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*The Philosophers of Education; Major Thinkers from the Enlightenment to the Present*

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**From John Dewey to Bertrand Russell; Some Reflections on Becoming a Better Teacher**

As part of this seminar on the *Philosophy of Education* we read, discussed and sifted through the works of major thinkers on education; from John Locke to E.D. Hirsch. Ideas and theories about school education were analyzed and scrutinized. Certain references regarding teacher's qualities were also considered. From these readings and especially from the selective works of William James, John Dewey, Arthur Bestor and Bertrand Russell a number of questions came up that were of a particular interest to me as a teacher. The first question is; what can I take from these authors that would help me to become a better teacher? My other question that ties to the first one is; in what kind of school do I want to work if I were to choose one?

In order to identify the qualities required to be a good teacher one should start by examining the present social conditions as advocated by John Dewey. At the end of the nineteenth century, he made a statement that still has significance today. Dewey said that to know what a child is capable of "knowledge of social conditions, state of civilization is necessary."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, for an efficient teacher is very important today to know the child, and at the same time understand his/her own age. This requires teachers to be class psychologists and perceptive social analysts.

Dewey further observed that the rapid transformations that were taken place at the time brought with them a sense of constant readjustment, and schools were not immune from these changes. Consequently, the schools had to change their teaching practices and policies. Dewey noted that "it is impossible to foretell definitely just what civilization will be in twenty years from now. Hence it is impossible to prepare the child for any precise set of conditions."<sup>2</sup> To a certain extent we have a similar situation at the moment as we do not know what will happen in the decades to come, and how will this affect the state of school education? However, this state

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<sup>1</sup> John Dewey, *On Education, Selected Writings*, 428.

<sup>2</sup> Dewey, 429.

of constant fluctuation does require from teachers to be more willing to reevaluate their teaching styles, and come up with better methods and approaching to school instruction. In the end the teachers, as learners, will be better prepared to cope with future changes.

Dewey also saw the school not only as an educational establishment, but as a place where students would receive assistance in their adjustment to life's conditions. For Dewey "life is complex and ... the school, as an institution, should simplify existing social life."<sup>3</sup> The complexity of modern life does require from young people certain ways of adjusting and when the other institutions in the society are not there, and then the school has to step in! Is there any other agency out there that has the resources or the human capital to offer support to young students? Perhaps no! A teacher or a school counselor can help young people with their knowledge and compassion because the family and the community are not supportive of the students. Yet, we can only hope that adults and teachers are endowed with the right qualifications to teach the students to navigate the tribulations of modern age. With the increase in divorce rates schools may have to take on an additional task of helping students to mature.

However, for a meaningful education an interplay of other forces should take place and for Arthur Bestor these were "family, church, and the community," but these "have failed in their responsibilities to children."<sup>4</sup> The role of such forces which once played a role in the lives of children has been reduced in importance. Besides the decline in the number of two parent families, there is also a decrease in the number of people who are attending church services.<sup>5</sup> On top of that, communities are less and less involved in school education. Not only that, but people

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<sup>3</sup> Dewey, 430.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Bestor, "The Distinctive Function of the Schools,"195.

<sup>5</sup> Angeline Lillard in *Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius* observed that better learning outcomes are expected" when families are involved in the educational process. Not only that but it is even better if "parents help their children learn the skills needed to succeed in school, 325. Cit. in Deluca, Stephanie. Rosenblatt, Peter. "Does Moving to Better Neighborhoods Lead to Better Schooling Opportunities? Parental School Choice in An Experimental Housing Voucher Program."

participate less and less in community projects and activities.<sup>6</sup> Bestor thought that these shortcomings were caused by the “defects of school education.”<sup>7</sup> Today, one might argue that these problems were rather the product of transformations that the Western society had undergone for the past five hundred years which contributed to the erosion of the importance of the family and church. Consequently, with these changes, the individual had lost his/her sense of security and belonging. But these days we do have the schools which represent some form of stability. The school, as an institution, still remains today an vital pillar of the society where students go not only for instruction, but also to socialize and be involved in extracurricular activities. In schools, students learn to be part of a larger entity, thus acquiring a sense of belonging.

