

RECLAIMING VOCATIONAL PROFESSIONALISM FROM ECONOMIC PROFESSIONALISM IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

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The topic of spirituality and education invites an analysis of teachers' status as professionals. The meaning of professionalism is historically linked to the religious concept of vocation (Chater, 2005), which is to say an occupation to which one is called "that should be focused on the common good" (Sears, 2010: 116). In capitalist society, professionalism also refers to "efficiency, measurable outcomes, and careerist thinking" (Dawson, 2005: 220) – in other words, the economic good. But ongoing cutbacks to public education in the name of fiscal responsibility (instead of alternative forms of fiscal responsibility in the service of public education) demonstrate that the common good and the economic good are separate, if not incompatible, aims. In what spirit, therefore, should the teaching profession promote education today?

Before we can respond to this question in good faith, we need to understand how the teaching profession *does* promote education.¹ What specifically is the common good upon which teachers are called to focus? Who or what is calling them? Far from academic abstractions, these are basic questions that pre-service and in-service teachers must address in order to obtain and retain employment. As Christou (2009) cautions, however, "thinking about how things are is no substitute for inquiring how things might and ought to be" (570). For such inquiring to take place, the teaching profession needs to understand its present form historically, not as an ahistorical given that *ipso facto* is above criticism; otherwise "it will be merely a conservative establishment that preserves the status quo" (577).

In *A Critical Theory of Education* (1990), Young identifies three interwoven strands in the history of education: "a critical strand" and "strands of nationalism and dogmatism" (45). Each strand reflects two universal and often opposing human pursuits, one for personal happiness and the other for interpersonal harmony. The particular forms that these pursuits have tended to take, needless to say, have enhanced the freedom of some individuals at the expense of others. Young therefore celebrates the fact that the critical strand has been "an unavoidable and central theme of educational thought" since the Enlightenment, associating it with democratic expansion of freedom from "regal and ecclesiastical power" (45-46). Nevertheless, he acknowledges that emancipatory criticism has paradoxically led to new forms of oppression. Notably, Rousseau's paradigmatic shift from God to Nature was itself "too great an act of faith" that many a national state has exploited to justify its social

¹ For a discussion of the Sartrean distinction between good and bad faith and its implications for education, see: Hyslop-Margison, E.J. (2003). September 11 and existential angst: shaping authentic educational responses. *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 34, 67-77.

policies not as divine edicts but as brute facts, thereby evading the very spirit of criticism that led Rousseau (and secular nationalists themselves) to reject monarchical and theological dogmatism in the first place (46).² “The result, perhaps unintended,” Young observes, “was the identification of education with the purposes of the national state rather than the freeing of the powers of the individual” (47). Drawing on Dewey’s attempts to enable humanistic pursuits through education under state-sponsored capitalism, he characterizes the modern form of education as follows:

Two tendencies are at war with each other. An education which stresses the emancipation of the individual and through the universalisation of that emancipation, the development of autonomy-promoting social institutions, nationally and internationally, and an education which seeks to meet the more urgent economic and political needs of the nation in its contemporary situation (47-48).

This description remains apt today, with one qualification. The latter tendency, if it has not already won the war, is certainly winning in modern industrialized democracies such as Canada. The common good on which departments of education call upon public school teachers to focus is blatantly capitalistic.

Consider New Brunswick’s Department of Education. On an incontrovertible rhetorical level, its mission statement channels the abovementioned pursuits for personal happiness – to “have each student develop the attributes needed to be a lifelong learner, to achieve personal fulfillment” - and interpersonal harmony – “to contribute to a productive, just and democratic society.” Trilling’s and Fadel’s thesis in *21st Century Skills* (2009), which the then Graham government distributed to every principal in the province, specifies the particular form into which the public school system is shaping these otherwise universal pursuits:

Knowledge work – the kind of work that most people will need in the coming decades – can be done anywhere by anyone who has the expertise, a cell phone, a laptop, and an Internet connection. But to have expert knowledge workers, every country needs an education system that produces them; therefore, *education becomes the key to economic survival in the 21st century* (6).

This vision of education is not just symptomatic of an intellectual blindness that conflates universal pursuits with a particular economic perspective. It is indicative of a tendency towards the restructuring of the public sphere according to *one* private model, namely neoliberal capitalism.

² Emery J. Hyslop-Margison drew my attention to the distinction between brute facts, which are beyond human control and social facts, which are the result of human decisions and therefore subject to human control. He and Adrian McKerracher have pointed out the undemocratic omission of this distinction in Ontario’s Guidance and Career Education program. See: Hyslop-Margison, E.J. and McKerracher, A. (2008). Ontario’s Guidance and Career Education program: a democratic analysis. *Journal of Education & Work*, 21.2, 133-142.

If the teaching profession is to avoid the *de facto* reduction of education to workforce training, it is crucial to resist capitalism's monopoly over other perspectives, particularly in curricula that profess to foster personal development and democratic participation as pillars of the common good. Left unchecked, neoliberal education "reinforces students' roles as consumers, spectators, and passive citizens" (Norris, 2010: 74). Here Young's insight into the consequences of cyclical recession, which the neoliberal turn during the 1970s was meant to mitigate but has instead exasperated, remains relevant:

Young people begin to ask whether or not it is meaningful to work hard at school when there may be no prospect of a job at the end of it. In turn jobs are reduced to incomes and the idea of 'vocation' disappears (4).

Worse than the disappearance of this idea is its present reappearance in the notion that a call to serve others is simply a call to serve the economy.

Resistance to this conflation of vocational and economic professionalism is not enough. The teaching profession should promote education as neither revealed by God nor discoverable in Nature but as a human – and therefore criticisable – construction. This is not to say that private conviction, whether religious or secular or even capitalistic, should not contribute to this construction. It is to say that public spaces should enable open discussion and even battle between private views, rather than suppress all but one view in the name of universal agreement.

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