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Tools for a democratic society

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Introduction

This paper addresses the underlying philosophical and ethical issues concerning citizenship and identity by combining a modern fairy tale with some practical examples and ideas to improve professional practice in schools and colleges. A narrative description of the desires of young people in society introduces an inductive method for analysing the modifications of citizenship.

Learning for a democratic society means the presence of the third adult in development through childhood. Childhood also means playing. In our research we have observed how children articulate their perceptions, their thoughts and their practical solutions during some 'funny exercises'.

Value-education begins with a fairytale

Somewhere far away there is an island. The weather is always nice, the people who stay there are nice, even beautiful. When longings strike you they are good longings, so you can pursue them to your heart's content ... Each of us knows this island, because who has not been there?

Opposite this island is the Belgian coast, an outstanding example of consumption and expensive boredom. For every little pleasure there, a price must be paid.

What does our consumer society tell our youth? 'Do you want to go to the island together - charter a speedboat and be there as soon as possible?' And off they go, setting out for the island. It can't go fast enough. Call these speedboat youngsters 'freaks' for the sake of convenience - we can't do without a name. Since pre-school age, even since they were babies, they have been following the arrows of their longings without pausing.

There are freaks in every class, in every street, in every group. There are even gangs of freaks. Hard in every detail: their language, their clothing, their expression, their entertainment, their locations, this is the spoilt generation. No wonder that parents, teachers, educators and legislators react: around the island they create a circle of a ban. Children are not allowed within the circle: there is no admittance for minors without an adult.

This ban is the reason why a completely different category of young people is created, in addition to the freaks. These are boys and girls who tell themselves at night, when real longings and desires turn up, 'I'm ten, fourteen, sixteen years old and I've never been on the island. I know that some girls or boys in my class, street, grouping of my age have already been on the island. I'm ten, fourteen, sixteen years old and no one but myself caresses my body. I've never been caressed by someone else. Or yes, when I was a small child my parents used to do so. I'm the only one who observes myself, my body in the mirror. I've never looked into the eyes of someone else - I've never seen how beautiful I might be.'

After all one isn't beautiful unless one is considered beautiful by someone else. This group are the 'Simple Simons'. Maybe they are not Simple Simons in reality, but that is the way the freaks label them. (Versteylen,1992)

This contrast between 'Simple Simons' and 'freaks' is exaggerated, of course. Each youngster will recognise that he/ she is a freak at some moments, and a Simple Simon at others. How can we develop in young people a healthy body image and a perception of love which seems completely at odds with the surrounding moral decay? In general we call the freaks children of the world. They accept patterns and examples without question; body perception is reduced to sex, which is no more than body consumption, body competition and above all body performance. What message is given to the 'Simple Simons' however, to girls and boys who want to enjoy their lives and their bodies as well? Should we not dare tell them (no matter how old they are), 'Do you want to go to the island? Please go - you're welcome to it! Don't go by speedboat, but by raft, floating together to the island. When you float, you never get in a raging passion. Drifting along, you get to know the differences between your longings. Maybe your friend expects the celebration on the island to be completely different from you.'

The task of the educator is to help young people to look for and to experiment with the best possible articulation between their desires and traditional prohibitions.

Does value-education tell a true story as well?

A reporter witnessed:

Far away I saw the little boy stumbling on out of the mountains in Kosovo. He had to be almost eight. With both hands he took hold of the sheet.

My interpreter spoke with him.

He was the survivor of a big family. I could already guess his story: I wiped the tears from his stained face. I thought: if could I only find a place of peace, somewhere in this world, where these miserable kids would find rest and happiness. But where is this place?

(De Standaard)

People can be angry or disappointed, not only because of a disappointing experience on the island but also because many people miss the opportunity to find the island altogether. What do anger or disappointment have to do with moral education? Why is my starting point anger and indignation? We are angry because we see so many people around us forced to live in inhuman situations: in poverty, hunger, oppression and virtual slavery. A society that is passive in such an untenable social situation, or that sees it as irrelevant, might make us even more angry.

Is such anger a good starting point for reflection? Anger is a bad adviser. Analyses of the European situation often refer to mistakes made in anger over particular situations. Anger is an experience of contrast between two parts (Schillebeeckx, 1989; Geurts 1996): experience of something wrong, and discovery of injustice or grief over suffering. This is the 'visible' experience of contrast, but there is also a hidden aspect. To discover injustice requires an understanding of justice – discovering injustice is discovering that justice is missing.

The difference between these two parts is that the first is clear and easy to express, but the second part is a more difficult idea, not knowledge that can be expressed in conceptual terms. How can children learn to recognise and cope with such experiences?

We need a method

The method proposed here is an old formula developed in a new way, which can be summarised as See - Judge - Act. It was originally proposed by Monsignor Cardijn, a cardinal and priest, for the Young Christian Workers in Belgium at the beginning of the last century (Cardijn, 1960). We try to *see* and to analyse a situation; we *Judge* (though perhaps a better term would be evaluate or discern) this in terms of evil/sin/good/grace within the Judaeo-Christian tradition; and finally we try to *act* to bring about a transformation, to introduce the dimension of grace. This is the construction of a reflection - action spiral, moving between commitment and critical reflection and back to commitment.

Analysis of the situation (See)

Individuals prefer to rely on personal experience when confronted with the need to make moral decisions. Human experience is an important source of knowledge that allows us to recognise good and values. Moral judgements are only possible if these values and ideas of good are involved, and if human actions are balanced against an examination of competing goods.

