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Imagining Education: The Questions We Ask

> I would prefer to describe it as a certain view of man, an anthropology, if you like; of man as wayfarer, in a rather conscious contrast to prevailing views of man as organism, as enculturated creature, as consumer, Marxist, as subject to such-and-such a scientific or psychological understanding—all of which he is, but not entirely. It is the "not entirely" I'm interested in—like the man Kierkegaard described who read Hegel, understood himself and the universe perfectly by noon, but then had the problem of living out the rest of the day.
>
> —Walker Percy, *Signpost in a Strange Land*

Why is it that educational problems plague us so? Could it be that educationally, we are like the individual Kierkegaard describes above, who seeks knowledge and understanding in the prolific body of educational research, but who then still has the problem of "living out the rest of the day" in school rooms, with diverse students, parents, and colleagues? In this book I propose that along with the

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legitimate educational research that informs our practice, we are paying too little attention to certain elements in our inquiry that could speak to how we live out the rest of the day as we engage in educating. There are two characteristics of this inquiry that are critical to its efficacy in speaking to our educational lives. First, such an inquiry must be interdisciplinary in nature. Second, it must engage in a moral dialogue that merges theory and practice, the abstract and the particular. In doing so, it must recast our most intractable educational problems as energizing tensions, rather than as conflicts. I will address each of these characteristics in turn.

By its very nature, education is one of the most interdisciplinary activities of our lives. First, it brings persons together who often vary dramatically in age, race, class, gender, and authority. Each of these descriptors of ourselves brings with it varying and interactive lenses through which we view the world. Second, the process of education itself exists within an understanding of the *psychology* of how one changes and learns; the individual and age pattern development of the learner, as well as the psychology and emotion of the teacher; the *philosophy* of teaching in its aims and goals and the *ethics* of its delivery; the *sociology* of the institution of schooling, of the family and society who send their children to school, of demographic patterns of race, class, and gender; the *political science* of government influence in curricula and standards, of research and the *economics* of funding; the *history* of traditions and patterns that define educational practice. In each of these disciplines, there are two foci: a micro focus on the individual student, teacher, or school; and a macro focus on the larger society or overall practice of education. Education is inherently interdisciplinary and at some point, must create an interdisciplinary conversation when addressing itself as a whole.

In most of the universities that house colleges of education, one often finds many disciplines represented, that is, historians of education, curriculum specialists, economic researchers, sociologists, administrators, and more. Yet they often have little to do with one another in their professional work. Philosophers of education write for and attend conferences with other philosophers of education, secondary math teachers write for and attend conferences with other secondary math teachers, administrators write for and attend conferences with other administrators, and preservice teacher candidates pursue course work separate from counselor education and principal candidates even though they will all work together at a common site for a common purpose. This fragmentation continues through-

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out the university community with the scholars of each discipline laboring in their own field. There are many reasons why this is so, and I will not debate the merits of this fragmentation here, but I raise the issue to point to a deficit in our educational discourse. If the process of education is so utterly multifaceted, how can we be confident that we have addressed all that we must to enrich our praxis and improve the quality of education if we do not have an equally multifaceted discourse about these issues? In this work I attempt to bring a somewhat interdisciplinary lens to bear on the comments I make about the culture of education, which includes its theory and its practice. In this regard, my writing is not easily categorizable, nor is it easy to determine to which audience it should be directed. That is all as it should be.

What I hope to provide herein is a part of a conversation that is necessary in our attempts to talk about what is wrong or what is right with education today. Noted educational researcher John Goodlad has recently re-released a small book entitled *What Schools Are For*. In this book, Goodlad argues that we must "initiate a national dialogue about what education is, what it should do, and where it can be most productively advanced."[1] I assume that this dialogue is not simply another call for political leaders to grandstand on educational issues. Rather, such a dialogue must reflect the interdisciplinary nature of education by involving the parties most implicated in it's practice. Who would it include? Educators (both frontline classroom teachers and educational academics), parents of many varieties; students of many ages and backgrounds; community leaders, including government, business, *and* the arts. These conversations or dialogues must proceed along the lines of the slogan Think Globally, Act Locally. In other words, more expansive theory and careful, critical thinking must be called upon to inform the local concrete practice and context within which schools operate. One without the other is fragmentary and ultimately creates the person Kierkegaard described as being full of theory, but wondering still how to live.

