A Mindful Approach to Teacher Education: An Interview With William Hare

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ABSTRACT: To honour and celebrate Dr. William Hare's important contributions to educational studies on the occasion of his retirement, a two-day conference was held at Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia in October, 2008. As part of one of the working seminars, we interviewed William Hare. Beginning with questions on the complex concept of open-mindedness, he discusses the use of case studies in education, the controversial link between open-mindedness and neutrality, the challenging task for teachers of posing questions for which there are no definitive answers, and the central role he assigns the philosophy of education in teacher education. Hare also reflects on his lifelong commitment to the topic of open-mindedness and why it has fascinated him for so long. This interview and the video-taped format will be valuable educational resources for teachers and educators working in diverse discipline areas, including the philosophy of education.

RESUME: A l'occasion du départ à la retraite du Docteur William Hare et pour lui rendre hommage et honorer l'énorme contribution qu'il a apportée aux études pédagogiques, une conférence de deux jours s'est tenue en octobre 2008 à l'université du Mont Saint Vincent, à Halifax, en Nouvelle Ecosse. Lors de séminaires de travail, nous l'avons interviewé. Tout en commençant par des questions sur le concept complexe "d'ouverture d'esprit," il a analysé l'usage des études de cas dans l'enseignement, la corrélation entre l'ouverture d'esprit et la neutralité, la tâche périlleuse des enseignants de poser des questions pour lesquelles il n'y a pas vraiment de réponses et le rôle clé qu'il attribue à la philosophie pédagogique dans le cadre de la formation des enseignants. Monsieur Hare a aussi réfléchi sur la recherche qu'il a menée tout au long de sa vie sur la notion d' "ouverture d'esprit" et a expliqué la raison de cette longue fascination. Cet entretien et

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l'enregistrement vidéo représentent de précieux outils de travail pour les enseignants et les éducateurs qui exercent dans des domaines variés y compris celui de la philosophie pédagogique.

Introduction

Dr. William Hare has had an illustrious career as a philosopher, researcher, and professor. He is a prolific author, having written or edited ten books and monographs, 100 articles and book chapters, and 32 book reviews. He is an internationally renowned scholar who is much sought after as a guest speaker at national and international conferences. Dr. Hare has received several distinguished service awards during his career, including the Award for Research Excellence from Mount Saint Vincent University in 2007.

In this interview, William Hare reflects on his research and teaching in the philosophy of education. It was our hope to create an educational resource for teachers and teacher educators by highlighting key aspects of Dr. Hare's work. Beginning with questions that examine his work on open-mindedness in teacher education, he explores how he introduces this complex concept and why it is such a central component of his research and teaching. He acknowledges the daunting challenges of teaching and stresses the vital role of philosophy of education in teacher education. Hare also discusses the importance of teachers being open-minded and the responsibility of students in this area. Given the choice of deciding on the final question that he would like to answer, he reflects on his lifelong fascination with the concept of open-mindedness. This paper will be of interest not only to philosophers of education but to all teacher educators hoping to help their students gain a better understanding of the broader philosophical concepts, such as open-mindedness and critical thinking, in the context of teacher education.

SS: Dr. Hare, much of your research focuses on critical thinking and open-mindedness in education. This concept of open-mindedness in education will form the basis of our conversation here this morning. We are delighted to have this opportunity to talk with you about your work, and we welcome you. Could we begin by having you talk a little bit about your experience in introducing the concept of open-mindedness to teacher education students? We're curious to know how you begin those conversations.

WH: It's a good question. Student teachers of course are naturally interested in practical questions that they're going to face. They

see teaching as a somewhat daunting challenge, and in the B.Ed. program they expect, and I think it's a perfectly legitimate expectation, that they would acquire skills and strategies that would help them to become an effective teacher. And I doubt very much that they would think immediately that philosophy is going to be of great practical help to them. But, of course, I believe that they do need to have their horizons broadened, and to begin to see bigger questions and issues that will face them in teaching, not simply the more immediate practical concerns that may preoccupy them at the moment. So I think when we're talking about philosophical ideas like critical thinking and open-mindedness, it's good to ground those discussions in a case, in an example that will make sense to them.

