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Edmund C. Short

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Educational issues should be considered not only in light of their efficiency, but also their morality. Morality is the hard question and it challenges us to put aside intellectual laziness and mind-sets of habit.

education and a question of morality

by Edmund C. Short



Philosophy and educational inquiry concern Edmund C. Short, associate professor of education at Pennsylvania State University. He is co-editor of the book *Contemporary Thought on Public School Curriculum* and has published articles in the area of knowledge production and utilization. He also has taught at the University of Toledo and Ball State University. His Ed.D. is from Teachers College, Columbia University, while his master's is from Texas Christian University and bachelor's from Purdue University.

"Education is both a purposive and a moral enterprise." Those who guide its processes are prone to take this commonplace for granted. They tend to believe their own view of the enterprise to be above reproach with respect to "good," "better," or "worse" options toward which education may be directed. They also consider their own actions within the routines of the educational process to be beyond question with respect to their being "right" or "wrong," "just" or "unjust."

Educators seldom give thought to the implications of this readily accepted commonplace about education. Action which they suppose is in keeping with the principle of a purposive and moral enterprise is carried on daily. The impact of whatever action is taken is felt by every person involved. Seldom, however, are educators called upon to make explicit what is meant by this statement and to furnish sound arguments for the particular meaning set forth.

It would appear that the problem of what shall be the valued purpose of the educational enterprise is an enormously pervasive one, one from which no one can prudently escape, especially those intimately engaged in the enterprise as pupils, teachers, or administrators. The question of how to make the conduct of the enterprise both effective and moral is likewise a complex one, one which neither learners nor teachers can easily avoid.

Could it be that the common-sense notions held by each individual educator on these questions are the only ones operating in the educational enterprise? How often are controversies over differences on these matters brought to public discussion in a particular educational situation in order that some deliberate stance on the purpose and character of the educational system might be taken? How frequently have educators considered whether moral and purposive integrity of the educational enterprise should be left a matter of indifference or whether there are compelling reasons for putting their concerted energies to work in support of actualizing such integrity? What is involved in coping with the implications of value and moral questions in the design of educational systems? How may educators equip themselves to lead in the resolution of differences over these matters rather than simply becoming the unwitting accomplices of some influential force whose own assumptions might prevail in these debates? What lies behind the achievement of some skill in facilitating the determination of satisfactory purposive and moral integrity for the educational enterprise?

Four Dimensions of Intellectual Commitment

First of all, it must be recognized that this endeavor requires an intellectual aggressiveness of the first order. Those who have not grasped the issues, the alternatives, or the significance of choices among them, either in a particular context or more generally from recognizing these ideas repeated throughout educational history, are simply not equipped to cope with the existential situations with which they will be confronted. Some people have not made, or will not make, the necessary effort to be in command of these essential intellectual tools. These tools are not easy to master, but the claim to be capable of being an educator carries with it the obligation to master these intellectual tools. They are available to be mastered and they can be mastered. No one need remain ignorant in this realm. If they are willing to apply themselves to the task of learning about these matters, educators will discover that the moral and value issues of a particular situation have a ring of familiarity in them and that the significance of getting them resolved can more readily be detected.

Secondly, educators must apply their own powers of logic to assess the intellectual merit of various alternative purposes and educational procedures. If they cannot determine the positions that can stand the test of reason, they are not very far along the road toward sorting out viable preferences among alternatives. Again intellectual laziness can be a hard villain in this area, as well as in the first aspect mentioned, but it can be overcome. There is no road to consensus on such issues save through reason. This exercise in logic, therefore, must not be avoided. There are other necessary roads as well, to be cited a little later, but if reason is neglected, the common characteristics of minds, by which we can recognize each other's arguments, are put aside in favor of mental capabilities that are not inherently common to all, and the difficulty in seeing eye-to-eye is increased exponentially.

In the third place, educators have to recognize their own unique value positions and moral stance. Such views and predelections, it must be recognized, are acquired by everyone through the experiences of their own unique environment from birth until the present. No two persons could be expected to hold the same points of view on such matters, and they, in fact, do not. To the extent that they can account for the particular influences that helped to build the hierarchies of value and moral imperatives that they now adhere to, educators may better understand and make intelligible their positions to others. But even if they cannot trace this explicitly or fully, there will be present these strongly held views and dispositions to act which need to be recognized for what they are. When one is ready to admit that personal biases respecting purposive and moral integrity of the educational enterprise may not be the biases that others hold or prefer, then one is forced to check into this stance to see how firmly it should be held in view of the fact that no one person is going to be able to impose biases on the school and that some reason for subscribing jointly to a value orientation or to a moral perspective must be sought. One is often compelled to recast personal positions in order to be able to support new ones with reasons believed to have some chance of being taken by others as acceptable when an operational consensus is required. This rethinking is difficult again, and some people refuse to budge from long-held views

or perspectives and willingly attempt to revitalize their stance in light of new knowledge, new reasons, or newly perceived realities. Nevertheless, they are likely to be badly prepared to join the fray over institutional purposes and moral integrity unless they have done this kind of self-examination.

The fourth stage brings together all parties concerned with determining what's best for a particular educational enterprise. The task is then to formulate the most satisfactory statements of educational purpose and the most adequate guidelines to ensure moral educational practice that can be adjudicated out of the varieties of input. Each person contributes from personal analysis of the issue and from an assessment of the reasonableness of various positions on them (as indicated in stages one and two). Each person also admits inexplicable adherence to certain hierarchies, of values and to certain moral imperatives (as indicated in stage three).

But the discussions will consist of more than the expression of the various preferences and perspectives of the person involved. They will even consist of more than attempts to get others to come around to one's position. Such deliberations require consideration of what's desirable for the educational enterprise as a whole, with all of its participants and all of the influences it has upon it.

This is a big order, even when all parties willingly pursue the common good rather than their own biases. It requires skill in the arts of deliberation. More importantly, it requires the developing of a consensus through gradually coming to a mutual recognition of certain higher values that can supply acceptable reasons for whatever statements of purpose and moral guidelines are formulated. To suggest an instance of this, recall how a dispute over whether schools should be predominantly utilitarian in purpose or boldly liberating of human potential was resolved when people began to recognize that they all valued their children's becoming capable of performing in life in ways not dictated by necessity.

Does Higher Education Develop Integrity?

In conclusion, it should be apparent that if education is to be a purposive and moral enterprise, and if educators are to have any special ability in making it so, the preparation of educators must entail study and experience in each of the four dimensions just discussed. Do colleges of education set such an expectation for the preparation of qualified educators? Are we demanding intellectual competence in the analysis and significance of perennial educational issues and of the character and logic of alternative positions on them? Are we requiring educators to clarify their own value positions and moral imperatives on educational matters so that they are above being advocates of unexamined doctrines and above being stubbornly provincial in light of the general needs of the common enterprise of education? And finally, are we requiring them to gain experience and skill in the arts of public deliberation in a context of a group's having to formulate statements setting forth clearly the hierarchies of value and of action that they wish to have govern a particular educational enterprise?

And incidentally, does the enterprise in which colleges of education themselves are engaged possess purposive and moral integrity?