Such a complaint is common among those preparing to be teachers. On occasion I assign Goodlad's book to a class of graduate preservice teachers. They bring the urgent demands of classroom practice to their reading of this book. While they are supportive of the need for a larger dialogue about education, they want to know what this might look like and how such a conversation could occur and be brought to bear on improving education. In other words, they want the conversation to reach beyond and perhaps even originate from

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places other than the political or higher education arenas. They are correct in wanting to know more. Before culminating in policy decisions, before being brought to a vote at a school board meeting, there must be much discussion on the purposes and implications of how we *do* school. These conversations must be more informal and occur where the stakes are not so high that we prematurely close the door on listening to others. And the conversations must be more inclusive of those who are implicated in the practice of schooling. Some cities have held "education summits," but these often are framed by the political arena, and many folks are precluded from participating. More grassroots and ultimately a necessity for community and parental support, are conversations that occur close to home. In some districts, principals offer to meet with groups of parents in their homes for dialogue about what is happening in their schools. Teachers invite parents and students to classroom picnics *before* the school year begins in order to develop a sense of inclusive community. Parents are invited into the schools in meaningful ways, participating on school decision-making committees or in the classroom, extending the traditional nursery school parent co-op commitment through the eighth grade. We need to imagine new ways to converse about education in a manner that prevents fractiousness.

Bringing an interdisciplinary lens to these conversations is the first step in synthesis which is a necessary prerequisite for addressing complex social issues. One interdisciplinary education program defines synthesis as the "ability to weave many complex strands into a fabric of definable issues, patterns, and topics."[2] With this book I attempt to enter into such an interdisciplinary conversation, drawing from the ideas, experiences, and work of others and myself in a process of synthesis.

The second characteristic of this inquiry is that it develops from my work in moral philosophy. In this introduction I place my work within a larger body of scholarly work regarding education. In addition, I describe the method by which I have joined in the educational conversation that addresses what schools *ought* to do and how they *should* be for our children. In so doing, this book contributes to an area of educational discourse that is often overlooked in dialogue regarding educational improvement and reform. Simply put, this book addresses the moral character of education and the relationships embedded therein. While scholars have written in this realm generally, the discussion of the moral nature of education in relation

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to educational renewal or reform is lacking in much of current educational discourse and policy. Consider the following two points.

My first point regards the general nature of this discourse. While it is true that there has been a body of writing on the moral nature of education, it generally takes two forms. Either the writing is all but encompassed within the realm of moral philosophy and lacks a connection to the practice of education, or the writing addresses the practice of education and educators, with an ancillary discussion of its moral dimension, and in so doing, it often lacks a breadth of moral complexity. In this work I attempt to bridge the gap between these two ways of addressing the moral nature of education. Accordingly, this book attempts to focus exclusively on fundamental moral questions regarding education, but does so in a way that constantly ties them to the phenomenological experience of educational practice.

My second point regards the specific nature of my topic. The notion of dignity is one that appears self-evident in its importance, and yet too often the everyday practice of education affronts the dignity of young people. With this in mind, I have undertaken a philosophical exploration to "unwrap the ordinary," a process that Thomas Green describes:

> Observe this progression—first, the ordinary, or "ordinary life," then comes philosophy as the occasionally intrusive reflection on the ordinary, and finally, if we wish to go even farther, there is philosophy as the record of that reflection. The thesis here is that doing philosophy, in contrast to merely studying it, especially in the case of education, is simply the task of unwrapping the ordinary. *It is making evident what we already know, but may have overlooked.* (Emphasis mine.)[3]

