

From the Editor

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Spring is beginning here in Oklahoma, a little early but very welcome. As this election year heats up, we are reminded inevitably of the importance of education for a democratic society. As Dewey kept reminding anyone who would listen, if we are not good at thoughtful living, we will not be good at self-government. That he was correct is never more clear than when we listen to campaign rhetoric. There is perhaps no more urgent measure of the true failure of public education than that people's votes are influenced by the "arguments" that pass for debate today. In this issue we get a chance to reflect from a variety of perspectives on the proper content of meaningful education and the importance of mindful practice of education consistent with its proper ends.

First, Carole Janisch, Amma Akrofi, and Xiaoming Liu share with us their insights into the ways that learning about children, their interests, and their capabilities can contribute to success in teaching. And we should note that "success" is here measured by more than test scores: It is engagements with the "elements of authenticity... [and] 'thoughtful literacy'" (p. 16). I am encouraged seeing this insight and experience as part of the professional formation of new teachers. Too often in this age of test-driven instruction, the reality of children is lost in the pursuit of specified and quantified "outcomes."

Reading Paul Wagner's article, "Legal Ethics: No Paradigm for Educational Administrators," reminded me of my mentor, Tom Green, who used to say, "the term 'professional ethics' is a redundancy." If teaching is to make the sort of shift that Janisch, Akrofi, and Liu suggest it should,

not only the focus, goals, and attitudes of teachers must change; those changes must also be supported by administrators who understand the broad social and ethical demands of the teaching profession. Schools must be transformed top to bottom. Wagner reminds us that there is more to professional ethics than keeping within the letter of the law; educational administrators are supposed to be contributing to the education of the children in their schools. Not being sued is certainly nice, but it is not a worthy goal for educators.

In a slightly different vein, James Nehring reminds us that there is no such thing as an idea so good that it cannot be ruined by abstracting the “instrumentalities” of the practice and using them as “models” to be “implemented” (p.57). Focusing on just one aspect of Ted Sizer’s work as reflected in the operation of the Coalition of Essential Schools, Nehring considers how application of Common Principle Six (variously “diploma by exhibition” and “demonstration of mastery”) can become merely instrumental if it (or, by extension, any other or all of the Principles) is taken out of the context of rich intellectual engagement in which it was formulated and meaningful. His reflections remind us, however, that it is also possible, and very important, to enact the sort of serious reform the Coalition sought, although meaningful and mindful reform is certainly made more difficult by the instrumental and shallow instruction that is the default response to the current regime of testing.

Charles Anthony Earls extends the range of these essays, reminding us that education includes higher education as well, and that the same issues and caveats apply. Using the critique of higher education offered by Allan Bloom, that relativism and sterile technicism have led to a “closing of the American mind,” Earls asks us to join in Dewey’s rejection of a “quest for certainty” and accept that we do indeed live in uncertainty, which does not mean we live without conviction and a responsibility for our own fate. What education must do is not reveal to us the certainties of the past; it must engage us in critical thinking and reasoning that will lead us to reliable, if not eternally certain, answers to the problems that face us.

Finally, Douglas Stewart engages in an extended reflection on the nature of forgiveness and the possibility of its cultivation as a facet of schooling. Here we have a deep look into the possibilities of schooling, engaging not just the mind and the imagination, but the heart and moral sense. In conversation with the other authors in this issue, Stewart reminds us that there is a moral center to teaching, that it is not about sterile content, not about following some structure of schooling, not about applying models of reform. It is, as is argued in our first article, about an authenticity that models serious moral intention. The

lesson for us of Stewart's reflection is that good teaching requires good teachers, good not merely in a technical sense, but also good in a moral, human sense.

None of our authors would deny for a moment that technical competence is necessary for good teaching, and that to teach without technical competence is a moral failure as well as a technical one. All would have us remember, however, that the ends to which we put our competence matter. Without a moral purpose and center, without a deep understanding of and commitment to the core meanings of education, teachers are functionaries not professionals, and schools are holding pens, not the incubators of democratic citizenship.

I am glad to be able to present the collection of essays in this issue. I hope that you enjoy them and find them fruitful.

And do enjoy the spring.