INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

IJS - 5: CONCEPTIONS OF EDUCATION

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

The month of August presents problems to the writer of Institute Newsletters in
Europe. Most of the British are at the moment in Spain, joined there by an
overwhelming number of Germans and, of course, the Spaniards; most of the
French are in Italy, joined there by many Scandinavians and the Italians
themselves. This leaves at least this one American newsletter writer in London
with no one to talk to but himself, that is if one discounts the half million
or so Americans who have taken over London for the summer.

Therefore, I take the opportunity in this newsletter and the one which follows
to share with you some thoughts which attempt to relate a philosophical
analysis of the concept of education to the policy problems which we shall
encounter. This undertaking lays the groundwork for my research and analysis
in the coming months. So indulge me if you will, while I put on my philosopher's
cap.

Cordially,

Irving J. Spitzberg, Jr.

I.   WHY ANALYZE THE CONCEPT OF EDUCATION?

Most discussions about educational policy are about the problems of particular institutions. Even when one self-consciously rejects these institutions (for example, in the writings of Ivan Illich), the arguments still seem to focus on institutional shortcomings. This emphasis can be both helpful and healthy, because educational problems obviously relate directly to policies and practices of various persons organized into what we call institutions. And most of what will come from me in future newsletters will be exactly of this sort.

But these discussions usually neglect the most difficult issues by assuming that the operative concept "education" is a primitive: that is, all one can do is assert a definition of the concept with which others either agree or disagree but about which it is not helpful to spend time arguing. Such arguments are left to philosophers; and everyone knows how irrelevant they are.

There is some merit to this skeptical position. Much of the heat and very little of the light generated in educational policy disagreements in the history of education has been the result of so-called "philosophical" disputes, which degenerated into conflicts which, in their reliance on faith more than reason, must be characterized as theological. And,as often,these disagreements are based on conceptual mistakes (the dispute between the "progressive" educators and the "traditionalists" in the United States was often a misunderstanding by both sides of John Dewey's analysis and the tradition from which it sprung). Therefore, some attention to what one means when he uses the concept of education might, at the very least, avoid misunderstandings and thereby focus policy disagreements on more precise areas of dispute.

More importantly, even when we disclaim any preconceived notion of education, this disclaimer itself sets the stage for self-deception, for we always take to any policy problem a set of concepts without which we could not perceive, much less communicate about, the problems with which we pretend to deal. And if we cannot articulate for ourselves what sort of analytical apparatus we take to problems, we are unlikely to have much success in dealing with them.

For this reason, if no other, it is worthwhile to take stock of various accounts of the central concept to be used in dealing with the policy problems we are going to investigate. The exact role of philosophical concepts in policy analysis is an important and complex problem to which I shall return in my next newsletter.

II. EDUCATION: THE TRADITIONAL ACCOUNTS OF THE CONCEPT

The traditional expositors of educational theories may be divided into three general categories: the imprinters, the growth theorists, and the educational skeptics.

Before briefly describing each school we must understand that it is quite unusual for the enthusiast of any given theory to provide a definition of the concept of education. And even when one does, this definition usually tells less than does the guiding model which he uses as an analogy or

metaphor for the educational process. Each of these schools offers a different central model for the educational process: models of education are process metaphors, not accounts of stable states.

A.   The Imprinters

This first account of the process of education characterizes it as one where a teacher takes a given body of material-facts, sense-data, or techniques - and imprints this material on the open mind of the students. This tradition is best represented by John Locke's tabula rasa account of education: the teacher is like a chalk writing on the blank slate of the student's mind. This account of education emphasizes the importance of the material to be imprinted and the imprinter, and in so doing it neglects the differences among the students by casting them in a uniform and passive role.