In this manner, I take the practice of education (a part of ordinary life to be sure) and ask if our self-evident acceptance of dignity is actually realized in our practice. Further, I ask, what would the nature of schooling be like if the sustaining and enhancing of children's dignity were a fundamental concern? To my knowledge, this question has not been addressed before, and, therefore, this book makes a contribution to understanding the moral character of education and educational practice. In this effort, I am not vilifying our teachers who labor day in and day out for the benefit of the children in our schools. As I often comment in my classes, I know of no teacher

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who sets out to harm children or who would choose to create an educational environment that dominates or stifles. But we all know children, perhaps even ourselves once, who have said, "School is boring!" "It's like a prison there!" "Nobody cares about me!" Interestingly enough, these complaints grow as students progress through the years. The question I pose to my students is, what shall we make of this situation? If teachers do not intend to harm children (and they do not), why are so many children unhappy and unengaged in our schools today? I believe that we must explore the moral nature of education in order to understand this paradox.

Scholars have written about different moral characteristics that are necessary to education. For example, in *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, Nel Noddings thoughtfully outlines an ethic based on caring. In her book of approximately two hundred pages, roughly twenty pages address moral education. This is an example of a treatise in moral philosophy that addresses education as an ancillary concern. Alternatively, in *Lives on the Edge*, Valerie Polakow exposes the way that institutional social structures perpetuate inequities within education that contribute to a "pedagogy of the poor." While a concern for sustaining the dignity of children is apparent in her powerful book, its main focus is on the structural marginalization of poor and oppressed women and children in the United States today. Others have written in the subject domain of stories, but again the focus appears either to be on a deeply philosophical treatment of the subject or on a practical application of the role of stories in schools. Again, I attempt to bridge the gap by undertaking a conversation of moral philosophy that measures itself against the practice with which I am concerned.

Others have written similar work in different fields. For example, in the field of psychiatry, consider Robert Coles' *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination.* This book explicated the role of stories in healing and the type of preparation that would assist doctors in becoming better, more caring physicians. Similarly, in the field of general medicine, Howard Brody's *Stories of Sickness* identifies the moral need for physicians to understand the role of stories in health and sickness in order to preserve the wholeness or dignity of an individual. I make a parallel claim within the context of education and address the specific role that stories play in preserving the dignity of children.

To do this I have drawn from the work of many others who have focused on notions that I employ to enrich the concepts of dignity,

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stories, and education. Among others, I draw upon the works of Charles Taylor regarding notions of authenticity, Maxine Greene and bell hooks regarding notions of freedom, and Thomas Green and Richard Rorty regarding notions of public discourse and ethics. In this way, my work is a synthesis of many outstanding contributions by thought-provoking philosophers of our day. I take their carefully articulated ideas and apply them to the process of "unwrapping the ordinary" in my discussion of dignity, stories, and education.

As we unwrap the layers of educational theory and practice, we begin to see some interesting things that will be helpful as we engage in educational conversations. At the root of most of the intractable problems in education, there are deep moral tensions.[4] These moral tensions often grow from contradictory social values that are etched deeply in the American psyche. These tensions have been observed and articulated by scholars such as de Tocqueville as he commented on the competing demands between individualism and the common good in American Society in *Democracy in America.* Lest we think these were only complications of a new nation, we can turn to Robert Bellah and colleagues who have examined this tension more fully in *Habits of the Heart.*[5] More recently, law professor Bruce Hafen identified schools as "mediating structures" in a democratic society. He describes this function:

> A school aspires to be a bridge between the private world of the individual and the public world of society, helping each individual to realize his own autonomous sense of self while simultaneously inducting him into membership in the democratic community. He (or she) thus learns to give as well as to take from the wellsprings of a free culture. To fulfill such contradictory but lofty purposes, the school as (a) mediating institution must itself be a paradoxical construct, belonging both to the private world of the family and to the public world of the state. Thus a school must reflect both institutional authority and personal autonomy, private values and public virtues, excellence and equality, neutrality and advocacy.[6]

For example, varied school debates about equity in funding or inclusion of students with disabilities go beyond the particular merits of a given proposal. Rather, at their base these dilemmas place us as individuals and as a society between our legitimate moral commitment to provide the best we can for our own children, *and* the lofty

