
Toward a More Critical Outlook

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The value of an educational ideal lies in the potential it has to inspire and guide teachers and educators towards their central aims; the promise, however, all too often remains unrealized. We have known, ever since Socrates awakened us to this insight, that to fail to think seriously about the choices we make as citizens or about the decisions taken by government is to live a life that is not worth living because all-important questions about what is right and just are simply ignored. Socrates' insight comes to mind on reading the discussion in this issue of *Journal of Thought* of the teaching of social studies in schools today.

Robert A. Waterson and A. G. Rud make the case that democratic bankruptcy threatens if the potential the social studies have for fostering educational ideals such as critical thought and civic engagement is squandered. When the emphasis in schooling increasingly falls on standardized curricula, competency tests, and formulaic approaches, we risk losing sight of the need to teach in such a way that students develop the moral and intellectual virtues that will enable them to make informed decisions and exercise good judgment. This article draws attention to three thoughtful and stimulating approaches to teaching social studies that take seriously the importance of discussion, controversial issues, and problem solving, and that require of teachers the very qualities and dispositions these programs seek to develop in students.

In a wide-ranging survey of Chinese education from classical times to the present day, James Z. Yang and William C. Frick remind us that the same ideal of reflective thought appears as early as the work of

Confucius in his comment that a person who studies but does not think is lost. It is also worth adding, in the same context, Lao Tzu's observation that extensive knowledge is not the same as wisdom. Regrettably, the ideal of critical judgment implicit in these philosophical ideas gave way to increasingly rigid and illiberal practices in teaching and education in China, the worst excesses coming during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s when political ideology, propaganda, and anti-intellectualism dominated education at every level. With respect to the educational reforms that have been underway in China since the 1980s, the authors identify a tension in contemporary Chinese education between fostering creativity and independent thought in technical fields of study while at the same time imposing constraints in other areas of the curriculum where intellectual freedom might lead to political dissent. One is reminded immediately of John Passmore's observation in the 1960s that the Soviet attempt to restrict innovative thinking to technical areas was breaking down. There is nothing mysterious here. Passmore had introduced the idea of the critical spirit, as distinct from the possession of critical ability, to capture the idea of an attitude or an outlook that a person brings to whatever is at issue. Once this spirit is engendered, it is practically impossible to confine it arbitrarily to certain approved areas.

The idea of the critical spirit is also relevant when we come to the article by Gary W. Houchens and John L. Keedy who focus in particular on the efforts of school principals as they endeavor to promote student achievement. Their article builds on the pioneering research of Argyris and Schön in the 1970s which characterized attempts to describe and explain the actions and procedures that people follow in addressing problems in their professional context as 'theories of practice.' Houchens and Keedy report on a recent study (by Houchens) examining the action strategies and achievements of four principals as they attempted to exercise instructional leadership in their schools. One interesting result suggests that principals readily alter their strategies to achieve their goals ("single-loop learning") but are less inclined to question the underlying assumptions on which the strategies are based ("double-loop learning"). Passmore reminds us, however, that the critical spirit acknowledges the possibility that the norms themselves may have to be revised, and that a type of performance may simply have to be given up altogether rather than being done in a different way. Houchens and Keedy have identified a certain lack of critical self-reflection on the part of school principals, a finding that leads one to wonder why this might be so and what might be done to foster a more critical stance.

We don't take our ideals seriously if we fail to examine the unintended consequences of our actions, and one area of contemporary education

where critical examination is badly needed concerns so-called high-stakes testing that has been introduced with the laudable aim of ensuring that all children are being served well by their schools. This issue is the main focus of attention in the article by John W. Hunt, Michael Afolayan, Marie Byrd-Blake, Martins Fabunmi, Brandt Pryor, and Pereari Aboro which looks at the impact on teachers in urban areas of state-level tests designed to assess whether or not schools and students are making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). In a qualitative study of 46 educators, from elementary through high school, one common concern that emerges from these teachers and administrators is the way in which an emphasis on testing distorts the curriculum by squeezing out subjects and activities not included on the test, and tends to diminish the ability of teachers to use their own good judgment to determine individual student needs and appropriate pedagogical approaches. Seventy years ago, Bertrand Russell reminded us that teachers can only work well if they feel themselves to be directed by an inner creative impulse, not controlled by an outside authority. Our authors raise a doubt in our minds about whether or not Russell's wise advice is being taken to heart by educational authorities.

In one of her early essays, Maxine Greene remarks that informed encounters with literature may enable us to break with conventional thinking, release our imaginative activity, and stimulate us to see things differently. Her words make clear why we should be grateful that Catherine's Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* or *Early Times in Massachusetts* takes center stage in the article by Sally McMillan and Connie Wilson Anderson. Published in 1827, Sedgwick's novel was widely read and very popular during her lifetime, but by the end of the century the book and its author had fallen into near obscurity. In helping us to rediscover Sedgwick, our authors present a writer who was able to challenge many conventional ideas that constituted the political and moral assumptions of her time. In Sedgwick's novel, we find an alternative narrative involving respect and collaboration across racial boundaries, together with a portrait of strong female characters, that resists the dominant cultural views of the period. Discovering forgotten voices and neglected perspectives can help us to see things differently; and if we can learn, in the authors' words, to read between the lines, Sedgwick may help us gain some critical distance on unexamined assumptions and prevailing norms in our own day.

It was John Dewey who redirected our attention to the ideal of wisdom and good judgment that Socrates, Confucius, and the classical philosophers had championed, an ideal that, in different ways, the articles in this issue see being neglected or subverted in contemporary

education. It is all to the good, therefore, to round out this collection of essays with an article devoted to Dewey's general philosophical outlook. Jim Garrison, echoing the distinction between knowledge and wisdom, surveys Dewey's metaphysical ideas, revealing a turning away from a quest for ultimate origins, fixed and final ends, and indubitable foundations—what Dewey terms an absurd search for an intellectual philosopher's stone. Dewey embraces instead a philosophical outlook that emphasizes ongoing experience, endless reconstruction of ideas, and the creation of tentative knowledge for human purposes. Dewey's metaphysics and his educational theory merge in the idea of education as a continuous reconstruction of experience, a conception that replaces the ideal of completion and perfection with one that views education as a process of growth that only ends when experience itself ends.

This issue includes a review by Eddah M. Matua-Kombo of a recent collection of essays devoted to the complex and controversial topic of social justice. The idea of social justice is liable to become little more than what Dewey calls a 'catchword' unless it is subjected to the kind of critical scrutiny the essays that make up this collection provide. A critical stance is always difficult because, as Dewey reminds us, reflective thought requires going against an inveterate tendency to accept ideas at face value; it means being willing to put up with uncertainty, confusion, and doubt. However difficult and painful it may be, however, its value lies in the fact that the absence of critical reflection leaves us, in Dewey's words, at the mercy of impulse, caprice, and circumstance.

Concluding this issue of the journal, J. D. Sabiston's piece, a *petite play*, provokes us to think of the multifaceted and, likely, unpredictable life and death of the teacher who treasures students, ideas, intelligence, creativity, and reflection. The different interpretative lenses of one's students and their families, not to mention one's acquaintances, colleagues, and supervisors, may be enough to demoralize all but the strongest of educators. For, as T. S. Eliot observed, no one can really know all of the unintended consequences of her choices and actions, teaching or otherwise. Hence, thinking and choosing carefully, as Socrates urged, remains instructive.