B.   The Growth Theories

A metaphor used by a long tradition of educational theorists is that of the growing tree: great oaks from little acorns grow. This tradition of theorists stresses the innate - in some ways teleological - propensities of students to learn: the process of education is one of designing an environment which will encourage these students to make the most of their natural tendencies. Jean Jacques Rousseau's EMILE is a classic example of this theory: the tutor's task is to assist Emile in using his natural propensities without corrupting him by a formalized educational program.

This account concentrates on the needs and abilities of each individual student but seems to neglect the demands which the nature of the knowledge to be learned might place on the design of the educational process.

C.   The Educational Skeptic

This last group of theorists is characterized by its self-conscious repudiation of a recommended educational process. Its account suggests that one cannot build a rational model of education and then follow a set of prescriptions derived from it. Instead it sees education as an arational process which is not subject to rational analysis. The most that one can do is abet the dynamics of historical experience. Edmund Burke represents this school, which counsels abstention from theorizing about learning. He emphasizes the role of "prejudice" in history - not bigoted opinions but the general attitudes which one develops in social experience, which are to be distinguished from rational reflections on social relationships. The determinist account of history - economic or psychoanalytic - is another example of the educational skeptic school when applied to educational problems. This group dismisses educational theory, because all social change is reducible to a non-rational or supra-rational cause, such as economic forces or sexual desire.

Burke, Marx, and Freud would dismiss this whole exercise of considering concepts of education as quite irrelevant to educational policies; although they were in fact using and defending their own concepts for policy analysis.

D.   The Present Force of Traditional Accounts

In case one believes this exercise is strictly of antiquarian interest, let me briefly illustrate the present force of philosophers long dead.

The imprinters are still alive and well. Recently on a BBC discussion
of the future of British Primary Schools I heard a forceful critic castigate
the open classrooms(a la Summerhill) for not teaching children "facts". And
in a more constructive vein, those who devote themselves to developing
programmed instruction techniques and behavioural objectives for curriculum
are very much in the tradition which looks to Locke in its emphasis on the
ordering and acquisition of particular sorts of knowledge in a particular way.

The position of the growth theorists is manifested in the whole open
classroom approach which has become the hallmark of British primary education:
the use of informal learning situations in an unstructured setting. Also,
the conceptual framework of growth theory is at the heart of developmental
psychology which has followed from the work of Piaget. And this tradition
has provided the critical perspective for contemporary educational muckrakers
such as Jonathan Kozol and John Holt.

The educational skeptics have a contemporary supporter in Michael Oakshott
of the London School of Economics, who has said that, especially in the social
sciences, the best one can do is to expose the student to the learning which
actual social experience gives him and the example of those who have had this
experience. This point of view manifests itself too in the emphasis on
internships and experiential leaves of absence for students in higher
education.

So each of the traditional accounts of education still plays an important
role in current debates. Therefore, the shortcomings of traditional models
contribute to the inadequacies of contemporary policies. Some of these
difficulties have been indicated in the short account of each conceptual type;
however, instead of dwelling on these traditional approaches, I believe it
would be more helpful to examine carefully the work of contemporary philoso-
phers. To this task I now turn.

III. EDUCATION: THE ANGLO-AMERICAN ANALYTICAL APPROACH

Present philosophical discussions about the concept of education, as
distinguished from contemporary policy debates just identified, draw on
analytical techniques developed in England and the United States. After
John Dewey's influence wa ́ined, there was little serious attention given to
issues in the philosophy of education by serious philosophers. Indeed, it was
only in the 1960s that philosophers once again turned to these issues; this
time using the techniques refined by the followers of Wittgenstein and Austin.
This analytical approach emphasizes the way in which we use concepts in our
ordinary discussions and attempts to clarify this usage in a manner which
makes clear the issues at stake. This approach is directly relevant to the
tasks of the policy maker, but it is seldom understood, much less used, by
him. These techniques deserve serious attention from the student of public
policy in general and educational policy in particular.