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moral ideal of equality promised within our own larger community. Although these school debates seem to center on questions such as Do we have enough tax money to provide an equal education? or Is there enough teacher attention to go around when a child with a disability is placed within a classroom? these are not the real issues at stake that make these dilemmas appear intractable. The more fundamental questions that are rarely asked or addressed are questions such as Whose children are these? and How can I balance my commitment to myself (and mine) with my commitment to the larger good? Without acknowledging and addressing these kinds of foundational questions, we will go on ad infinitum in our debates. If we continue to cast the funding debate as the greedy, selfish rich on the one hand, and the lazy, uninspired poor on the other hand, then we will never find a way to address the severe funding and equity problem that haunts our childrens' education. In this regard, Hafen tells us that "the swings that have occurred in our educational history . . . are but manifestations of paradoxical conflicts between legitimate and competing principles that deal both with learning and with the important social purposes served by education."[7] Therefore, if, in our joint conversations, we can identify the competing pull of our moral commitments, then we can begin to discuss how to balance the equally valid moral commitments that parties bring to the educational table.

Hafen describes these tensions or contradictions as "productive and dynamic paradoxes that are inherent in the educational process."[8] For example, consider the inherent tension between liberty and discipline, individualism and the common good, authority and autonomy, revolution and preservation, equity and excellence, and the list goes on. For too long we have misunderstood this inherent tension within education and have turned competing social values into conflicts. Any one who has attended a school board meeting, lunched in a faculty lounge, or sat in faculty meetings knows of what I speak. Unfortunately, without understanding the role of tension, educators, parents, administrators will place themselves in certain camps, and the issue gets lost in an "us" against "them" fight. What is more productive is to articulate the issue as one of competing tensions that when explicated can be negotiated. We can learn to understand that the point of view of the "loyal opposition" is most likely based within a deeply held social value, rather than attributing their position to stupidity, stubbornness, laziness, or a multitude of other character defects. Rather than abhor or avoid another conflict,

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we can celebrate our ability to find a workable balance in a given paradox for our specific educational contexts. To undertake this complex task requires a willingness to construct a learning community built on trust, risk-taking, and good will, along with a healthy dose of humility. (I am sure that my words belie the difficulty of this task.)

Let me explain how it is helpful to educational dialogue to reframe our conflicts as tensions. Generally speaking, tension often is misunderstood in a negative light, for example, "tension in the air," or "tension headache," or the tension of a "fight brewing." Yet seen in a different light, tension, understood as a characteristic of "paradox in productive equilibrium," is a powerfully productive force.[9] Consider this. Tension can be understood as that which actually animates and brings life to a given endeavor. I take my examples from the world of art, music, and drama. I often ask my students who are artists and musicians to describe what role tension plays in their work. They tell me it is a critical part of their work that represents two competing tendencies trying to seek resolution, but never completely giving way to the other. They describe it as what gives energy to a piece of music or art. It is often the ability to capture and express this tension that differentiates a great piece of art from merely a competent one. Art without tension is boring. Surely it may entertain for a time, but it does not capture our imaginations or hearts, nor does it endure. To illustrate, I draw another example, this time from architecture. Think of the amazing engineering creation we know as the arch and the role of its keystone. The keystone functions as both the site and the mediator of tension. There are two exerting forces, which the keystone balances while redistributing the energy to hold the arch rather than let it destruct to the stronger of one side or the other.

Seen in this way, tension is a state that is necessary for an activity to be dynamic. We would hope education could be cast as such. It should not be a goal in education to resolve tension. Rather, it is important to understand its role, identify the social values at stake, and find a mediating balance point in what remains as intractable dilemmas. Recast as a positive and creative force, tension should be considered fluid and movable and should be valued as that which animates the moral dimensions of education.

