TOWARD A PEDAGOGY OF THOUGHTFULNESS

Introduction

What is a child? To see a child is to see possibility, someone in the process of becoming.

Jan’s parents did not get along. Even at age six Jan knew this; it created tensions and sometimes an unpleasant feeling at home. Then, one day, her parents announced plans to break up their marriage. They decided for the sake of the children not to live too far apart; Jan and her brother could choose whether they wanted to live with their father or with their mother.

That was several years ago. The father has moved away. Jan now lives with her mother.

Jan is in sixth grade. The teacher finds Jan remarkably mature. Or is it that she seems so much more experienced than some of her other classmates? Every day the children spend half an hour writing in their individual journals. Sometimes children write poetry, sometimes they write a story, and sometimes they use the journal as a place to express their feelings and communicate to the teacher. At the end of the day the teacher takes all the books home and writes a response to each child. The teacher reads Jan’s story: "Today I’m a little blue. I wrote a letter to my Dad last night and I really miss him. Usually Trisha will cheer me up but she’s sick. I know my Dad misses me, but I just wish that I could be in two places at once or that I could live normally with parents that live together. I’m glad that now, when they talk on the phone, they sound more like friends, but that still doesn’t change the fact that my Dad lives too far away. I
know I live normally — like I got my health and a loving family … but then again, not really. I guess today you have one lonely kid!” As the teacher responds to Jan with some thoughtful lines, she is again amazed at herself. As a teacher she knows many children like Jan, many worse off than Jan. But why does the teacher in her always want to respond as a mother?

Compared to their parents and grandparents, young people today live in a severely fractured world — families are less stable, divorce has become commonplace, neighbourhoods tend to be more in flux and less community-minded, schools are less personal and more competitive, and peer groups set up conflicting loyalties. Moreover, television, radio, newspapers, and other media rush images of adulthood into the living space of young children — images beset with violence, sexuality, drugs, global crises and conflict. Many parents and educators feel uneasy about the frenzied, intensely eroticized icons of some music videos on the developing minds and bodies of young viewers. They believe that children prematurely see and experience too much in our consumer-oriented, information-based, and advertising-driven culture. Technology, in the form of computers, video, and other communication innovations, also radically alters the modalities of modern living. Aspects of adult life that previously remained secret from children until they had mastered more sophisticated reading levels and until they had obtained access to more mature literature now have become dominant themes of the lives of children. This has led some educators to suggest that the boundaries between childhood and adulthood are eroding and that childhood itself, in its development phases, may be disappearing.

It is this reality of change, complexity, plurality, fragmentation, conflict, and contradiction of beliefs, values, faiths, living conditions, aspirations, and life-styles, that makes the lives of young people today an experience in contingency. Contingent life is indeterminate, unpredictable, subject to chance, impacted by events and unforeseen circumstances. The youngster born into the modern social world often must respond to early pressures and premature expectations to grow up faster than seems possible or advisable. And yet, in spite of — or because of — this contingency, the lives of young people are often full of stimulation, interest, and challenge.
The modern child is born into a world that can be experienced, within limits, as a life of possibilities — though the possibilities are certainly not the same for all. Yet even children who are raised in situations affected by poverty, youth unemployment, alcoholism, drug abuse, prostitution, violence, crime, and other dangers of modern living nevertheless may be able to experience a certain openness of choice and possibility in life.\(^1\)

**The Possibility of a New Pedagogy**

Unlike the ages when one knew, by being born in a particular social niche, what one was expected to become, whom one could count on, what one could do, present-day children must live with uncertainty. They must make active choices in their lives for fear of not becoming anything or anyone. The modern child must actively realize that he or she is born into a condition of possibilities. He or she *is* this body of possibilities. To become a person, to grow up and to become educated, is to transform one’s contingency into commitment, responsibility — one must choose a life. This means that the vocation of pedagogy, of being educationally involved with children, is to empower children to give active shape to their life’s contingencies.\(^2\)

To be a contingent person can be seen both negatively and positively. Negatively it means that many present-day children are growing up in an uncertain world, a world with too many conflicting views, values and aims; this predicament can mean that children drift into (self-)destructive lifestyles. Positively it means that each young person must make choices and commitments in life, that they all must come to terms with their possibilities. The child is in a real sense the agent of his or her own destiny — at both the individual and the social level. So a new pedagogy of the theory and practice of living with children must know how to stand in a relationship of thoughtfulness and openness to children and young people rather than being governed by traditional beliefs, discarded values, old rules, and fixed impositions. The pedagogy of living with children is an ongoing project of renewal in a world that is constantly changing around us and that is continually being changed by us.