For example, I will often introduce the topic of open-mindedness in the context of the infamous Jim Keegstra case[1] which happened in Alberta in the early 1980s. This is a very effective case – first of all, it's a real case, and it's a Canadian case, so students are not able to say that these are problems that happen somewhere else. But it's also a case in which we clearly have a teacher who was not only not concerned to help his students become open-minded, but in fact, wanted to impose a certain close-minded ideology on them. What is particularly interesting is that his colleagues and supervisors, and other people in the teachers' association couldn't see, or couldn't recognize, what was wrong with what he was doing. But if open-mindedness is such a familiar concept, the question arises, well why couldn't people who were close to the scene and who actually knew what was going on, recognize that here we had a form of mis-education occurring?

Once you get students to recognize that there are some problematic issues here, this can't all be plain sailing, otherwise this would have been readily recognized, and the problem would have been dealt with. With hindsight and at a distance, we can see clearly that something very wrong was happening, but people closer to the scene couldn't. But then, of course, students begin to see that, well philosophy would have a practical bearing, because if people had been able to address this ideal more clearly, and have it working for them as a real guiding principle, then the practical problems that ensued in that school system would have been addressed much earlier.

In light of a case like that, students can begin to see not only what philosophy is, but it actually might have some bearing on the practical concerns of school. That's how I tend to begin. It's not the only case one could use. For example, you know, you could introduce the topic of open-mindedness by grounding it in a discussion of creationism versus evolution, and whether or not intelligent design should be discussed in science classrooms. Cases like that help to give philosophy a certain kind of practical edge that will help student teachers begin to see a connection between what first seems like, you know, a very abstract discussion and the more practical classroom concerns that they have.

SS: Peter Gardner has said that to be open-minded is to be neutral or undecided about some matter to which consideration has been given. You reject this viewpoint as being overly simplistic. Could you talk a little bit about your concerns with his perspective on open-mindedness?

WH: Okay, well, the idea that open-mindedness and neutrality are closely linked goes back some time. In fact, it became a very prominent educational idea in the early 1970s, and it really emerged in the context of education. Moreover, the idea was that the open-minded teacher was the kind of teacher who was able to keep his or her own partisan position out of the classroom discussion. I think the idea became popular because there was a great concern at the time about the possibility and the danger of indoctrination in the classroom, especially in social studies and other kinds of courses where values issues might be discussed. So this seemed like a way out. I mean, if the teacher weren't putting forward his or her own ideas, then clearly they couldn't be indoctrinating. Therefore, we had a kind of safe passage through these difficult questions.

However, I think it is simplistic. I mean, there is a certain truth here: namely that if an issue is such that you're genuinely undecided about it or you feel torn, well, of course, your open-mindedness here, your examination of the evidence which pulls you this way and that way, but doesn't give you a clear answer, leads you to at least temporarily adopt a position of neutrality. But what this position doesn't recognize is that open-mindedness also has to do with the way that people hold their views when they do have views and they're not neutral. So

there's a difference between the kind of person who holds a position dogmatically, unwilling to listen or even to consider the possibility of counter-evidence, and somebody who has a position, but at the same time still listens to emerging evidence, and is willing to change his or her view if the evidence suggests that there's something wrong with the position that they hold.

Now I think that it's vital that teachers recognize this, because I don't actually think that it's a good idea for teachers to pretend to a certain kind of neutrality about all of these issues when we all know, and students know, that they're not actually neutral about them. So the teacher is, in a way, putting forward a kind of a false front about this. What is more important is for the teacher to create the kind of atmosphere in the classroom where students understand that if the teacher puts forward a position or says, well this is what I think, this would be my interpretation, that this isn't put forward as an authoritative definitive position that the students are expected just to accept, but it's being put forward for consideration.

If the students can recognize that their teacher is an open-minded individual, then they will take that for what it is, the teacher's point-of-view, and think about it. It's much more challenging and it's probably easier, in some ways safer to say, I'm not going to say what my view is, and it's somewhat riskier to say, even about an interpretation of a passage, I think it means this, but you have to say that in such a way that you're inviting the students to disagree, if they do disagree.

SS: So there is a fluidity and malleability in opinions.

