

EDITORIAL

Educational Dilemmas

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Are there genuine educational dilemmas? There appear to be a number of kinds of dilemma that a teacher might face, some of which might be characterized as (a) teaching and learning dilemmas, (b) emotional dilemmas, (c) practical social dilemmas, (d) moral dilemmas, and even (e) legal dilemmas. There may be many others.

The sort of things I have in mind might be illustrated by a number of examples:

The the following situation is the one that might easily obtain in a classroom. There are a number of children who have learning difficulties of an identifiable kind that require careful personal attention, the majority of those in the classroom appear to be normal learners, and a few of the children appear to be especially quick learners, some with special powers or abilities. And further suppose there is no extra help for either those with difficulties or those specially gifted. How ought a teacher to devote her or his time over the course of the days, weeks, months, or year(s)?

The following strategies might easily come to mind: (a) devote extra time to those with learning difficulties and assume that, given the days assignments, the others will manage perfectly well to learn what they ought; or (b) devote extra time to both those with learning difficulties and those with special gifts, and assume that the normal will manage the days assignments as they ought without further ado; or (c) spend no special time with those with learning difficulties and no special time with those who learn quickly or have special gifts, instead, spend all of the time seeing that each one of the majority of the class, the normal learners, learns what they ought so that the class can move on as a group with these learners satisfied; or (d) devote no special time either to those with learning difficulties or the normal group, but rather spend a lot of extra time with those with special gifts who are quick learners. The problem with each and every one of these solutions is that it poses both a moral and practical dilemma for a teacher.

The above scenario has many possible emotional counterparts. For example, one might imagine a class in which most of the children have no difficulties at home, come to school well fed or happy, and are not in fear and trembling either of the teacher or of other children. But some of the children may have enormous emotional difficulties both at home and therefore derivatively in the classroom setting. This sort of thing was anticipated by the 19th century school promoters in England, in the United States, and in Canada who saw the common school as a refuge from the vagaries and difficulties of many homes. Their banner was the wiping out of crime, poverty, and ignorance via the safe haven of the common school. Again the dilemma facing a teacher is whether to spend a disproportionate amount of her or his time with the emotionally troubled children helping them to cope and in doing so get on with their learning, or to relatively neglect the emotionally stable majority who may have other learning difficulties.

The general form of such dilemmas is always the same for a teacher who works with a class full of children as opposed to a tutor who works with one, namely, how am I best to devote my energies given the limited time I have and the multiple children needing my attention? Such dilemmas are always practical dilemmas, for a teacher is always faced with the difficulties faced by the children at the moment. And the solution to such dilemmas is always in the form of a choice here and now by a teacher to work with just this child on this problem or to work with some other or others or to work entirely with the class as a whole, neglecting the individual difficulties faced by some.

There are of course other kinds of dilemmas that a teacher may face. For example there is what one might call social dilemmas relating to the teacher's response to her or his knowledge of how a child might be being treated at home or in that child's community. It can come to the attention of a teacher that a child is being physically abused out of school, the teacher suspects it is parental abuse of the children, and yet fears if the powers of the social system are called into play, the child's learning may suffer more than it does in the status quo. What is the teacher to do? Should she or he report the suspected abuse? Should she or he comfort the child and give the child a safe haven at least for the time the child is in the school? Again a teacher will face the dilemma the only way that she or he can, by making a difficult choice, by taking some difficult action.

There are, of course, much less troubling dilemmas that a teacher must face all the time. Here I am thinking of matters of pedagogical

detail, the “how to present” questions that fill a teacher’s day. Should I use just this illustration or that one? If in a mathematics class is this form of proof more easily grasped, more helpful, sounder? And on what basis ought I to choose? Should I introduce the grammatical detail now, or wait until the children understand some more, or have had a chance to delight in the poem, the play, the essay? Or should the teacher proceed as if there are no standard provincial, state, or other general examinations faced by the children because she or he believes this is pedagogically sound while facing the possibility that the details of such an examination may bypass the children’s learning without her or his direct intervention?

Such dilemmas are not commonly discussed in the literature. I would like to encourage those who find dilemmas in their work as educators and how they have tackled them, to write up some of their thoughts and send them in, perhaps to JET, for others to think about and perhaps comment on.

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