

Viewpoint

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Humanism, Hegemony and Teacher Training

Abstract

The teaching profession is at least as important as any other profession - the world of tomorrow is in the hands of the children of today - but it does not enjoy the same public respect accorded the other professions. This is partly due to the fact that new teachers entering the school systems are a mixture of good and bad. They are this mixture because the philosophy animating and shaping teacher training in North America, and elsewhere, has been one of excessive humanism which dictated that the weak teachers should not be culled. University presidents could and should intervene to change this state of affairs, but they don't.

Résumé

La profession d'enseignant est au moins aussi importante que toute autre - le monde de demain est entre les mains des enfants d'aujourd'hui - mais elle ne jouit pas de la même estime publique que les autres professions. Cela s'explique en partie par le fait que les nouveaux enseignants qui entrent dans le système scolaire sont un mélange de bons et de mauvais. Cela est dû au fait que les principes qui régissent et qui façonnent la formation des maîtres en Amérique du Nord et ailleurs se sont appuyés sur un humanisme excessif qui stipulait qu'il ne fallait pas éliminer les faibles. Les présidents d'université peuvent et doivent intervenir pour modifier cet état de choses, mais ils ne font rien.

It is very disturbing that in North America school teaching, as compared to other professions, lacks strong public confidence and respect. Doctors have

their failures: patients die. Lawyers have their failures: clients lose expensive court battles. Architects have been known to produce monstrosities and accountants known to mislead. Yet these professions are held in high public regard. Teachers have their failures: some students achieve little. But the teaching profession is typically held in some disdain. This negative attitude washes over on to the young, which only furthers the difficulties faced by teachers.

A good yardstick of public esteem for the teaching profession is how teachers themselves judge the respect accorded them. In the United States, in *The Second Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll of Teachers' Attitudes Toward the Public Schools* (Elam, 1989) it was noted that “[t]eachers see their own services as more valuable than those of all 11 other occupations they rated, including medicine, the clergy and the bench. At the same time, teachers place their prestige at the bottom of the totem pole, below even funeral director, realtor and advertising practitioners” (p. 785). In *The 22nd Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitude Towards the Public Schools* (Elam 1990), when asked which of certain groups should receive \$50,000 or over, 73% gave this mark of distinction to doctors, 68% to lawyers, 53% to engineers, 38% to pharmacists, 26% to nurses, 21% to teachers, and 18% to plumbers. In *The 23rd Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitude Toward the Public Schools* (Elam, 1991), when asked which grade they would give to the public schools, 10% awarded the schools ‘A’, 32% gave ‘B’, 33% gave ‘C’, 10% gave ‘D’ and 5% gave ‘F’. In Canada, a 1990 poll *Public Attitudes Toward Education in Ontario 1990* (Livingstone & Hart, 1991) yielded 47% satisfied with the Ontario schools, elementary and high, 29% dissatisfied; about half of the 25 - 54 years age group were dissatisfied with the schools. (In 1986, the same poll found 7% very satisfied, 35% satisfied, 23% dissatisfied, and 10% very dissatisfied [OISE, 1986].) One could go on but the evidence is abundant, overwhelming and very constant over time: the public does not hold the teaching profession in high regard, rather it has very mixed feelings toward teachers.

The teaching profession is not concerned with mending bones, pulling teeth, winning disputes, or balancing books. It is concerned with the maximum development of the minds and emotions-sensitivities of the young. It is certainly arguable that teaching is more important than any other profession: the world of tomorrow is in the hands of the students of today. We here make the modest claim that it is as important as any other profession. The lack of public esteem, and thus confidence, is, then, a problem. This problem should be addressed.

One of the major reasons teaching is not respected as a profession is that the criteria for graduating into the teaching profession are very loose. The teaching profession is constantly undermined by the yearly entry of the indifferent and individuals with poor potential along with the good and the

excellent. The public deals with teachers. The indifferent and poor teachers generate anger and contempt but parents are helpless in the face of closed ranks and their fear of teacher reprisals against their children if they make trouble. So parents “beef” to each other, which finally shows up in polls revealing mixed views on the teaching profession and in a certain careful but critical coolness displayed by many parents in their actual dealings with teachers.