By raising these issues, by seeing this work as a comment on the moral nature of education, by bringing an interdisciplinary lens to the discussion, by understanding the difference between conflict and tension, I hope that this work can inform the dialogue of educa-

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tional reform. As educators, we share an underlying commitment to the well-being or flourishing of children's lives. We are concerned that many children are marginalized in the process of education, that many children fail to gain skills for leading full lives. We should even be concerned that most children find school boring! Just as important, we need to understand what occurs in those classrooms inhabited by children and *masterful* teachers. In order to do this, I argue that the notion of dignity is a crucial component of educational reform discourse and that it is generally not found in such dialogue. Instead, "best practices" or sweeping answers to our perceived educational problems are encapsulated by politicians in programs of "legislated excellence."[10] I claim that along with such research and policy, but prior to and foundational to it, must be a concern with the moral character of the relationships that occur at school. Without such a concern, researchers, whether they utilize complex statistical analyses or long-term ethnographies, will fail to reach the heart of the matter.

To illustrate, consider this example. Several years ago, Shirley Brice Heath visited the University of Washington and gave a thought-provoking lecture regarding her research work with drama and at-risk urban youth. She spoke of a powerful after-school theater program for inner-city at-risk children with whom she was involved. She described the hard work of those involved in these programs and the way that the children and adolescents would engage and sometimes be transformed by their involvement. Her work sounded wonderful! During the question and answer period following the lecture, a woman from the audience commented something to this effect: "Your after-school theater program sounds so marvelous. How can we transfer such a program into the public schools?"

While the question may sound benign, it illuminates the underlying assumption that we can simply transfer work from one domain to another. It betrays the complexity of the human relationships involved in this work. In our well-intentioned efforts to improve education for children, programs are often lifted like templates to be placed in another context. It is mistakenly thought that it is the program that solves the pressing problem. Missed is an acknowledgment of human needs such as recognition, trust, yearning, and community. Fundamentally, it is the character of the moral relationships that occur within these unique and special programs that address these needs. Innovative programs are necessary, but in exploring such programs, we cannot forget that at their foundation there must

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be a concern for the moral character of human relationships and needs. This is the point that I make herein.

To support the claims found within this work, I undertake a normative analysis. To describe the standpoint from which I undertake this work, it might be helpful to contrast the method I have chosen with other methods often used in educational research in order to highlight the differences. (My oversimplification of research methods here is meant to be illustrative only of pertinent differences and not the deep-seated epistemological issues existing between methods of inquiry!) One way to support a claim is by empirical evidence. Whether one is conducting an experiment or taking field notes, the justification supporting the research claim comes from empirical evidence. For example, in a quantitative analysis, one may manipulate variables and record what occurs thereafter, and through statistical analysis determine the extent of the variable's impact on a given event. Or by way of qualitative study, one may spend a good amount of time observing a particular event or particular events, becoming part of the process in question, and then generate descriptive or explanatory themes. Such analyses can be very complex. While important methods for garnering and analyzing data, these are not the methods I employ.

Another form of evidence employed to support a research claim is generated from an analytical philosophical method. This can be in the form of a tight argument (for example, in a syllogistic form), or by way of a conceptual analysis wherein one takes one or two related concepts and in a very detailed and methodical manner explicates a concept by indicating what it is and what it is not. For example, one could analyze what it means to be a person by examining in an abstract sense, the metaphysical nature of personhood. All this could be accomplished through conceptual analytic analysis without ever addressing the messiness, complexity, and contradictory nature of the human condition. While an appropriate and fruitful endeavor along one line of explanation, this is also not the method I employ.

The method I employ in order to generate my normative claims is one of laying out the best evidence for my claim. This evidence is drawn from various sources, including reasoned argument, broad conceptual analysis, case examples from schooling, stories from literature, and interpretation of the meaning of examples given. In addition, I draw upon the analyses of others as a part of building support for my normative claims. By drawing upon these sources, I

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employ a phenomenological approach. In other words, my claims are based upon how schooling is experienced by many. The type of "meaning" I am attempting to articulate herein is how the phenomena of schooling, education, and the associated relationships are experienced by the individuals involved. This is a different sense of meaning than that of the analytic philosopher who is aiming at a clear, intellectual, conceptual analysis. This method is similar to that employed in a court of law where the method is to garner the best evidence from various sources in order to make the strongest case possible.

