

George E. Flower

“Do Pass the Potatoes, Henrik”

Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright, was given to torrential discussion at his dinner table. At times, it is said, the waves of argument rose higher and higher, and disagreement grew so intense that Ibsen and his guests would all be speaking at once. At such times, Ibsen's wife had her own way of bringing them back to a sense of proportion. “Do pass the potatoes, Henrik,” she would say, in a gentle voice. And Ibsen, just as gently, would pass them.

Perhaps, at this stage in our educational development, it is time for someone to say, “Do pass the potatoes.”

Education has come a very long way in recent decades. Certainly this is abundantly true of the McGill Faculty of Education under Dean Wayne Hall and his colleagues; their record is outstanding. What now of the future?

A dozen years ago most of us were pretty confident about the future in education. John W. Gardner, as President of the Carnegie Corporation, had coined a much-quoted phrase when he referred to education as “the servant of all our purposes.” Canadians tended to look to their elementary, secondary, and post-secondary schools for solutions to virtually all their difficulties. Education luxuriated in the position of a favorite child in the competition for public funds. Expansion and expansiveness were the order of the day. Almost anything for education was regarded as a Good Thing.

Today the future isn't what it used to be. People have tried education, only to find that, in spite of much larger and more expensive educational efforts, our country — indeed our world — remains in a perpetual state of social, economic, and political crisis. Many people seem willing now to regard education not so much as "the servant of all our purposes" but as "the scapegoat for all our frustrations."

There is not much point in claiming foul, on the grounds that the enormous expectations held for schools and colleges and universities were unrealistic in the first place. There is not much point in saying don't blame the schools; were it not for the schools we would be in a much worse pickle than we are. Nor is there much point in trying to ignore the current disillusionment with education, dismissing it as a kind of generalized regressive behavior which people will grow out of and get over; we must grapple with it. We must also recognize that, in further contrast to recent decades, we now face projections of stand-pat or declining enrolments rather than expanding numbers. What shall our stance be? What initiatives shall we take? Must innovation dry up entirely and give way to painful retrenchment?

I do not believe so. I have great confidence in the future for education and in the prospects for faculties of education. I do believe, however, that we are clearly at the stage where we need to consider again what we are doing, how well we are doing it, and whether we are doing what we ought to be doing. These are tough questions, requiring tough answers on which it is never easy to agree. But for colleges and faculties of education surely an imperative for the future is to seize the opportunity to devote more of our energies to the continuing education of teachers rather than to satisfy ourselves largely with their initial preparation as we have in the past? Already dozens of voices among us are raised as to how to proceed, and in what directions. The problem is one of priorities. How shall we choose among them?

Please pass the potatoes, Henrik.