

Book Reviews

No Easy Answers

William Hare & John Portelli.
WHAT TO DO: CASE STUDIES FOR TEACHERS.
Halifax, NS: Fairmont Books.
94 pp. \$9.95.

Much educational theory, research, and philosophy presents protracted and difficult answers to simple questions. In these accounts teaching is a technical enterprise, one in which most of the hard thinking, and all of the important decision making, is left to theoreticians who never soil their hands in the muck of classroom reality. Teachers are rightly skeptical. Drawing on analytic philosophy and narrative inquiry William Hare and John Portelli have produced a book which invites teachers, even the most skeptical and "practical" among us, to engage in considered philosophical reflection on practice. In *What To Do*, Hare and Portelli present a vision of educational philosophy which is grounded in the concrete dilemmas that teachers face day to day. They offer a series of open-ended case studies which pose difficult real life questions in very accessible language.

The traditional relationship between educational theory and teaching practice has come under increasingly intense scrutiny in recent years. As qualitative research methods and teacher research have achieved a greater degree of credibility, teachers' own accounts and perceptions have become an important source of data which is crucial, both to personal professional development, as well as a source for the kind of sharing of experience which can contribute to a collective professional renewal. As Hare points out in his introduction, "a story is a powerful and effective way to communicate educational ideas" (p. 20). I would go even further to claim that in our stories we might begin to gain a transpersonal sense of what it is to be a teacher and begin to gain critical, grounded professional expertise. Empirical educational research has always had as its focus the development of a transpersonal view of teaching and learning, but teachers have typically not been the audience. Teachers have been the objects, pesky and unpredictable variables to be

controlled, victims even. Traditional educational philosophy has also had this detached and out-of-touch image, invoking thoughts of ponderous grey beards who function as theoretical allies to researchers, the men in white coats.

Teachers have believed, and have been encouraged to believe, that academics know their classroom worlds best by virtue of the latter's possession of "objective", "unbiased", considered theory. This theory would inform practice and improve it. Answers were provided to teachers by experts. Hare and Portelli, on the other hand, provide no easy answers, only open-ended, thorny problems. By flipping or even setting aside the traditional theory-practice equation, Hare and Portelli inform teachers of ways of speaking and thinking about what they do in schools. In this revised equation, practice informs and contributes to theory. This approach trusts teachers to find their way into issues and problems of philosophy by traveling the familiar roads of teachers' stories. Through the medium of problematic stories, teachers are encouraged to dig into the cases establishing, defending, revising, and abandoning positions. Pragmatic teaching and school-related situations presented in the cases move rather easily from the more obvious surface issues and dilemmas such as: controversial reading material, sexual harassment, racism, discipline, confidentiality, and child abuse (to name a few), into deeper questions of epistemology, ontology, and the assumptions which undercut positions and statements.

Understandably, both preservice and inservice teachers respond positively to the case study approach; this is the world that they know and experience. Since issues are presented as pragmatic "stones in the shoe", it is easy to identify with the struggles of the teachers depicted in the cases. One teacher comments: "I ceased to be an academic sponge, that soaked up every little piece of information like it was the 'only truth', and began critically evaluating the materials offered" (p. 82). At first glance I found it odd that Hare and Portelli would include what amounts to testimonials to the positive qualities of the case study method in the conclusion of this book, but after some reflection I can see that these comments are another sort of record, one which speaks of the emergence of a reflective and critical professionalism.

For teachers the development of a critical attitude is an ambivalent experience and the frustration, uncertainty, and even discomfort which accompany the acquisition of a critical attitude are evident both in the cases and in the responses in the concluding section. In a very real sense it can be frightening; teachers have been expected to be acritical pawns in the very political public enterprise of consciousness formation. For the

most part we have done this job well, and most of us have been proud to do it. Perhaps it is not said often enough that teachers still labour under conditions in which our autonomy as professionals and as intellectuals is regarded with considerable public and collegial suspicion. Often engaged and critical professionalism is actively discouraged. The bureaucratic, disciplinary, and surveillance dimensions of teaching chafe against what Portelli calls “a philosophically oriented notion of professionalism. . . based on the importance and urgency of asking the inquiring questions: Why?, On what grounds?, To what purpose?, and, In whose interest?” (p. 11). Quite naturally too, these technocratic aspects of teachers’ lives become grist for the mill in *What To Do* as we see teachers struggling with problem situations where the rules do not suffice, where routines fall apart, when important decisions hinge on judgment, and when there are no correct answers.

One keeps hearing teachers complain about teacher training, both past and present. These criticisms are often couched in terms of the disjunction between the ethereal world of the ivory tower and the “real” world of the classroom. Some of the most caustic commentary is reserved for the inevitable and obligatory course in educational philosophy that virtually every practicing teacher has had to endure. New and experienced teachers moan about how they were unprepared in B.Ed. programs for life in schools, “they never told us about this!” or “they’ve got their theories but let ’em come in here and try it out in my room, it’s just not practical.” Under all of this, it seems to me, is a technical-rational conception of what teaching is, and this view contains the idea that there are indeed correct answers to all “what to do?” questions. This simplistic thinking is eerily normal. Unfortunately, this view is also embedded in the pedagogical practice where curricula are designed from above and delivered from below. By continuing to engage in such instrumental thinking – expecting the experts to provide the answers to every “what to do” – teachers are unwittingly supporting the very bifurcation of theory and practice which they rail against. It seems to me that philosophy as engaged practical reasoning is a powerful way to bridge the gap between the thinkers and the doers.

I think Hare and Portelli have produced a book which will help teachers, teacher educators, and others problematize teaching for both preservice and inservice teachers, helping to place in their hands some recognizable yet slippery fish.

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