Drawing up a framework (Judge)

The inner structure of thought moves from experience to the foundations through reflection. We work inductively and reflectively, not deductively. Rationality is a key concept in the justification of moral norms and the regulating factor in law, because it directs action to aim.

The aim of human will is the idea of the good: the *bonum universale*. Humanity is bound to strive to achieve the universal good between particular different goods. To judge present-day Europe and its mission, we can chose, as a methodological option, to start with deconstruction to avoid being caught. Ideological suspicion, adopted to analyse the situation, has to be extended to the judgement process, because this is the point at which many children become the unwilling victims of doctrines developed to justify existing situations.

Toward a moral praxis (Act)

We now arrive at the third step: how do we realise such visions in contemporary situations? We complete the circle by going back to develop an agenda or particular strategy for a class, a school, a group of pupils.

Young people reach deeper relations, within the community and, in a wider sense, between teachers and pupils. Such deep and familiar relationships cannot be expected among all members of a large bureaucratic network. A close fellowship happens within a limited group of people, who meet regularly and interact on a person-to-person basis. Certain human needs can only be satisfied in relationships, and a small group can be more effective in providing an avenue for intimate communication and friendship, in increasing awareness of each other's situation, in offering strength and support to members, and in challenging each other towards greater growth and self-realisation.

Moral education, where members can be relieved of their burdens, prevents a class from turning into an introverted ghetto community. Moral education in a classroom can become a laboratory for experimenting with alternatives to present society's inequalities, injustices and oppression.

Moral education must be deeply involved in current issues, one of which is politics. The relationship between moral education and politics will always be contentious: both are interested in frontier-situations – those situations not yet defined by tradition, and which show an absence of salvation. Human action is only human because it is determined by reason. Action is not purely instrumental, and human decision is not just technically rational. It is not enough to raise children from a ‘fire brigade ethic’ to argue in favour of fire extinguishers.

The Greek word ‘*kairos*’ is now used to symbolise a decisive option and, at the same time, for the opportunity to strengthen the struggle for justice a new vision. *Kairos* is opposed to crisis. The current situation (the contrast-experience) is considered dangerous. But every situation can be experienced as favourable: chances have to be described and joined together.

Watch out for the traps

This application of an old formula may be easy to use, but embarrassing when its logic is followed. The short cut of ‘seeing and acting’ has been the approach of many well-intentioned social activists, who propose strategies of struggle and violence without allowing inspiration (books, gospel) to challenge such options. Another short cut is to judge without seeing. This has been the position of organisations who silence people with doctrinal and legal positions. Our organisations introduce a dichotomy between body and soul, thinking and acting. The result is there are many fighters who are blind to values. On the other hand, those who reflect are often imprisoned within beautiful ideas and feelings, but do not hear the cry of the people outside. But we must know that a method is not sufficient!

We also need a good environment for our young people

The Third adult

There are three categories of adults in relationship to young people: parents, a ‘loving and concerned’ consumer society (which is not loving at all, but is certainly concerned to profit from the desires of this generation), and between the two a rare type of ‘third adults’. This group is often loving - sometimes more loving than the parents - but not concerned to profit (for example, the reliable youth leader, the approachable teacher). This group does not sell goods, but simply offers values. Education is not possible without it this group. These people take care of the “zero” world: the inner life, and inner bruising and injuries. Many people from the first and second worlds who feel sympathy for the third and fourth worlds are lonely. Their outer commitments have often destroyed the inner warmth (Versteylen, 1992)

In each life there may be a dramatic moment of fundamental choice, which reaches the deepest levels and values, a commitment from which later choices and actions flow. Bernard Lonergan would call such a moment ‘religious conversion’ - the radical shift from seeing life as a problem to seeing life as a mystery and a gift. Once this happens, changes touch, heal and release ever-deepening levels of personality. Edward Braxton

developed Lonergan's schema to include affective conversion (from the suppression of feelings to the release and ownership of feelings); intellectual conversion (from knowledge as measurable fact to meaning, mystery, wonder); moral conversion (from satisfaction or law to values as the criteria of choice) or communical conversion (from society as 'they' to society as 'we') (L. Wostyn, 1998). Conversion can be jargon, but I have found these dimensions helpful in trying to assist people to discern where there are possibilities of change in their life journey.

The teacher as the third adult?

A teacher's first gift of is not telling, but listening: listening to what people are saying in their lives. The roles are like those of witness and guide. The witnessing takes on greater depth with a director who may has had more experience of listening, to many lives. The teacher also acts as guide, not just into the life of the school, but into ways of learning.

A current cliché is that the teacher converts a one-man band into a conductor, helping each pupil play a part. A better image would be of a circus master who tries to ensure there is something going on in all three rings. Another image would be of the teacher whose task used to be to transfer knowledge now becomes a guide to active learning. Teacher and pupils become each others' partners in dialogue. In this the central element is not to transfer knowledge, but the interaction between learners and subject-matter.

In order to do justice to the connection between the dialogue of the learners and dialectics of core words and experiencing, the didactic triangle of teacher, pupils and learning content has been extended to a pedagogic-didactic rectangle of learning-guide, learners, core words and experience.

In a dialogical teaching-learning situation this learning-dialogue is our primary concern. Special attention need to be paid to a mutually open relationship, a common theme of conversation, the personal contribution of the participants, the question-answer structure of core words and the skill to distinguish between core words (G. Schaap, 1984). Last but not least we need 'key figures' who can initiate seeing, reflecting and acting.

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