Why is teacher training lax? It is lax because the vision or philosophy of education in general in twentieth-century North America has been one of excessive humanism. The main strands composing this vision are humanistic psychology, behaviouristic psychology, neo-Marxism, and a dominating belief in freedom-democracy-creativity. More recently feminism, multiculturalism, and special education have had strong impact. Latest on the scene is post-modernist thought.

Humanistic psychology, drawing heavily upon the work of Maslow (1962) and Rogers (1969), insists on the prime importance of a good self-concept in a child’s development. Not surprisingly, then, humanistic psychology views teachers as facilitators, not forcers; labelling a child “failure” or “poor” would, in its view, have disastrous consequences: stunting development now and likely for always. Behaviouristic psychology, drawing heavily upon the work of Skinner (1971) (whose deterministic views have been bolstered by current ‘strong artificial intelligence’ supporters who declare all behaviour to be a strict consequence of genetically-based brain algorithms [Penrose, 1990]) insists that all behaviour, which includes learning behaviours, is shaped by genes-environment and shaped most effectively by positive reinforcement (praise, reward, and suchlike), which is to say, painlessly. Hence, on this view, evaluation, whilst benefitting those who do well, retards the learning of those who do poorly.

Marxists rail against schools because they reflect and support capitalism (i.e., a competitive economic system with, necessarily, winners and losers), and especially against the grading system since it discriminates against the children of the poor (Bowles & Gintis, 1975). Marxism proffers a vision of a cooperative society with no power hierarchy and no social losers.

John Dewey, the dean of American philosophers of education, proffered a vision of democratic America where democracy was a cooperative mode of living. He urged the common-sense view that the respect for the individual enshrined in democracy translated in the classroom into teachers building on the actual interests and capacities of the child within a social group dynamic: learning is not a matter of forcing but of guiding (1938). A.S. Neill (1966), believing more in the power of freedom-to-learn than did Dewey, founded Summerhill where no student was ever pressured in the slightest to attend class or learn, where school rules were arrived at democratically (on one notable

occasion the student body voted to expel Neill, their principal) and where creativity was the main measure of student development. Independent research has since established that the graduates of Summerhill did as well with their lives, career-wise, as did the graduates of the regular high schools. Thus Summerhill has provided enduring ammunition for the believers in freedom-democracy-creativity. Neill speaks well for them:

You cannot **make** children learn . . . without to some degree converting them into will-less adults. You fashion them into accepters of the status quo - a good thing for a society that needs obedient sitters at dreary desks . . . a society, in short, that is carried on the shabby shoulders of the scared little man - the scared-to-death conformist. . . . All prize-giving and marks and exams side-track proper personality development. . . . We do not know how much creation is killed in the classroom with its emphasis on learning. (Neill, 1966, pp. 12, 25, 26)

This four-pillared, humane vision I term "Being Nice." Feminism, multiculturalism, and special education all reflect Being Nice: the desire that all groups be aided by schooling rather than some aided and others actually held back. Post-modernist thought, a latter-day Nietzschean philosophy, insists that since there is no "The Truth," nobody should be pushing others around. Post-modernist professors seek to liberate the young from a variety of hegemonies; post-modernist professors are "Nice" (Lather, 1989; McLaren, 1989).

Dominated by this vision, faculties and colleges of education across North America view evaluation negatively, indeed it is held to be alien to the very essence of education: evaluation can destroy or prevent a good self-concept; evaluation is hierarchy, someone in power and someone out of power, a denial of freedom and democracy; evaluation invariably puts memory ahead of creativity; and evaluation works against the culturally and emotionally deprived.