A.   Education: A Normative and Programmatic Concept

First one must clarify the explanatory technique used by philosophers
of education to communicate their conceptions. Israel Scheffler, an American
philosopher at Harvard, has identified four sorts of definition used in
education (and often, though not necessarily, of education): stipulative,
descriptive, scientific, and programmatic (see pp11-35, Language of
Education, Springfield, July 1960.). Without tarrying too long over a

discussion of this typology of definitions, let me identify the important characteristics of each. A stipulative definition is one which is used "for purposes of discussion" and can be quite arbitrary. A descriptive definition attempts to report previous usage of the term. A scientific definition attempts to relate to a theoretical framework by which one can evaluate the consistency of the definition with other definitions in a logical set. And a programmatic definition carries with it a set of recommended actions which follow from the definition.

Definitions in education often share descriptive and scientific characteristics; they are always programmatic. For example, (and this is the example Scheffler uses) when one talks about "curriculum", he often purports to define the term in a manner consistent with previous usage - e.g., that which goes on in the school classroom, or, to use the definition of another group of theorists, the whole life experience of the child - but in so doing he also sets constraints on future activities. An evaluation of the definition requires not only reference to past usage but also to the impact of the actions implied. Therefore, one must test not only the previous usage but also the program of action the definition might entail. And this is an important point to be made not only about definitions in education but also about the concept of education itself: it is a normative concept - that is, it recommends a series of actions which are to be consistent with it, a special program of activities. Because of its normative/programmatic character, one must carefully examine education as a value concept involving a number of different values.

But to make a value analysis of the concept of education is not to evaluate a definition. If one looks at the traditional schools of educational thought discussed earlier, he finds definitions incidental to a rather different strategy of analysis; this approach involves the use of metaphor and analogy. The tabula rasa, the growing tree, even the arational society are metaphors which set out to communicate the essence of education; they are not definitions. These are normative/programmatic metaphors which must be evaluated in terms of their normative presuppositions and programmatic implications. Any criticism of them, such as the brief comments which I offered about each, is made within an ordering of values which itself must be evaluated.

Instead of undertaking such an analysis in regard to the historical accounts of education, it would be more helpful to report and analyze a model of education offered by a contemporary philosopher, Professor Richard S. Peters of the University of London Institute of Education. This is especially fruitful because Professor Peters provides not only a model but also canons for evaluating this model. And both his model and his canons attempt to take account of shortcomings in the traditional accounts of education.

B.   Three Criteria For Education and The Model of Initiation

Peters suggests three criteria which a process must meet before it ought to be considered to be education: i) that it transmits something which is worthwhile to those who become committed to it; ii) that education must involve knowledge and understanding and some kind of cognitive perspective which are not inert; iii) that the process does not involve certain pro- cedures which lack wittingness and voluntariness (on the part of both teacher and taught). (p45, Ethics and Education, London, 1966) There are ambiguities and difficulties in each criterion of education, which, were this a critical essay on Peters, it would be well worth exploring. But for my purposes here it is satisfactory to take these three criteria at face value, with only a cursory look at each.

The requirement of "worthwhileness" seems necessary, for although we may say that a certain education is "appropriate for the devil", this is an unusual and irregular use of the term. For a situation to be deemed educational, it is necessary that what is being taught be considered consistent with the value perspective of the independent observer, which is what the judgment of "worthwhileness" entails.

The criterion of cognitive perspective is at once the most interesting and difficult to get hold of. This criterion demands of the educational process not only that it teach one something but that it relate the particular lesson to one's general conceptual framework and thereby transform the framework in such a way as to provide the student with a new perspective which he can actively use. This requirement gives content to the conception of education by distinguishing between active and passive, narrow and broadly integrated experiences.

Finally, the requirement of voluntariness and wittingness is added to the list to rule out indoctrination and forced, rote procedures; this requirement assumes the value of free choice and reasoned participation in a process which one characterizes as educational.