WH: Exactly. That is, in a way, the fundamental point that the teacher is trying to communicate to the students, that there will be some matters where open-mindedness doesn't really arise in any serious way. It's a clearly established matter, it might simply be you know, the date when somebody was born, there's no great debate about it, but there are many matters where open-mindedness is important. We may think that our view is well established and has a good deal of evidence to support it, but we're also aware that we make mistakes and that, wakening the students to the idea that the views that they form may shift and change as their own ideas change, and as the evidence changes, that's something I think is extremely important for teachers to try to communicate to their students.

MJH: I think one of the effective ways that you do this is through the use of case studies.

WH: Yes.

MJH: I've noticed that in your research you talk a lot about the use of questions. I'm wondering, how do we as teacher educators, encourage teachers to take up this challenge of posing questions to their students, to which there are no definitive answers?

WH: It's quite a challenge. I think the first thing is for teachers themselves to see and to actually believe that those kinds of questions matter, and are important. That it isn't just a matter of somehow communicating to students established views as settled knowledge so to speak, but that human beings are interested in thinking their way through matters where there isn't any clear direction. These questions are very important. I mean, whom should we vote for in the election, for example? You know, the case is complicated and we can feel torn this way and that.

Moreover, there are all kinds of questions in life where there isn't a definitive answer so to speak, but we still believe that if we go on thinking about it, we might make some progress in the direction of a better answer. I sometimes remind student teachers of the simple point that Aristotle made, that not every question in life is a question like elementary arithmetic, where there's a simple calculation to be done and you can come to a clear conclusion. There are many questions that are important which we want to understand better, but there isn't any definitive answer that we can settle on now. But of course, we have to remember that even those questions that are now settled were once not settled, and we only came to settle them by thinking them through when they were complex, controversial issues, and we finally came to some kind of resolution.

Of course, the other challenge is not just to recognize philosophically that these questions are important, but teachers have to find in themselves the confidence to take on questions where it's not clear where the discussion will lead. And this takes you into an area of uncertainty and risk, and you have to have a degree of self-confidence in yourself and in your abilities to feel comfortable to go with questions like that, not knowing

what kinds of responses students may make, and then having to come up with your response on the spot. A response that isn't pre-rehearsed.

MJH: Yes, and the risk to ask a question that we may not know the answer to, is sometimes very much a challenge, particularly for new teachers.

WH: Exactly, and this all helps to communicate to students the fluidity that was mentioned earlier and the flexibility, and the need to be open-minded to participate in the discussion, to listen to the various points-of-view, and of course, teachers will also have to deal with the fact that students may complain that we're not making any progress. You know, we've talked about this for 20 minutes and we still don't have a resolution. Students can be frustrated by that, but they are also going through the process of coming to understand that these kinds of discussions, even though they don't come to a clear resolution are nevertheless, interesting in themselves and worthwhile, and that progress over time may be made.

SS: Do you think, given our current obsession with assessment, accountability, and standardization of curriculum that teaching the concept of open-mindedness is more difficult now than it was ten years ago?

WH: Right. Well, with respect to those kinds of developments in schooling, I think that open-mindedness is under threat to some extent. Because the more that we emphasize standardized tests with the multiple choice definitive answer and so on, the more we get away from that kind of open exploration of ideas, which is so important. So I think that you're right. Those kinds of developments do tend to constrain teachers in ways that I think are not particularly desirable. However, at the same time, I think there are also other developments that are more promising with respect to open-mindedness.

You know, for example, the rich array of resources that's available to teachers today, because of the internet, for example, that wasn't available 20 years ago, and the greater diversity in society itself, where we really can't fail to be aware of different points-of-view about many matters. All that, I think, is healthy with respect to open-mindedness. So it's, yes, some negative forces at play, but also I think, some positive influences which

will encourage teachers who believe in an idea like this, to find ways to perhaps work around the constraints, and nevertheless, keep the ideal alive.

SS: Work around or work within.

WH: Yes, that's right.

MJH: And in that same area, we've discussed open-mindedness and you've also talked about the teaching of foundation courses, particularly the philosophy of education, and how that is frequently under siege, in some areas. You have stated that the philosophy of education is the most important course a teacher can take. You have stressed the need for philosophical reflection in one's daily practice, so how do we ensure that this important work that has been going on around open-mindedness in teacher education continues to be given the prominence that it deserves?