In *The Uses of Argument*, Stephen Toulmin describes two models that can be used to support a claim. One is the logico-mathematical model, which is based on deductive reasoning from premises to conclusion. The other model to which Toulmin refers is jurisprudential. He indicates that such a model marshals evidence from various sources. For example, he indicates that the following activities are important to making a strong case: evidence regarding identification, testimony regarding an event, interpretation of statutes, claims for exemption from law, pleas for extenuation, and that which must be considered in coming to verdict and sentencing. For claims made in other arenas of inquiry, Toulmin argues that similar reasoning, drawn from multiple sources, must occur in order to take into account the complexity of the human situation. He states:

> When we turn from the special case of the law to consider rational arguments in general, we are faced at once by the question whether these must not be analysed [sic] in terms of an equally complex set of categories. If we are to set our arguments out with complete logical candor, and understand properly the nature of the "logical process," surely we shall need to employ a pattern of argument no less sophisticated than is required in the law.[11]

In writing this book, I have drawn upon multiple sources of evidence suggested by the jurisprudential model.

This method is eclectic in that it employs various strategies. Part of the conceptual analysis follows Green's process as noted earlier wherein one closely examines the ordinary concepts employed in support of education. Green notes:

> When we note the ordinary language of such common affairs, and the integument of logic by which these words are bound together or forever set apart, then the underlying structure of

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> our lives reveals itself. Habit is unwrapped; the concealed ethic, the ordinary is revealed. And in this unwrapping, the ordinary may appear as a fresh discovery even though there is nothing in it we did not already know. The ordinary unwrapped can surprise us. The medium of our thought—these ordinary words—can become the object of our thought, and when that happens, then philosophy has entered, not as someone else's text, but as our own. Philosophy appears as the logic of our common life.[12]

When I examine the concept of dignity or the concept of story, I am beginning with concepts that we employ in everyday life. We think we understand them and their place in our language and practice. By explicating them in the way Green describes, I uncover linkages between them and the process of education that may be unseen or unexamined. This type of analysis consequently generates my normative claims.

In addition, prior work in moral philosophy has explicated an important distinction that is useful to me. This distinction indicates that normative "ought" or "should" claims are sometimes inherent in the description of a concept. In this regard, John Searle argues against Hume who states that one cannot derive an "ought" from an "is." In his article "How to Derive 'Ought' from 'Is,'" Searle indicates that "ought" can be derived from "is" because "institutional facts exist within systems of constitutive rules."[13] It is the system of constitutive rules that gives meaning to a particular concept. Searle states that "some systems of constitutive rules involve obligations, commitments, and responsibilities. Within those systems we can derive 'oughts' from 'is's.'"

Searle provides the following examples. In the sport of baseball, when an umpire calls the base runner "out," he is implying a set of actions that must also take place beyond the description of his judgment that the ball reached second base before the runner. He is implying that the runner must now leave the field, that an "out" be charged against the at-bat team. What the player ought to do by virtue of being called "out" is derived from a certain set of constitutive rules that define the game of baseball. In another example regarding the meaning of debt, Searle states that "to recognize something as a debt is necessarily to recognize an obligation to pay it." Within the description of what the concept of debt means, lies the obligation of the debtor to pay. In like manner, inherent in the practice of education are certain oughts or shoulds. These constitutive rules often remain invisible and hidden. Yet they are consequential to the quality of the

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educative experience. Education proceeds by virtue of certain constitutive rules. In analyzing what education or dignity is, normative claims are generated regarding what we ought to do by virtue of being educators or sustaining dignity. This book addresses the oughts inherent in the concepts of education and dignity and points to some unexamined questions that might be asked of the constitutive rules of education.

Such is the nature of the contribution I hope to make in this book, employing the method that I have. Like Walker Percy, quoted in the excerpt at the beginning of this chapter, I am interested in bridging the gap between theory and practice, in addressing what our experience in education means, and in finding ways to "live out the rest of the day."

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