

## Who Should Run Schools?

“... schools are awful everywhere. Grown-ups ... run the schools to suit themselves.” Mark in Chapter 5 of *Harry* presents some powerful arguments on schools and education. Following is a summary of a discussion of *Harry* 5 by a group of fifteen student teachers enrolled in the Primary Diploma of Teaching Course at a College of Education in Canberra Australia. The discussion was one of the tutorial sessions in the Philosophy of Education Course. All tutorials in fact were based on selected extracts from *Pixie, Harry and Lisa*.

Chapter 5 covers differing views on education provided by Harry, Mark and Maria. In our pre-reading and preparation for the tutorial, the sequence of the conversation presented us with the following stream of consciousness and discussion:

- an expression of dissatisfaction with a particular class (boring)

*led to*

- a broad categorization of classes into “interesting” and “uninteresting” rather than “educational” and “non-educational”;

*versus*

- an even broader condemnation of all classes as “boring”
- a philosophical discussion on random sampling from a bag of candy, used by Harry to demonstrate that there was no necessary relationship between classes i.e. they could be all good or all bad or any combination of good and bad could occur;

*this led to consensus that:*

- schools in general were bad, probably because they were run by grown-ups who run them to suit themselves (“they’d call it good no matter what they do”);

*but*

- someone has to run schools, and grown-ups “know better” than children how to do it - in fact “they’re the only ones” who can do it right;
- The basic question is whether schools should be run by people who know what they’re doing (but how do we assess whether or not they know what they are doing?). We expected (and were prepared to guide) discussion to focus on:
  - what the teacher’s job is;
  - the job’s necessary relationship with a school philosophy and the utility and limitations of such philosophies;
  - the influences of the social environment;
  - the different perceptions and perspectives of children, teachers, parents and the educational hierarchy (principals, clergy, regional administration);
  - who are the people who know what they’re doing?

Surprisingly, the most responsive chord was struck by the use in the passage of stereotyping or broad generalization, i.e. jumping to entrenched conclusions on the basis of limited, even a single contact or knowledge. Racial or ethnic

stereotypes seemed of most concern: for example whinging Pom; the Ocker Australian (Paul Hogan); the greasy wog; the lazy Aboriginal. On the positive side, there was a broad recognition and acceptance that in the context of the national image being projected, every Australian travelling abroad is potentially an Ambassador for his/her country. The connection was made that in the “blackboard jungle” each of us can influence pupils’ attitudes towards teachers in general.

The expression “That’s his job” also drew significant comment. It was noted that “I’m only doing my job” can often be an excuse for doing something that is morally wrong and there will inevitably be some conflict between what you would *like* to say and do and what you are *required* or *expected* to say and do as a teacher. Examples volunteered by the group included the sports coach who has an ingrained desire to win but who must counsel his charges that it’s playing the game that counts. The point was made strongly that the social context is important - what’s “right” for the Australian teacher/coach may not be “right” for the teacher/coach in the United States or Russia where winning is socially seen as much more important than competing to the best of your ability (stereotyping again?).

The conclusion reached by the group was that as professional teachers we should follow the dictates of the school philosophy, even if these conflicted with our own inclinations.

This conclusion led to a discussion on how far this kind of responsibility should extend. Teachers’ behaviour does influence pupil behaviour, and we must lead by example - if we accept the role of educators we must play it properly, even out of school hours. As Catholic teachers, or teachers in Catholic schools, we would be expected to set an example in Church attendance, involvement in parish activities, and moral as well as educational leadership.

To focus on the question of what qualities children perceived as making a good teacher, the results of a Year 6 survey were distributed. The ensuing discussion identified understanding, tolerance, kindness, friendship, intelligence and dedication as the qualities in a teacher which were most valued by the sample surveyed. In the discussion which followed, it was expected that compliance with the children’s ideal would provide the makings of a good teacher, but we would need to add the qualities of firmness and fairness because sometimes meeting the needs of one or two children would mean denying the different needs of others and sometimes would conflict with our own needs as teachers.

It was observed that punishment for disobedience was part of most children’s family or social ethos. Although some saw this as an undesirable expression of power as opposed to leadership, others felt that there was often no alternative.

The observation that schools should be run by “people who know what they’re doing” also generated lively discussion revolving around two themes:

- (i) You can know what you’re doing without knowing whether this is necessarily the right thing;

- (ii) Views on what the right thing should be will vary in different schools and different contexts within the same school.

Education can be viewed (and often is by both teachers and parents) simply as training the child and young adult to fill a role in life (job, university entrance etc.), in which case formal marks and academic achievement can be a legitimate objective of education in some circumstances. However, it was suggested that teachers and parents should consider a broader view of education as the development of the “whole person”. This involves creating human beings who are not only an asset to society but a credit to it.

A consensus seemed to emerge from this discussions that although academic achievement is a function of education for specific purposes and is particularly important in the last two years of high school, it is far less important than developing the “whole child” at the primary level and it should never be the sole objective of any level of education.

If we take the vocationally oriented school to its logical extreme, we can end up like *Oliver Twist* in the hands of Fagin who knew exactly what he was doing and did it very well, but few would call it a “proper” education.

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