

What Is Educational

“**E**ducation is a highly diffuse and difficult activity in which many earnest people engage with seriousness without being altogether clear what they are trying to do.”²¹ Twenty-five years ago Richard Peters aptly described what we believe to be the state of conversations about education and educational leadership in Canada today. Discussions about learning and teaching, curriculum and assessment, governance and leadership, suggest profound confusion about what it means to educate. We believe that it is just this lack of clarity about education which strips educational leadership of its essential dimension — education.

The current situation represents both challenges and opportunities. The need for public discussion to clarify what we mean by education seems both evident and urgent. It is certainly timely; in the next few years many of the people in formal leadership positions in schools, colleges and universities will retire and be replaced. Finally, there are valuable, but generally neglected resources available to help us in this effort; here we use the work of Richard Peters and mention others.

The Educated Person

To begin to understand what people mean by “education” we have used an exercise that we have done dozens of times with different audiences including teachers, administrators, trustees, students, parents and business people. It is certainly not an original exercise, but one we have found very helpful. We ask people to think of someone that they consider to be an educated person.

Then, in groups, we ask them to tell stories about that person. Finally, we ask the groups to generate the criteria that their exemplars had in common. Every audience we have done this with generates similar criteria; the exact words change, some criteria are omitted or added, but generally the same list emerges. Participants tell wonderful stories of wise and caring people who connect with the world and with others in attempts to make meaning of their own lives and contribute to the lives of others. They describe people who know a great deal about some things and something about a great deal. They describe people with particular kinds of attitudes: people who are unimpressed with their own

achievements, enjoy being with other people and sharing with and learning from others; people who are enthusiastic and whose enthusiasm is contagious. They describe people who are curious, love to learn about things that matter and yet are critical and analytical about that learning. In short they describe good people, people who are wide-awake and want to make a difference in their community and who want to continue to learn about various aspects of human experience. Many of the people selected are relatives, teachers and elders, although no group is excluded.



Educational About Leadership?

By David Coulter and John R. Wiens

It is also interesting for us what they do not describe. No group has ever included formal schooling among the criteria of being an educated person. Indeed, many of the people chosen have minimal formal schooling (although to our relief, people with formal schooling are not excluded). Persons who knew a great deal, but were not able to connect with others, were not named.

We learned a great deal about what our audiences thought counted as education from this exercise. Certainly, we are not claiming that this exercise qualifies as formal research determining the meaning of “education,” but it did confirm, and contribute to, our understanding of some very sophisticated research into what counts as education: the conceptual work of Richard Peters.

Education and the Worthwhile Life

In his 1973 essay *Aims of Education: A Conceptual Inquiry*, Peters attempts to respond to his own challenge to be clearer about what is meant by education. Much of what he develops in this paper is consistent with what our audiences told us. He describes education as “the initiation of people into a worthwhile form of life,”² that is, what a particular society values, what it considers to be good and right. Peters unpacks some of the criteria inherent in this meaning of education and especially the knowledge and understanding required to participate in a community. He distinguishes between knowledge — that is, information organized into disciplines or forms of knowledge — and understanding, which involves

making meaning from that knowledge. We find this a very useful distinction. Knowing something is not the same as understanding it and while there may very well be a knowledge explosion in our society, there seems to be no parallel understanding explosion. Peters describes how education involves depth and breadth of both understanding and knowledge. To be educated is not to be narrowly specialized, but it does entail substantial expertise in some worthwhile area (not, for example, in being a criminal). The people that our audiences described as educated were experts in some areas and knowledgeable (and curious) about many others.

We also found support for Peters’ critics. Jane Roland Martin and Nel Noddings, for example, take issue with Peters’ emphasis on the cognitive and his neglect of how a worthwhile life is determined and who gets to make this determination.³ They and our audiences would, we think, support Hannah Arendt’s contention that central to a worthwhile life is building webs of relationships with other human beings that allows us to define who we are and what kind of lives we want to lead.⁴ Education, for Arendt, involves preparing children to participate in a common world in which people together decide what is good and worthwhile. Clearly, this was the concern of our audiences: the educated people they described sought and maintained relationships with others that enriched all. They may have been learned people, but their knowledge and

understanding were embedded in relationships with others: educated people were sought out for advice, respectful of others and patient. Many groups, curiously, included a sense of humour in the qualities that they listed. We would be hard pressed to include this in our formal school curriculum, but clearly humour is valued in maintaining relationships with others.

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Educational Leadership

We are arguing that leadership is a parasitic concept, dependent on purposes. Military leadership, business leadership and educational leadership may have common features, but the nature of the activity determines what counts as good leadership. Being an educational leader, therefore, requires becoming clear about what is meant by education, which, following Peters, involves preparing people to lead good and worthwhile lives. Deciding “good” and “worthwhile” is, of course, especially contentious in a multicultural, democratic society where various claims

to goodness collide, often inside and around schools disguised in dichotomies like traditional/progressive, whole language/phonics, education/training, and hidden in slogans like “the change process,” “school reform,” “lifelong learning,” and “effective schools.” The difficulty — indeed, the impossibility — of completely reconciling these various claims to goodness does not relieve educators from directly confronting questions of goodness. Discussions about effectiveness, for example, beg questions of effective for what and by what criteria? Principals may be effective in disciplining children by intimidation or punishment, a strategy that is self-defeating in the long run if we want people to make independent moral judgements as adults. Similarly, super-intendents who are successful in raising large amounts of money by selling student-customers to advertisers may balance the school district budgets, but to what educational purpose?