John Dewey, despite voluminous, scholarly and insightful writing on education, never gave serious thought to evaluation. He was realistic enough to know that even his cooperative, guiding, group-oriented teaching would not succeed with every child, but rather than utilize evaluation, a form of pressure, he simply urges more effort on the part of the teacher (1938, pp. 56, 57). Neill went the whole way when he declared there were no problem children, only problem parents. The vision of twentieth-century education has been a passionate rejection of pressure and power and a proud embracing of nurture and facilitation, a reaction to the previous vision of education by discipline and the rod.

So in faculties and colleges of education examinations are few and far between, and the few examinations there are are typically of the sort where the students have the questions beforehand, whereby professors of education can

appear to satisfy university standards yet remain “Nice.” The norm, however, is to require papers whose topics are chosen by the students. In many cases students are encouraged to collaborate - the strong should help the weak because this is “Nice”: cooperation, not competition. Whether the paper was written by the proclaimed author or whether it was even written for the course and is not just a recycled paper nobody knows. It’s not “Nice” to be suspicious. A large proportion of marks is typically allotted for student presentations. Very little traditional teaching is done in faculties and colleges of education, most courses consisting mainly of student presentations either to the class or to small discussion groups, all this in the name of “true education”: education characterized by student interest, involvement, creativity, and nondomination by the professor. Grades are incredibly high, partly because one cannot provide hard evidence given ‘soft’ evaluation practices if grades are challenged and partly because one must be nurturing, encouraging, “Nice.” The registrars of North American universities have all the data in their files. Unfortunately, they are not free to speak.¹

Thus student teachers find themselves with the choice of studying hard or doing little; dedication is optional. Speaking from more than 20 years experience in teacher training, I know that a good proportion take the easy route - teaching, because of the long holidays, attracts more than its fair share of the unmotivated. Some students drop out during or just after practice teaching in the school, finding the job to be much harder than they had anticipated. But associate teachers, reflecting their own training, are typically very kind and generous in their assessing of student performance. So the hardworking and the slack, the strong and the weak, the animated and the dull, the good teacher and the bad, all end up with impressive transcripts. Faculties of education are notorious for being held in disdain within universities across North America (Eiselle, 1990). Not without reason.

Why is nothing done about this? Universities are not willing to publicly acknowledge that one or more of their degrees are being devalued, the teacher federations are not going to publicly call into question their own credentials, faculties and colleges of education believe they are the true educators and cite the drop-out rate to prove their standards (but the failure rate is nil), and student teachers, loving an easy entry into a desirable profession, will not disturb the applecart.

Many neo-Marxist professors take satisfaction in subverting capitalist society by mocking its credentials. Many humanist professors view evaluation as a form of violence against children and practise what they preach. All education professors feel the constant, insistent pressure to be “Nice.” Our school children finally bear the brunt of all this but they are too weak to do anything about it. Some years ago, when a high school graduate sued the San Francisco School Board for a million dollars because despite having a high

school diploma he could neither read nor write well enough to get a job, the Board successfully argued in court that the diploma merely indicated attendance. This incident is the world of education in microcosm.²

Medical schools, law schools, institutes of accountancy, financial advisor associations, and issuers of driving licences, all have no qualms about holding serious examinations to determine competency. They are not willing to see the qualifications issued in their name devalued; they are not willing to put the public at risk. They are respected. Teaching, by and large, is not.

Educators should learn from Aristotle. In his notion of “the golden mean” Aristotle³ essentially points out that anything taken to excess will destroy itself, will lose its nature. To excessively nurture is in fact to neglect. To excessively care is in fact to coddle.⁴ Schools graduate numerous diploma-bearing students who in fact lack the skills to hold their own in society.⁵ And just as standards of achievement have played second fiddle to a misguided excessive humanism, so too have standards of behaviour. Many schools are now armed camps.⁶ A rising tide of violence threatens the truly humanist ideal of universal education. Thus the excessive humanism that has dominated teacher training has become anti-humans.

What can be done about this?