WH: Right. Well it's a somewhat paradoxical situation really because philosophy of education as a discipline has never been livelier than at the present time. There's never been such a quantity of wonderful articles being produced all around the world. Philosophy of education as a subject is extremely healthy, and this is very exciting. In addition, we're seeing now a much closer connection between philosophy of education and general philosophy than we've seen in a long time. So these are all wonderfully encouraging developments, but at the same time, the paradox is that we know that in teacher education programs, especially the B.Ed. programs and their equivalent in other countries, philosophy of education is often being squeezed out.

There are programs in our own country where students prepare to be teachers and don't take philosophy of education at all. This is very disturbing because I do think that in the philosophy of education course par excellence, you have an opportunity to look at the bigger picture, those larger more fundamental questions that are so important. If you don't ask them, and you don't think your way through them, you can rapidly find yourself lost in the detail of day-to-day teaching. Eventually you find that you've lost your way and don't really understand why you're doing what you're doing anymore, because you don't have that vision of education and teaching

that I think teachers really do need to have as a kind of guiding set of ideas.

So, I don't know what the solution is, and I think probably some of those factors that were raised in that earlier question are probably at play here, because philosophy is not the kind of subject that lends itself to that kind of assessment and testing which is so popular and prominent. To many people it seems like a very nebulous subject; it doesn't have much bearing on matters concrete and practical. And I also think this isn't mentioned as often, that philosophy is sometimes seen or viewed as a threatening subject by those who don't want the status quo disturbed. So I think that we just have to go on trying to defend and show the value of philosophy of education in the context of teacher education.

I think that philosophers of education themselves need to try to show the relevance of their work for teachers and student teachers. I'm not saying that all philosophers of education need to be preoccupied by the practical application of their ideas, because I think it's important for philosophers of education to explore those questions that seem to them to be important, and that they're interested in, so that they'll do the best work that they can. However, some part of the group, some philosophers of education need to attend to that more applied side, so that it will be visible and recognized in the general educational community, that work in philosophy of education does have an important bearing on practice. So that it will be harder for those who would want to eliminate it and squeeze it out, to make their case seem defensible.

Also, I think that it's not just the philosophers of education in teacher education programs who can address these ideals. Whether you're teaching a course in science methods or a course in literacy, or educational psychology, all of the people who teach in these areas can do something in their own context, and in the context of their own subject, to also make sure that these ideals are addressed, and also manifest in their own teaching.

MJH: Yes, I would think it would be very important for educators to bring these ideals into the different content areas and disciplines.

WH: Well that's right, and there ought to be that kind of interconnection among our courses, and one hopes always that there is, that students will begin to see that some of the ideas that they're talking about in educational psychology are coming up again in the other courses that they take, like philosophy and their methods courses.

SS: One of the things that is so obvious in your writing is your profound respect for teachers and the work that they do, often under very difficult conditions. But we've noticed in preparing for this interview and the reading that we've done around your work, that your focus seems to have shifted from teachers to students, and the role that they play in determining teacher credibility and open-mindedness. Could you talk a bit about this shift?

WH: Well I'm happy to hear you say that you've detected a respect for teachers. I'm pleased about that because I do feel that, and I've felt for a long time, that teachers in our society don't get the respect that they deserve, faced with the enormous challenges and the very important work that they do. Well now, I hope there's no incompatibility between all of that and this sort of latest work that I've been doing, and I don't think that there is. Let's look at it this way – one of the important tasks that teachers have, and so challenging that it's one of those tasks that should earn our respect and admiration, is to develop in their students a certain kind of independence – philosophers sometimes call it autonomy. So that they wean themselves away from their teachers, and also from anyone who would want to impose on them a way of thinking, and override their own critical faculties. So that teachers need in their teaching, and in the way in which they interact with their students, and the manner that they adopt and so on, and the atmosphere that they create, to try to develop in their students a sense that they need to judge for themselves whether to accept an idea.