Tying leadership to education and conceptions of a worthwhile life, however, does more than clarify the ends to be pursued by educational leaders; it changes the nature of leadership, since a worthwhile life is not an end in the usual sense at all. Peters explains: “To be educated is not to have arrived at a destination; it is to travel with a different view. What is required is not feverish preparation for something that lies ahead, but to work with precision, passion and taste at worthwhile things that lie to hand.”⁵ Peters is drawing on a very old tradition in Western culture: Aristotle’s ideas about a good life and that acting or living well does not allow for the separation of ends from means. Education cannot be conclusively defined and then pursued; the means are embedded in the ends. How teachers teach becomes part of what they teach; how leaders lead becomes part of what their followers learn.

The people that our audiences described as educated did not believe that they had arrived at any destination; they were passionate about continuing

their own worthwhile journeys. Indeed, as one teacher pointed out at one of our first sessions, the people who were chosen as exemplars did not see themselves as educated at all, but were still educating themselves. We may have asked the wrong question, but an alternative like “Describe an educating person,” would have made no sense to our audiences.

If education is a continuing effort to lead a worthwhile life, then no final destination is possible or desirable; various stops may be warranted, but the journey must continue.

Good Educational Voyages

If, as Peters argues, education is a voyage and not a destination, this complicates the nature of educational leadership in Canada. Deciding what might be a good journey — a worthwhile life — is much clearer and simpler if only the captain gets to decide where the ship is going and the passengers and crew must follow along. This can be enormously tempting for both leaders and followers. If, however, we refuse to turn over decisions about what should be considered good and worthwhile to an elite leader class, but insist that all should be involved in deciding the meaning of their individual and collective lives, then educational leaders cannot be absolute rulers, but leaders in educational ways.

Educational captains must help crew and passengers define what trips are good and worthwhile. Not all voyages are worth beginning. Some journeys are better than others and comparing alternatives requires reasoned dialogue. In promoting such dialogues, educational captains must take care to include all affected, that is, everyone;

indeed, they must actively recruit people to join the discussion. Finally, and ironically, educational captains must guard against their own success, the tendency to define and achieve closure, that is, declare a final destination, a final vision. If education is a continuing effort to lead a worthwhile life, then no final destination is possible or desirable; various stops may be warranted, but the journey must continue.

Resources are available to help. A number of scholars have recently made important contributions to understanding the challenge of creating and sustaining dialogue about good and worthwhile lives, including Canadian Charles Taylor who uncovers some of the rich moral sources available to us in constructing our lives together.⁶ In making this conversation genuinely democratic, we find the work of Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas especially useful. Arendt attempts to recapture and redefine democracy as public dialogue and Habermas tries to connect democratic conversation to the institutions of modern society.⁷

We should add that none of this relieves educational leaders from their traditional management responsibilities to make sure that good teachers are hired and supported, that supplies are ordered and buildings maintained, for

Quand on accepte l'idée que l'éducation consiste à préparer les jeunes à vivre une vie utile et valable, l'idée qu'on se fait du leadership change pour devenir un cheminement plutôt qu'une destination. Cette approche ne décharge nullement l'administrateur scolaire de ses responsabilités traditionnelle de gestion, mais elle l'aide à adapter ses efforts de gestion à la nature particulière de l'éducation. Les administrateurs scolaires ont un rôle essentiel à jouer; et celui-ci n'est pas de définir des objectifs, ou de créer des consensus artificiels, ou encore de manipuler les opinions, il est de rassembler les membres de la collectivité pour parler de ce qui est bon et valable.

example. Good captains, after all, ensure that their ships are ready for voyages. What does change, however, is that administrative/management efforts must be tied to the unique nature of the enterprise — education.

Educational Challenges and Opportunities

Following Peters' advice to be clearer about the nature of education does not lead to simple, unambiguous conceptions of education or educational leadership. No seven-, nine- or 12-step programs are recommended; deciding what constitutes a worthwhile life does not lead to simple dictums. We need to recognize that the issues are enormously difficult and complex and approach them with due humility and respect, but they must be approached. We need people who recognize these challenges as opportunities.

Canadians must decide what kind of society they want to create and what kind of education is consistent with that society. In this task, educational leaders have critical roles, not to define visions, or create artificial consensus or manipulate public opinion, but to bring communities together to discuss what is good and worthwhile. We need people to begin such debate by suggesting possibilities, listening carefully to others and moving the conversation along. We need educational leaders who foster dialogue in which:

What matters is an affirmation of a social world accepting of tension and conflict. What matters is an affirmation of energy and the passion of reflection in a renewed hope of common action, of face-to-face encounters among friends and strangers, striving for meaning, striving to understand. What matters is a quest for new ways of living together, of generating more incisive and inclusive dialogues.⁸

In selecting people to initiate and sustain these discussions we need people who themselves are on their own educational voyages — “educating”

people — and hope to contribute to other journeys. We need people who are attempting to be clearer about what they are trying to do. We need educational leaders. ■

1 R. S. Peters, “Aims of Education — A Conceptual Inquiry,” in R. S. Peters, ed., *Philosophy of Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 14.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

3 Jane Roland Martin, “The Ideal of the Educated Person,” *Educational Theory* 32 (2), 1981, pp. 97-109. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

4 H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

5 Peters, “Aims of Education,” p. 20.

6 C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

7 J. R. Wiens, “Hannah Arendt and Education: Educational Leadership in Dark Times”

(Ph.D. dissertation, Simon Fraser University, forthcoming) and D. Coulter, “Teaching as Communicative Action: Habermas and Education,” *Handbook of Research on Teaching, Fourth Edition*, edited by V. Richardson (Washington: American Educational Research Association, in press).

8 M. Greene, “Epistemology and Educational Research: The Influence of Relevant Approaches to Knowledge,” in L. Darling-Hammond, ed., *Review of Research in Education*, 20, 1994, p. 464.

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