Indeed, as we ask ourselves what it means to belong to this

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earth, we must seriously ask ourselves what it means to belong to our children. Living at the turn of a new millennium poses unforeseen and unforeseeable challenges to parents and to teachers and other professional educators. This does not mean, of course, that we should dismiss or abandon every valued cultural construction that appears presently under siege. For example, in a new age of commercialized social mores and more fluid interpersonal relations, the family has experienced difficulty maintaining its former cohesiveness. This does not mean that the more close-knit familial structure is or was wrong and that we should give up on the idea that children need, if possible, a mother and a father, as well as other kin relations, all playing active roles in the child’s journey to adulthood. A new pedagogy must face the challenge of change but also be prepared to defend, or reconstruct in new forms, values and value frameworks that growing up seems to require.

Of course, life will be carried into the twenty-first century by new realities and new visions. Some of these realities will be exciting and positive experiments in human living. But we must recognize also that spheres of human intimacy increasingly come under strain from consumer, economic, bureaucratic, corporate, and political technologies and ideologies. The notion of education, conceived as a living process of personal engagement between an adult teacher or parent and a young child or student, may well disappear in an increasingly managerial, corporate, and technicized environment. How can educating and bringing up children remain a rich human and cultural activity?

This text is addressed to both beginning teachers and experienced educators. But the perspective and approach is somewhat unusual in that it takes the in loco parentis relation as a source for exploring pedagogical understandings and insights that maintain a holistic focus on the lived world of professional educators and children. In my ongoing conversations with teachers and young people I have been intrigued by the fact that when teachers and children talk of meaningful educational experiences, these experiences often seem to occur on the margin or on the outside of the daily curriculum experiences of the classroom. One should not make the mistake, however, of supposing that the pedagogical life on the margin of the “teaching/learning process” is not fundamentally connected to the central processes of curriculum and teaching.
Remembering educators' in loco parentis relation

Even in these times of eroding parental and family influence, parents carry the primary responsibility for the child’s well-being and the child’s development. Does anybody have a right to diminish the rights and abilities of parents to be responsible for their children’s welfare and growth? Yet we are living in an age when many children and young people experience very little parental support and influence in their lives. Working parents who are largely absent, families in various stages of disintegration or breakup, single-parent families without adequate resources or child care, family violence and child neglect, poverty-ridden neighborhoods, alcohol and drug abuse, all are contexts for the lives of many children we meet in our schools.

At the same time there are children growing up in a variety of modern family settings, surrounded by a stable atmosphere of parent(s) and other adults who are present to them and with whom they share and interact in significant ways. Yet even these children are living in a time of crises and a sense of doom about the viability of the human race and the survival of the earth. Teachers are living with children who come from very diverse backgrounds and with widely varying experiences. These teachers exercise a responsibility in loco parentis toward all those children entrusted to their care. Naturally, teachers are expected to educate these children in the various curriculum subjects. Other child professionals too have particular educational tasks. Their pedagogical responsibilities are associated with their specialized tasks as counsellors, school administrators, psychologists, child care workers, and so on.

The implication for teachers is that they are constantly being reminded to be mindful of their status in loco parentis. Professional educators, if possible, must try to assist parents in fulfilling their primary pedagogical responsibility. In other words, out of this primary responsibility of parents flows the teacher’s charge as a responsibility in loco parentis. So what is relevant for the relation between parents and children may be informative for the pedagogical relation between teachers and students. As schools and other child care institutions have taken on more and more responsibilities previously dealt with within the family, professional educators need to become more reflective about what in loco parentis entails.
Indeed, the school, as a cultural-political institution, needs to come to terms with its \textit{in loco parentis} responsibilities. The responsibility of the adult resides in children’s need for a protective sphere in which they can develop a self-responsible maturity. The school institution also has legally defined \textit{in loco parentis} responsibilities. The school’s boundaries were traditionally commonly considered as a transitional space between the secure intimacy of the family and the more risky public openness of life in the outside world.\footnote{But in modern society we cannot assume that this secure family exists for the child; and to the extent that it exists, it cannot be assumed that this family “intimacy” grows out of the right kind of love for the child. And so, the \textit{in loco parentis} responsibility of the school does not only consist in preparing the child for the larger world, it also consists in protecting the child from the possible risks of abuse and shortcomings in the intimate sphere of the family.}

Some have argued that increasing selfishness and greed in modern society requires that professional educators develop caring school environments, for the sake of the children and ultimately for the sake of society.\footnote{Similarly, schools struggle with the task of preparing children, not only for the challenges and dangers of the larger world, but also for the demands of intimacy and moral responsibility that successful family life presupposes but that families find increasingly difficult to impress on their children. In other words, the institution of the school needs to orient itself increasingly to the norms of parenting that parents themselves seem to have forgotten as it were. While parents are excused, the schools are often accused of improperly preparing children for the responsibilities of their own parenthood.} In other words, the institution of the school needs to orient itself increasingly to the norms of parenting that parents themselves seem to have forgotten as it were. While parents are excused, the schools are often accused of improperly preparing children for the responsibilities of their own parenthood.