Nothing. Too many people are benefitting and so will remain silent. It would take a very determined university or college president and governing council, who knew and cared about the situation, to appoint a very determined dean or principal who also knew and cared about the situation, who would appoint a very determined assistant dean or vice-principal who would gather around him or her a core of professors/instructors of like determination. Such a faculty would adopt a humanistic position of “Being Demanding.” One can be demanding without being nasty, but not without being serious about evaluation: being ready and willing to fail the incompetent and to give poor grades to poor performers. “Being Demanding” would mean greater creativity, not less. If such a vision were to take hold in North America, then and only then will the teaching profession be held in high public confidence and esteem, as it most certainly should be. (Whether schools should adopt the vision of “Being Demanding” is a separate question and one I do not address.)

Such presidents, however, are nowhere to be found.

I dedicate this paper to those professors/instructors who believe that teaching the next generation is of such social and individual importance that only the worthy should be licensed to teach; to all those professors/instructors who were able to resist the insidious hegemony of “Being Nice.”

NOTES

1. In more than 20 years as an academic I have heard only once of a registrar speaking out. His remarks were repudiated by the university president the following morning - public relations must be served first. I cite enough to give the flavour: "We get this shoddy product and what do we do? We pass them. . . . We not only pass them, we convocate them. . . . But there's ironic justice because we put them into faculties of education for teacher training." *The Globe and Mail*, Toronto, May 8th, 1975.
2. Cf: "VANCOUVER: . . . a study has found that more than half the employees in B.C. sawmills cannot read well enough to understand the written material they encounter on the job. The study by the B.C. Council of Forest Industries and the woodworkers' union, IWA-Canada, found 56% of 227 employees tested at eight mills had difficulty reading at a mid-grade 4 level. . . . Almost 40% of those found to have reading problems had completed grade 12. But the study results are not a measure of the employees' intelligence or abilities, an IWA-COFI committee stressed in releasing the report yesterday." *The Globe and Mail*, Toronto, October 17th, 1991, p.1.
3. "First of all then . . . moral qualities are so constituted as to be destroyed by excess. . . . Enough has now been said to show that moral virtue is a mean, and in what sense this is so, namely that it is a mean between two vices, one of excess and the other of defect; and that it is such a mean because it aims at hitting the middle point in feelings and actions. This is why it is a hard task to be good. . . ." *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book 2, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (1941), R. McKeon (Ed.), New York: Random House.
4. Cf: "For Linda Morowei much of the problem is rooted in teacher attitudes . . . 'In Jamaica, I was taught by teachers (many British-born) who cared so much they wouldn't talk to you for days if you failed an exam' she says. 'They took it personally if a student failed. Here, [Toronto], they don't seem to give a damn.'" *The Sunday Sun*, Toronto, October 27th, p.26. At the same time newspaper ads were being run by a famous Ontario public school: "HAS YOUR CHILD WRITTEN A WORTH-WHILE EXAM LATELY?", followed by "Holy Trinity School offers excellent academics in a caring family setting." *Economist and Sun*, Markham, Ontario, October 30th, 1991, p. A5.
5. See, for example, "Solving an Educational Crisis", by Randall Litchfield, *Canadian Business*, Vol.64, #2, February 1991, pp. 57-64, which reported that 30% of high school students will drop out and of those who graduate 15% will be functionally illiterate. See also, re the U.S.A., "The Nation's Report Card Goes Home", *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol.72, #2, October 90, pp. 127-133; also: ". . . in international comparisons, American students are falling behind - not only behind students from developed countries but also behind those in many undeveloped countries. . . ." in M. Kennedy, "Policy Issues in Teacher Education," *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol.72, #9, May 1991, p. 661.
6. Cf: "In the 1991 poll the general public ranked discipline second amongst the biggest problems with which public schools in their communities must deal, and gave disciplined environment (free of drugs and violence) the number one ranking among the six national goals." *The 23rd Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitude Toward the Public Schools*, op. cit., p. 56.

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