
OHIO TEACHER EDUCATION: A RANT IN THREE PARTS

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...if you want progress on a large scale, you must have schooling to keep people from taking advantage of it.

Edgar Friedenberg
“Children as Objects of Fear and Loathing”¹

PART I

How has it come to this? That’s what I want to know. How is it that we educational progressives find ourselves apologists for the public schools?

When I was an elementary teacher back in the late sixties and early seventies, I taught in a school that was as progressive as they came. We had open classrooms, team teaching, multi-aged grouping, continuous progress, limited grading. Our teaching included discovery methods in science, concept-based instruction in social studies, manipulatives in math, both individualized programs of study and cooperative learning. We used learning centers to address multiple learning styles and differential placement to meet individual student needs. And despite all of this (or, perhaps, because of it) I found myself involved with starting a “free school.” Of course, the school was not free of cost. It was outside the public schools and, therefore, had to charge tuition, but with sliding-scales and scholarships, anyone who wanted to could attend. It may have not been free in cost, but it was free in spirit.

It was the spirit of the free school movement that attracted me to the social foundations of education and, specifically, to philosophy of education. We were reading Jonathan Kozol’s *Death at an Early Age* and Edgar Friedenberg’s *Coming of Age in America* and Herbert Kohl’s *36 Children* and Charles Silberman’s *Crises in the Classroom*, and A.S. Neill’s *Summerhill*, and, of course, anything by John Dewey. What has happened to that progressive movement: the one that embraced Ivan Illich’s call to “deschool society” and the one that called for voucher plans to help make it possible for any child to escape the indoctrination of public schools designed to turn them into implements for advancement of those whose children attend Choate or Phillips Andover or St. Paul’s or Lawrenceville.²

At a time in which the public schools are so much more rigid, so much more disrespectful, so much more dehumanizing, so much more aggressively advancing the ideology of extremism, how is it that progressives feel compelled to defend the public schools? Why is it that when we hear agents of the ruling classes such as Rod Paige say things such as that public schools are a “broken system,” we feel the need to reject the comment instead of saying, “Yea! It’s about time you bastards recognized it!”³ Just because a spokesperson

is fronting for “the man” doesn’t mean that he can’t be right. Think about it for a moment. Maybe the public schools are broken beyond repair. Certainly that’s what progressives used to argue. So how is it that we now take positions diametrically opposite to those that we used to take? Why do we allow our opponents to maneuver us into a position that we don’t really believe? I’m certain that everyone in our field has high hope that public schools might someday provide real education; but I’m equally certain that everyone in our field knows that in today’s schools, rather than education, we find highly efficient training and illusory propaganda, brutal regulation and foggy mystification.

PART II

Let us look at one example of where progressives have moved. In “The Policy Agenda for Teacher Education: The Ohio Story,” Xiaodan Huang argues for philosophers of education to participate more in the reform movements effecting teacher education, Huang accepts Marilyn Cochran-Smith’s position that there are 3 different reform agendas in education.⁴ Realizing that there are actually three different reform movements helps us to remember that hegemony is a coalition of ruling elites, itself dominated by the hegemony of elite elites. While it may look like we are facing a unified, single elite, we must remember that we are not. Huang’s analysis helps us remember this. However, though I think her analysis is accurate at one level; I think it misses the boat at a deeper and more important level.

The Republican Party that dominates our public institutions today is a coalition of 3 different ideological groupings: neoliberalism, neo-conservatism, and social conservatism. Social conservatives are themselves a coalition of the religious orthodox in which the politically conservative evangelical fundamentalist Christians maintain an hegemony over the orthodox of other religions. We must be careful to always modify this evangelical Christian force with the term “politically conservative” because there are hundreds of thousands of progressive evangelical Christians who do not support this so-called conservative political agenda. After all, Jesus is said to have lived among the poor, not in a gated community; and it is believed that he taught us to forgive our enemies, not to bomb them.

How social conservatives, who are people supposedly committed to the value-based reasoning of religion, are able to find common cause with neoliberals, who are people who are supposedly committed to the purely self-centered reasoning of the marketplace is truly a miracle of modern political bed-making. Perhaps one way these two diametrically opposed forces are bonded together is through the third ideology—neoconservatism. While many people equate neo-cons with neoliberals, I believe that this is a mistake. Neo-cons are best represented by those who signed on to the Project for the New American Century agenda for attaining world domination through a

commitment to the will to power.⁵ This ideology has much in common with an earlier ideology that we all refer to as fascism. The neo-con's combination of commitment to use the state to advance the interests of the corporation combined with their commitment to traditionalism and worship of power helps the Republicans maintain a coalition among three groups that should be mortal enemies.

In the area of educational reform we see that the coalition of neoliberalism (the most powerful voice in the coalition) with that of the social conservatives have an ideological interest in destroying public schooling. No matter how many Ted Kennedys there may be who supported, and continue to support, No Child Left Behind, the truth is that this reform movement is intended, consciously, to dismantle the public schools and turn them over to the private sector.