There exist deep connections between the nature of teaching and of parenting, yet these connections are rarely explored. In the North American educational literature the parent is remarkably absent. It is as if in the minds of education theorists the education of children is not an integral part of the whole process of growing up. Even the English language reflects this separation between education (largely an institution process of teaching/learning in schools) and child rearing (usually considered the process of parenting in and around the home). There is no single word in English that describes the entire moral, intellectual, physical, and spiritual complex process of bringing up children.\footnote{Parenting and teaching derive from the same fundamental}
experience of pedagogy: the human charge of protecting and teaching the young to live in this world and to take responsibility for themselves, for others, and for the continuance and welfare of the world. Moreover, there are other similarities often overlooked between the world inside and outside the school. For example, how often do educators tend to forget that the children who are before them in school are the same children they see in the street and that the way children learn in school is essentially no different from the way they learn at home or in the street?

Children are not empty vessels who come to school merely to be filled with curricular content by means of special instructional methods. Moreover, children who come to school come from somewhere. Teachers need to have some sense of what it is that children bring with them, what defines their present understandings, mood, emotional state, and readiness to deal with the subject matter and the world of the school.

Educators may be able to learn about pedagogy not only from what they share with parents but also from the differences between being a parent and being a professional educator. For example, like parents, teachers often develop deep affection and love for their students, they feel responsible for the young people in their charge, and they cherish hope for the children they teach. Eventually teachers have to let go of their children, and yet they may live on in the memory and in the lives of the students they have taught. Professional educators may need to reflect on the question of what is similar and what is different in these experiences between the pedagogical relation of the parent and the child, on the one hand, and the pedagogical relation of the teacher and the student, on the other.

In this text, I will constantly consider examples of the pedagogical experiences of parenting and of teaching in order to keep reminding ourselves of our in loco parentis relation to the children we teach. As parents and as teachers we need to keep open the question of the pedagogical meaning of our vocation, and we need to remain aware of the total life world in which young people grow up, learn and develop.

**What do we look for in pedagogues?**

Another obvious feature of the in loco parentis responsibility of professional educators is found in the expectations that parents
hold for the teachers of their children. In everyday life parents look for certain qualities in the teachers of their children. What might those qualities be? Parents often have a difficult time articulating relevant standards. Generally they are concerned that the teachers “like” their child because parents sense that a positive affective relationship may benefit the child’s school experience and the child’s success in school. Parents’ particular expectations are usually more concretely tied to the daily experiences their children have in schools and classrooms. Often expectations become more clear when things have gone wrong at school, when the child has been let down, hurt, neglected, misunderstood, misjudged, or mistreated.

In this text it is suggested that the following qualities are probably essential to good pedagogy: a sense of vocation, love of and caring for children, a deep sense of responsibility, moral intuitiveness, self-critical openness, thoughtful maturity, tactful sensitivity toward the child’s subjectivity, an interpretive intelligence, a pedagogical understanding of the child’s needs, improvisational resoluteness in dealing with young people, 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, humor and vitality.

Of course, teachers of the young should know what they teach, and should take responsibility for the world and traditions which they share; moreover, they need to know how to hand over this world to the child so that he or she can make it his or her own world. In other words, pedagogical thoughtfulness is a multifaceted and complex mindfulness toward children. This is a tall order for any human being. And yet underlying this suggestion is a crucial question: Does a person who lacks any of these qualities possess the pedagogical fitness required for educating young people?

The idea and nature of pedagogical fitness as a certain thoughtfulness and tact is offered, described, and interpreted in this book in a manner that may contribute to the thoughtfulness and tact through which the reader can come to see, act, and interact with children and young people. This book offers a (self) reflective approach to teaching children. However, “pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact” are unlearnable as mere behavioral
principles, techniques, or methods. So one will look in vain in these pages for simplified sets of effective teaching techniques, or for sure methods for managing classrooms.

Pedagogy is primarily neither a science nor a technology.® Yet it is often treated and researched in an empirically scientific way. Science and technology by their very nature cut knowledge off from experience by producing generalizations and technical principles that abstract from experience. This is quite all right in a field like engineering where students can learn the scientific principles of bridge building from an expert who in fact may never have built a bridge. Similarly, a technological approach to education assumes that teaching can be taught by means of generalizations and general techniques. Only recently has anyone recognized that education needs to turn back to the world of experience. Experience can open up understanding that restores a sense of embodied knowing.