It is difficult to decide within the confines of this abbreviated commentary whether Peters' canons are both necessary and sufficient. However, if one does not construe any one criterion too narrowly, then each criterion seems to be necessary for a process to be considered "educational" in a society which values the ability to reason and individual freedom. The sufficiency of the list is best tested by counter-examples: can one think of a situation which would meet all of the criteria but which he would not characterize as educational? I, myself, would accept the sufficiency of the criteria, given a broad, not a restricted interpretation of each. For the purposes of this exercise, we shall assume both the necessity and the sufficiency.

Given Peters' criteria, we may now move on to his metaphor for the educational process: the model of initiation. The question we must ask of this metaphor is: Is it consistent with the three criteria? If not, why not?

Peters picks the model of initiation because of the importance which he attaches to the "getting on the inside" of knowledge in the educational process. He characterizes education as a process which develops individual centers of consciousness, which "are the product of the initiation of an individual into public traditions enshrined in the language, concepts, beliefs, and rules of a society." (p49, ETHICS AND EDUCATION). He does not give us the details of the initiation process, but he does tell us something about its results: "For both (teacher and student) are participating in the shared experience of exploring a common world. The teacher is simply more familiar with its contours and more skilled in finding and cutting pathways. The good teacher is a guide who helps others to dispense with his services." (p53, ETHICS AND EDUCATION)

Since Peters does not give us more details about his initiation model, we must ask ourselves about what the reasonable man would assume about it, and how consistent it is with the criteria, and how likely it is to produce the anticipated results.

A model of initiation brings to mind a rite such as becoming a member of

the Boy Scouts: where one memorizes an oath, learns some symbolic actions, and promises to abide by certain rules.

There is little in this model which leads one to expect the development of an active and transformed perspective of the world, arrived at through reasoned analysis; initiation does not seem to develop cognitive perspective.

One must be assumed to have decided upon the worthwhileness of that into which he is initiated, although there is nothing in the process which demands evaluation of it.

And although the model of initiation may have as its condition of entrance the process of voluntary choice, the mental picture of initiation seems to rule out witting and voluntary action within the process itself; choice is left at the door. Finally, the initiation process is designed to encourage mastery of a public language and public rules, but would one wish to characterize this mastery as the exploration of common worlds by initiate and initiator? There is little partnership in the initiation ceremony.

Even taking Peters' criteria at face value, one must wonder whether the model of initiation adequately satisfies them.

Yet, even with the model's shortcomings, it presents a much more sophisticated analysis of the educational process than any one of the three traditional accounts. But there remains the question whether or not this more sophisticated model gives us any guidance in regard to specific educational problems. The answer to this question must be yes. For example, the initiation model would make one skeptical of any strategy for education which overemphasized the freedom of the individual student to pursue his own interests, because such an approach would neglect the demands of the public language, culture, and rules into which he must be initiated. For one who believes that allowing the student to pursue his own interests is demanded by the value of freedom in education, this programmatic implication would be grounds for criticism. However, one must be careful to understand that no particular policy - such as open classrooms - is logically excluded by the initiation model. But a burden of proof against such policies is definitely established. On the other hand, the initiation model would exclude a one-sided strategy of rote indoctrination, for the process of initiation demands that the initiate get on the inside of the public concepts, which requires voluntary commitment. Therefore an authoritarian program too would have to overcome a burden given the standard of the initiation model.

CONCLUSION

The character of the relationship between conceptual model and actual policies is quite complex. It is clear from the consideration of the initiation model and also the brief accounts of traditional educational models that they will influence one's approach to particular policy problems. The purpose of this newsletter has been to consider a series of different conceptual models and to explore one such model and its implications in some detail. This exercise has left open the question about exactly how these models relate to public policy analysis of educational problems. It is to this problem that I shall turn in my next newsletter and that I shall explore by offering my own model of education and then testing its policy implications.

I trust that it is sufficient to conclude presently that the exercise of articulating conceptual models of education is in and of itself worthwhile, in so far as it forces one to organize his own views about this important concept.