankind currently possesses enough knowledge to destroy itself or to improve the quality of life of men and women on earth. The twentieth century witnesses to the most diversified, least integrated and most diffusely applied knowledge humankind has yet produced. It is also the most exact knowledge in specific, fragmented areas and the most operational. That it has produced the greatest disorder in the terrestrial household of humankind is little wonder. It is likewise obvious that unless humankind integrates and focuses its knowledge the disorder will grow into disaster. Undoubtedly, the most important reconciliation that has to occur, as humankind approaches the twenty first century, is between the ethical principles of human nature and the factual foundations of the natural sciences. During the last two centuries values and facts have become increasingly more divorced from each other. In the process people have become estranged from the object of their study. Such great thinkers as Goethe, Nietzsche, Hegel, Schiller and Schopenhauer, have tried to effect a synthesis based on the primacy of human values.

Notwithstanding, it would seem that at present much of our educational endeavour negates the primacy of human values in that it is moulded to the dictates of a scientific paradigm that is naturalistic, objective, analytical and directed at operational and functional ends. In the ensuing estrangement, the individual person becomes the alienated self. It is this estrangement that needs to be addressed as a matter of utmost urgency. This will require creative thought and innovative action. The price to be paid by educators in addressing this sense of estrangement and alienation will be courage and inspired determination. They must not allow their vision of the primacy of human agency and human values to stagnate within existing social structures; but rather they must be prepared to participate in the transformation and renewal of educational form and substance so as to ensure that human concerns and aspirations are not neglected or ignored altogether. This will mean that in their striving for transformation and renewal, educators will confront the future with a flexibility of vision that will seek to bring about innovation and change in the interests of the individual person and ultimately society as a whole. This in turn will require that educational discourse be rooted in a commitment to educational

change so that educators may be free to enquire, explore and be creative.

Educators stand in the service of education systems that are prescriptive in function. Prescriptive education makes independent and critical thinking extremely difficult. Conformity is demanded or expected, but this leads to mediocrity and the demise of creative endeavour. This demise in turn results in the neglect of human concerns and aspirations. Education systems today do not just neglect human concerns; there is simply not enough respect for the dignity, worth and uniqueness of the individual person's existence as a human being. Education systems tend to kill innovation, stifle creativity and in so doing estrange and alienate people from themselves. The constant compliance required by an education system leaves the individual person little, if any opportunity to develop a value system and self-concept based on internal rather than externally imposed criteria. And the resultant damage done to the human spirit may prompt one to conclude that education systems are perhaps the most authoritarian and dangerous of all social inventions of humankind.

The problem of the survival of the human spirit during the present epoch constitutes the problem of elevating the individual person's quality of existence and of allowing individual persons to be uniquely themselves in the crucible of human experience. Educators cannot ignore this problem - they also bear the responsibility of addressing the individual person in a distinctively personal manner and in so doing invest the individual person's existence with a sense of personal meaning.

## **Conclusion**

In arguing that education is concerned with virtues that sustain a human/e world, I have asserted that we need to ensure the presence of an ethical dimension in educational discourse that will resonate with lived human experience which is always marked by an element of the ineffable and mysterious.

Furthermore, I have argued that insofar as virtues are an affirmation of an inherent bond among all human beings we should further ensure that the qualities inherent in those virtues which education seeks to promote, shall not be sacrificed to pragmatic motives which seek to compel educational discourse to be

subservient to the political, economic and vocational demands of a rapidly changing technocratic world.

Education includes, but is not coincidental to basic, professional and vocational training. In the words of John Stuart Mill (1971, p.65):

*Men are men before they are lawyers or physicians, or merchants, or manufacturers; and if you make them capable and sensible men, they will make themselves capable and sensible lawyers and physicians.*

If we fail to establish such a vision of education, we will also fail to attain the most noble view possible of education, namely, that of the educated person and the good society.

H G Wells (1972, p. 10) in reflecting on the course of human history commented:

*Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.*

Seen in this light it can be concluded that the interest of education is none other than civilisation itself - the quality of humankind's existence. In pursuing this interest, education subsumes the concerns of the body politic and the market in the interests of humankind's need for enlightenment so as to ensure a quality of existence that is becoming of civilisation. This value-laden activity represents the educator's mandate, wherein the individual as a person often alone, often with others, seeks constantly with imagination and creativity, to clarify limits in order to surpass them, to order the mind so as to set it free.

But let me close with this final postscript:

*As I view the kinds of learning communities I would like to see nurtured, I hope also for the deliberate creation of the kinds of sustaining situations that would empower individual persons to engage with obstacles in their way until they expand the spaces in which they can reach beyond themselves and choose.*

In this hope is cherished the virtue of education.

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