Now of course, they can't be experts in every area, so in many areas, we are dependent on what the experts tell us, but at the same time, we need to be able to judge who is a genuine expert and who is not. Therefore, teachers have the responsibility to try to develop that, but they won't be able to develop that in their students if they're keeping their students totally dependent on them. So they have to create this distance

so to speak, between themselves and their students, and somehow make it clear to their students that they shouldn't blindly believe the teacher either. Now clearly, students do at the same time need to trust their teachers, trust the fact that they're well qualified, and nowadays teachers are extremely well qualified, and that their teachers are reliable and so on. Nevertheless, that shouldn't turn into a blind respect for the teacher and then sort of translate into a general blind respect for authority figures. So teachers have to create that, but I don't think it diminishes the respect in which teachers are held; in fact, I think quite the reverse. I think that students now – I think I argued for this in the credibility/credulity paper[2] – that students will actually respect those teachers who put their views on the line in this way, and say, you know, I'm open to what you have to say, to the criticisms, to the questions that you have. If students can see that their teachers can actually rise to that challenge and deal with these questions, then I think their respect will grow. So I can see how on the surface it might seem as if there is a shift, but I think it's all part of the bigger picture, and that the fundamental notion of respect for teachers hopefully remains intact.

SS: Indeed.

MJH: I think it's an important life skill for students to be learning to ask questions, and to explore those questions with others.

WH: Well that's right, and it's a very Deweyan point isn't it, that you know, if students are not learning gradually and as they go along, to develop this kind of independence of mind and critical ability, it's not going to magically appear when they're confronted with problems that they have to address on their own later in life. That's why I think that schools need to find a way to bring it along from the early days, so that when students leave school they're young adults who have developed an ability to think for themselves about difficult questions.

MJH: We have another question that comes from our colleague, Dr. Robert Bérard, and his question is: Do you think there's something we should have asked you that we didn't?

WH: Well, I wouldn't want to replace any of the questions that you did ask, because they were very good questions. I don't think that there's anything that, in any strong sense, you should have

asked, nor did I detect any sort of glaring omissions. One question that I'm often asked, and I'm reminded of this because I was actually asked it last week in a surprise e-mail from a graduate student who's working on a Ph.D. on open-mindedness. Her question was, given the fact that at least until recently not many other philosophers of education were particularly interested in open-mindedness, why did I stick with it for so long? I found it just a fascinating concept to look at. It has all kinds of tentacles reaching out to other ideas. It has all sorts of intricate connections with notions like bias, educational ideas like discussion and listening, and inquiry, and epistemological ideas like knowledge and belief, and you have this whole web of ideas.

I also found that when I was working on any one problem, it would give rise to the next one. So I never felt stuck. I also thought that I might make a better contribution if I stuck with one thing rather than just went from one concept to another. So in a way it's perhaps a little curious that, you know, I would spend most of my career working on the same idea, but in reality it never is the same idea because people raise questions that you hadn't anticipated which make what you said before not as adequate as you thought it was. New problems arise and cases come along all the time that involve open-mindedness, and those are new cases,[3] so the nuances are somewhat different. There's always work to be done, so I didn't feel that I was in a rut. It didn't strike me as particularly odd to do this, and it just maintained my interest, so I stayed with it.

MJH: Well, we're certainly glad you did.

SS: Dr. Hare, we want to thank you for taking time to sit down and have a conversation with us this morning. Mary Jane, as I have told you, speaks glowingly about you, as do many of your colleagues whom I encountered this morning, and it has been a real pleasure for me to hear your views on open-mindedness in education. So thank you.

WH: It's been a great pleasure for me. These were interesting questions, gave me a chance to talk about some of my ideas. It's been a wonderful experience for me to have worked at the Mount with our colleagues here, and just a great place to have an opportunity to combine teaching and the research that I was interested in. They always seemed to go together; there wasn't

any kind of a split in my mind. The questions that came up in the classroom were the very questions that I wanted to go home and think about, and what I'd been thinking about I wanted to take back to share with my students. So it was just an excellent blend.

MJH: Thank you again. We certainly appreciate your time.

WH: Thank you so much.

NOTES/REFERENCES

1. Hare, W. (1993. Limiting the freedom of expression: The Keegstra case. In W. Hare, *Attitudes in teaching and education* (pp. 75-88). Calgary, AB: Detselig.

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3. Hare, W. & Portelli, J.P. (2003). *What to do: Case studies for educators* (3rd ed.). Halifax, NS: Edphil Books.

For an extensive biography on the works of William Hare and to view a video clip from the actual interview, please go to www.williamhare.org

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