Bestor also argued that schools should become centers of ‘intellectual excellence’ where abstract ideas should be taught.<sup>8</sup> According to this author, the school should be autonomous from the influences of the society, and be endowed with the role of ‘altering society.’ Moreover, the schools should be able “to clog the friction of ... those movements in society that tend toward intellectual and cultural degradation.”<sup>9</sup> Bestor remarked that the school should prevent the process of “social conditioning” while promoting “intellectual independence” and “critical intelligence.” These intellectual pursuits cannot be achieved if freedom of expression is not allowed in schools. Bestor added further that: “Freedom to think - which means nothing unless it means freedom to think differently - can be society’s most precious gift to itself. The first duty of a school is to defend and cherish it. This means resistance to the pressures for social and

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital, *Journal of Democracy* 6:1, Jan 1995, 65-78.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Bestor, “The Distinctive Function of the Schools,” 195.

<sup>8</sup> Bestor, 196.

<sup>9</sup> Bestor, 196.

cultural conformity wherever they arise.”<sup>10</sup> One may wonder how the social media today puts pressure on students as well as on adults to conform to certain standards of thinking or behavior. Bestor’s ideas of schools becoming centers of intellectual independence are worth considering, but they do raise a number of questions. Can schools prevent the process of intellectual and cultural degradation? What should schools do to prevent this process? How does one achieve intellectual independence? But what if not everybody is intellectually inclined? John Dewey made a valued statement when he remarked “that in the great majority of human beings the distinctively intellectual interest is not dominant.”<sup>11</sup> This dilemma should make one ponder to what extent turning schools into intellectual centers is a viable option. While a noble idea, I do think schools should at least aim to become center of intellectual exploration where both, students and teachers can participate in joint academic programs. For that reason, the teachers and the students would benefit from this cooperation.

While for Bestor the schools were to be considered centers of excellence, for William James, on the other hand, the role of education was to facilitate the “acquisition of ideas or conceptions.”<sup>12</sup> The more ideas and concepts a student possessed, the better. In his opinion “the best educated mind being the mind which has the largest stock of them, ready to meet the largest possible variety of the emergencies of life.”<sup>13</sup> The task of the teacher, therefore, is to offer the environment for the young people to experience a variety of ideas, but these have to be taught at the right moment.<sup>14</sup> James insisted that abstract ideas should be taught before concrete knowledge. In his view “the object-teaching is mainly to launch the pupils, with some concrete

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<sup>10</sup> Bestor, 206-207.

<sup>11</sup> John Dewey, *On Education, Selected Writings*, (Chicago, 1964), 309.

<sup>12</sup> William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*. (Manor, Rockville, Maryland, 2008). 80-84.

<sup>13</sup> James, 81.

<sup>14</sup> James, 82.

conceptions of the facts concerned, upon the more abstract ideas.”<sup>15</sup> Today, we do notice that students are exposed to a lot more ideas and concepts, but that does not automatically increase the capacity for abstract thinking in students. It could be that the teacher and the modern schools should play a bigger role in introducing students to new ideas, ideas worth considering, but the dilemma for students as well as for adults is how to distinguish between different kinds of information.

However, the importance of James’ ideas for teachers as well as for schools lies somewhere else. In the article “What Makes Life Significant,” William James wrote that the role of education was to “enlarge a person’s horizon and perspective ... to multiply one’s ideas and to bring new ones into view.”<sup>16</sup> Having ideals, though, was not enough for James. An ideal had to “carry with it that sort of outlook, uplift, and brightness that go with all intellectual facts.”<sup>17</sup> Ideals by themselves though do not have the power to transform as these have to be backed by will and character and any materialization of an ideal requires the working these factors. James warned those who showed the signs of pessimism that “the thing of deepest- or, at any rate, - significance in life does seem to be its character of *progress*, or that strange union of reality with ideal novelty which it continues from one moment to another to present.”<sup>18</sup> The continuity of progress can be a driving force in one’s career life, but to have a meaningful life and full of significance a human being should possess other qualities. James makes a list of the characteristics needed to give the individual a sense of purpose. These are; “culture and refinement ... ideal aspirations ... pluck and will, ... and dogged endurance.” And all of these

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<sup>15</sup>James, 83

<sup>16</sup>James, 151.

<sup>17</sup> James, 151.

<sup>18</sup> James, 152.

