Editorial

Soft Disability, Bilingualism, Multiculturalism, and the Present View of Culture: Some Educational Thought

It is now over150 years since Nietzsche pointed out that Truth is not as important to us as an inspiration to our accomplishments as a species as conviction and stick-to-it-ness in a particular direction over a long time. To take one example, human religions are diverse and have fostered many things over the last ten millennia or so: great sculpture, painting, music, poetry, language-learning, self-sacrifice, human sacrifices, witch burning, sainthood, magnificent architecture, pyramid building, cathedral building, mosque building, and so on. Religion has often lain behind, and sometimes lain in wait of, natural science. But the undoubtedly great religiously inspired accomplishments in art, music, our understanding of the world, and moral improvement have often been won in spite of, or even in the face of, truth, even though each religion claims to be true or at least truer than its neighbor. Many wars and much killing in our time is based on the assumption that one's own religious group is privileged with respect to the truth and that one's neighbors are lacking in that particular virtue: Northern Ireland, the Middle East, and Yugoslavia readily come to mind.

Since the era of the state funded universal common school much of the maintenance of belief taken to be truth can be placed at the door of the common school movement in support of the official prejudices and beliefs taken to be truths at a given time. Religious beliefs are only one among these and usually, though not universally, the common school movement officially avoids religious education. It does so officially, for example, in China. But there the state religion is a form of communism which now includes the usefulness, if the wickedness, of capitalism. And

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although Buddhist and Confucian thought are officially proscribed the state religion permeates the daily life of the school. Thus the common school movement, unwittingly, often supports many other beliefs, many other things taken to be true, without critical thought.

Much of what we live by in a given era, or at a particular place over many eras, has to do with what we take for granted to be true, or believe to be true. Sometimes a way can be found to determine whether the things we take for granted, or believe, actually are true. But more often than not the proof of the belief or presupposition has to do with notions like "believe this and then you will see that it is true," or "live according to these rules and then you will understand," or self-fulfilling or self-referential truth. The favored way has usually been by means of the religious triumph of the sword or the gun, rarely by gentler means of persuasion.

There is much in past educational practices which are like this too. The undoubted accomplishments of the publicly funded school systems around the world forged some 160 years ago can all be traced back to a handful of assumptions or beliefs which school promoters took for granted, some of them benign, some of them nasty. It is relatively easy for us to see, 160 years later, what some, perhaps most, of these assumptions were – assumptions about nation, class, race, status, wealth, human nature, intelligence, the needs of society, culture, and the like. It is relatively difficult for us to see what we are ourselves, taking for granted in our own day and age about educational things. It is the merit of each of the papers in this issue of JET that our presuppositions about some important aspect of education in our time is laid bare.

We take it for granted in Canada, for example, that all children with disabilities should be in mainstream classrooms looked after by an ordinary, competent teacher. We take it for granted that many children have disabilities which are hidden, or "soft" and that it is the teacher's duty to identify these and remedy them if she or he can. We similarly take it for granted, in our officially bilingual country, that all children should be exposed to both English and French in a literary and scholarly way as far into their schooling as possible with an aim to having

the younger generation easy and able in both official languages, regardless of the background of their parents. We take it for granted that the teacher who is creating this bilingual capacity has a cultural mission.

We take it for granted that a teacher should be able to thrive and help her or his children thrive in a multicultural setting which is the modern Canadian school – reflecting the picture we hold of the new community of communities which is Canada. And we assume that schools should be places that teach more than reading, writing, and arithmetic. We should, for example, encourage all of our children to gain a grasp of art, music, and drama as central cultural features of our kind of world. These assumptions about the mainstreaming of disability, bilingualism, multiculturalism, and about culture itself are now deeply imbedded in Canadian schools throughout the land, in spite of the diversity of educational jurisdictions.

The papers in this issue of JET tackle each of these central concerns of modern Canadian education from a variety of vantage points. Anastasios Karagiannis writes about "Soft Disability in Schools" and points out that our concerns for those with real and severe disabilities have created an underclass of those who are judged, on a completely inadequate basis, to have mild disabilities which require special kinds of care and treatment. This judgment, often made early, may follow those so judged, through life, leading not uncommonly to their incarceration in our penitentiary system or to many other forms of lesser but equally debilitating consequences. Yvette Mahé describes with great delicacy the cultural mission of bilingual school teachers in Alberta before 1940 pointing out that as a response to the aims of the provincial public schools those teaching in French tended to create a French speaking citizenry which was largely in opposition to what was perceived as the protestant English speaking norms of the public school system. This opposition was closely related to the norms of Quebec at the time. Multicultural teacher education is scrutinized by Roy Graham and Jon Young from the vantage point of an action research project into teacher preparation methods. Of their many findings the most important is certainly that in their debriefing sessions the presence of minority or "multicultural" student representatives of the kind

they were supposed to be discussing were very rare and often totally absent. Thus the discussions had a second-hand quality. This is partly a measure of the success or failure of Faculties of Education in Canada to recruit teachers from the diversity into which they must teach. Finally, Mary Styslinger writing from South Carolina discusses the failure of the use of drama as a cultural tool to liberate, one of the chief reasons for its use in schools in the southern United States.

Our present assumptions about what education should consist of in North America are not very old. That usually means that they are buried because known to be true or else recited as a mantra, being bypassed in either case by critical thought. Happily in the case of our assumptions about the liberating effects of disability mainstreaming, bilingual education, multicultural education, and the use of certain cultural devices, such as drama, voices are raised and educational thought surrounds them.

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Editor