Of course, it is not being suggested that aspects of teaching cannot be learned as special instructional techniques (for example, how to tell a good story, how to conduct a class discussion or seminar), or as organizational skills (for example, how to plan a stimulating lesson, how to organize a field trip), or as diagnostic competencies (for example, how to assess the child’s cognitive abilities or school achievements). Yet, the essence of education is less a technical or production enterprise than a normative activity® that constantly expects the educator to act in a right, good, or appropriate manner. Accordingly, a pedagogical text like this one should not be composed and studied as if it were a technical handbook that specifies effective procedures for the productive management of learning environments. Rather, a pedagogical text needs to possess an inspirational quality together with a narrative structure that invites critical reflection and possibilities for insight and that leads to a personal appropriation of a moral intuition.

It is possible to learn all the techniques of instruction but to remain pedagogically unfit as a teacher. The preparation of educators obviously includes much more than the teaching of knowledge and skills, more even than a professional ethical code or moral craft. To become a teacher includes something that cannot be taught formally: the most personal embodiment of a pedagogical thoughtfulness.
The preparation of professional educators in institutions of higher learning tends to rely heavily on bookish approaches. But vicarious experiences provided by these texts tend to go to our heads, so to speak. Especially books that offer mostly "information," abstract concepts, and theoretical explanations and classifications may often be poor substitutes for the experiences provided by life itself. Pedagogy requires practical rather than intellectualized forms of knowledge. Through practical examples of experience, this text hopes to stimulate a reflective thoughtfulness and a sense of improvisational tact that actively speaks to our whole embodied being. As Dewey pointed out almost a century ago, it may be more important in the long term for educators to develop an orientation to children conditioned by ongoing reflection on the pedagogical meaning and significance of experiences in their lives, than to acquire an external set of behavioral competencies that enables one in the short term to improve "the mechanics of school management ... [but with which one] cannot grow as a teacher, an inspirer and director of soul-life." 

To write about pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact courts the dangerous presumption that one claims to know how to behave with moral superiority. By definition pedagogy is always concerned with the ability to distinguish between what is good and what is not good for children. Many educational thinkers are uncomfortable with this assumption, they try to pursue educational problems and questions in a value neutral or relativistic manner. It is wrong, however, to confuse pedagogical discourse with moral diatribe or preaching. Preaching is an act of moral exhortation on the basis of some unquestioned dogma. But pedagogy does not aim to deliver diatribe. Pedagogy is a practical discipline. On the one hand, educators need to show that in order to stand up for the welfare of children, one must be prepared to stand out and be criticized. On the other hand, pedagogy is a self-reflective activity that always must be willing to question critically what it does and what it stands for.

**Becoming reflective about pedagogy as the practice of living**

In this text there are two main thrusts. One is an attempt to rescue the idea of pedagogy from the wordmongers. For many decades the term "pedagogy" has been in disuse among educators in
the English-speaking world. Recently there has been an upsurge in the currency of the term *pedagogy* and the renewed popularity of this word may have something to do with the growing North American interest in West European philosophical, social, and educational theory. But present usage for the term *pedagogy* has added few new understandings to the field of education, and may have become little more than a new packaging of old ideas.

Second, this text aims to explore and offer a more experience-based interpretation of pedagogical reflection on the one hand, and of the practical pedagogical moment of teaching (and parenting) on the other hand. Indeed, it is the reality of these pedagogical moments that much literature has been trying to grasp and clarify under the labels of *reflective teaching, teacher thinking, the teacher as reflective practitioner, teacher as problem solver, teacher as decision maker, teacher as researcher.* Using the notions of pedagogical thoughtfulness and pedagogical tact, this book attempts to show that the interactive practice of pedagogy has a subtle and highly normative character. Pedagogical reflection plays an important part in the life worlds of parents and teachers with children; but the reflective nature of the actual pedagogical moments in parenting and teaching may differ markedly from the interactions of other professional practitioners, such as the medical doctor, with those in their charge.

Most books on education are agogical. They direct themselves to the adults, to the parents or to the teachers, and not to the children. They preoccupy themselves with the question how educators (should) think, act, feel, and interact with children. But such a focus neglects two important considerations. First, this emphasis on the adult fails to consider how particular situations appear from the child’s point of view, how the child experiences his or her world at home, at school, and in the community. From a pedagogical perspective the most important question is always, “How does the child experience this particular situation, relationship, or event?” Because this text deals with pedagogical tact, it must consider how things are for the child.

Second, an emphasis only on the adult’s dealings with children neglects the direct and indirect influence that children have on adults, and especially on their parents. Many parents know how powerfully children transform the adults’ sense of themselves, their priorities in life, and their preoccupations with the concerns of the world. Many teachers, too, experience the trans-
forming effects young people have on their professional and personal lives. This powerful influence of children that transforms personal existence and that radiates throughout the life of the adult is what kindles the topic for this text: pedagogy.