“principles have to fuse together for a life objectively and thoroughly significant to result.”<sup>19</sup> James’s observations inspire idealism, something to aspire to even if not attainable. This streak of idealism inspires a teacher to be knowledgeable, have tact, be sympathetic, cultivated and be courageous. A teacher should aim to carry these principles into the classroom and share them with his/her students. At the end of Voltaire’s *Candide*, the main character reaches the conclusion that after all the journeys and the troubles that he has gone through; the most important thing in life is to ‘cultivate one’s own garden.’ For a teacher this would translate as reading as many books as possible, and be knowledgeable and competent in his or her field. But what good is this cultivation if she or he does not share that with his/her students? When we share or help others, we become better human beings observed the Bengali writer and philosopher Tagore. The same author added that we, as humans, find our own meaning ‘through others, by giving something to others.’ Thus, when we employ ourselves into the service of our students and school we become better humans, better teachers.

Teaching about ideals has its own benefits, but a school should also offer instruction in practical skills. Not every student is intellectually gifted. Instead, schools could offer ‘opportunities for growth;’ ‘giving culture to the individual and to develop his capacities to the utmost;’ and ‘to train useful citizens,’ as expressed by Bertrand Russell.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, in Russell’s opinion the school can offer the environment for the children to thrive, but with imposing certain limitations on freedom in schools.<sup>21</sup> Russell also believed that concepts such as honesty and punctuality should be reinforced in schools, but more importantly students have to

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<sup>19</sup> James, 152-153.

<sup>20</sup> Bertrand Russell, “The Negative Theory of Education,” 213.

<sup>21</sup> Russell, 216.

adhere to a routine in their everyday lives.<sup>22</sup> Russell’s point about the significance of routine is that it instills in students a feeling of security. The author wrote that; “A life of uncertainty is nervously exhausting at all times, but especially in youth. The child derives a sense of security from knowing more or less what is going to happen the next day. He wishes his world to be safe, and subject to the reign of law.”<sup>23</sup>

Russell was not opposed to students taking risks but, he, nevertheless, cautioned that they will step into the unknown more often by feeling confident and not timid. “Adventurousness and courage,” he said, “are highly desirable qualities, but they are most easily developed against a background of fundamental security.”<sup>24</sup> This is a worthy advice as we try to encourage students to be risk takers. Perhaps, we, as school representatives, have to work on building their confidence and self-esteem before sending them off into the world. Besides making students feel secure, schools should additionally teach students to maintain a consistent effort in whatever endeavor they are engaged. “Students, according to Russell, enjoy the sense of achievement derived from mastering a difficulty, but this requires a consistency of effort ... and this capacity for consistent self-direction is one most valuable that a human being can possess.”<sup>25</sup> None of these attributes as described by Russell can be achieved without maintaining a balance between “freedom and discipline, and is destroyed by an excess of either.”<sup>26</sup> In modern day society we often encounter parents who think that children should be allowed to have more freedom, yet when that happens it is harder to discipline them. So Russell’s point has a degree of validity when it comes to discipline.

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<sup>22</sup> Russell, 219.

<sup>23</sup> Russell, 219.

<sup>24</sup> Russell, 219.

<sup>25</sup> Russell, 219.

<sup>26</sup> Russell, 219.

However, in order to provide a meaningful education other attributes should be part of the instructional process such as “adults with a genuine and spontaneous interest in intellectual pursuits ... small classes... and a teacher who can exhibit sympathy, tact and skill.”<sup>27</sup> While these are admirable qualities to have in any educational system, it is rather unfortunate that not every modern school can afford to have them. We only can hope to attain these developments in the future.

### **Conclusions**

Each of the writers presented above offers unique perspectives regarding the qualities needed to be a good teacher. From these works we choose ideas, principles and theories with which to create a platform from which to work on in the future. From John Dewey, I learned about how important is for a teacher to help students to adapt to the social conditions of the age. I liked Arthur Bestor’s ideas of schools being centers of intellectual activity where both, the students and the teachers can attain higher forms of flourishing. Students should be taught real skills as well as well as how to find the balance between freedom and discipline as advocated by Bertrand Russell. I thought that as a teacher is important to maintain an idealistic tone inside and outside the classroom as expressed in some of the works of William James. A dose of idealism backed by ‘dodged endurance’ brightens the day even when hardships and problems are on the horizon. There are days when teacher have doubts about his/her calling and is especially important that on days like these we should turn to the works of some of these others for inspiration. Our society will continue to face challenges and it will have to adapt to the demands of the age, yet certain principles and ideas endure the pressure of time. The teacher and the

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<sup>27</sup> Russell, 220-221.

school will have to be and remain an important pillar of the society despite all these transformations.

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