PART III

Progressivism at its best can be found in Kathleen Knight Abowitz's "The Ohio Transfer Articulation Guide: An Ethics Case Study for Social Foundations of Education Faculty."⁶ In this article, which explores the struggles of a professor to balance the power of the state with her own ethical commitments, Abowitz gives us a careful and fair analysis and critique of Transfer Articulation Guide (TAG) agreements as well as a thoughtful consideration of an appropriate progressive response. TAG agreements create common courses at all Ohio public colleges and universities transferable from one institution to another. It puts the state in the role of curriculum developers at the postsecondary level. Abowitz's article provides us with an argument and a sentiment and an ethics raised to the highest level. It gives me hope that in these times of seemingly technocratic times where all decisions seem to be made on economic efficiency that there are still people who will take the high road and attempt to make us better people by also demanding that we make decisions based on ethical factors as well. Abowitz has done this by taking her opponents seriously and demanding that we take ourselves just as seriously.

You'll have to forgive me if I am less fair, if I seek the low road, and if I fail to take our opponents seriously. The truth is, I believe, that they don't take us seriously. That their arguments are mere smoke screens and that to address them honestly is like debating intelligent design in science education classes. When we treat advocates of intelligent design with respect, we confirm that there actually might be differing opinions in biology as to relative merit of evolution and intelligent design. There is no such debate in biology, so we should refuse to engage in that debate and confirm that there is one. The same is true here. The purposes that lead to the TAG agreement and to our being pushed into offering an "introduction to teaching" course rather than a social foundations course has nothing to do with improving the learning of students in teacher education programs. And I prefer not to pretend that there is. So let us

get to the heart of the issue: what should be the role of philosophy of education and the other disciplines that go under the name of social foundations in a school of education. I wish to address that issue as a way to back into how those in our field should respond to the dictates of the state and to the demands of faculty and students in other departments.

To prepare for this section I decided to revisit one of the more notorious addresses to the American Educational Studies Association. I am speaking of Friedenberg's 1978 R. Freeman Butts lecture that he titled "Children as Objects of Fear and Loathing."⁷ In rereading this most entertaining of addresses I came to the conclusion that there was really no reason for me to write this article, but, instead, I should just submit Friedenberg's essay as the evidence for my thesis. Of course, this is not possible nor completely desirable, so instead I have borrowed freely from his talk—interspersing his ideas and words with a few of my own. In the passages that follow, Friedenberg's words are enclosed in quotation marks while my own substituted words and passages are in italics.

But, in a respectable modern state, school is where kids are spozed to be. This can hardly be news to anyone in this room; but it is worth re-emphasizing in the context of my topic simply to remind us all of what an unusual social arrangement universal compulsory schooling really is. Even though we do, in fact, know that only industrial nations define all individuals from six to sixteen as people to be schooled, we still act as if this were somehow perfectly natural. Yet, most people, throughout history, have lived and learned as members of quite different societies. If they went to school, or were sent there, it was not as part of a pattern of age-segregation that was designed to be as nearly total as possible, but in order that, as individuals or as members of a select social group, they were to be taught something special: to sing in a church choir, perhaps; or to help administer an empire. Not to learn, in the ordinary way, how to earn a living; you learned that on the job by going down into the mines or out to the fields with your father and elder brothers, or by being apprenticed to a journeyman, or by entering a business establishment or office at a low level and working your way up, seeking your proper level. (66)

Compulsory education is really quite a strange idea. Yes, it is true that all societies have ways of socializing their young. It is true that industrial, bureaucratic societies require impersonal agencies to socialize them to regulative and dominating forces. Foucault helped us see the way in which the external regulation of society has become internal regulation through discourses of professionalization. "So what else is new?"

What is new is the *extent* of alienation and its indispensability to maintaining the institutions that exist. Yes, all societies have ways of instilling into the young the anxieties that make them selectively inattentive to the evidence of their own senses that would expose their culture's integrating myths as lies....All communities have problems of waste disposal and pollution, too: but those of today differ so much in degree that they differ in kind: Prospero, wise Duke of Milan that he was, could never have had any idea what a modern Milanese experiences when he breathes that rich, industrial air. Alienation in modern societies is really something else; and the first responsibility of the schools is to produce it. When you don't need so much of it to hold society together, you don't need schools to socialize the young. It isn't true that all societies have to find ways to socialize the young. They *have* ways of socializing their young....But we *find* ways; we're into technology. We stand at a little distance from the product we process and devise means of modifying its behaviour. (68)

Look, schools do the best they can to turn young people into tools; different tools for different jobs....No, the schools don't train kids to be robots; there's not much market for robots. Computers are more like it, with complex functions and good but erasable memories. And let's be clear about how it is—how it has to be—with computers. They needn't be unfeeling. The more expensive ones are not, they're designed to be very sensitive; they have warning circuits and overload-breakers; they alert other systems before they break down under inputs they can't handle; they can even be playful if they're programmed to be....But what they cannot and must not be is, literally, authentic.

A computer must never be the original source of its own input! If it could do that, it could rule itself, it would have its own life. (73)

But you know something? Despite all of the shortcomings of our schooling, young people actually seem to grow up to be normal. And the normal child in America is pretty competitive, gossipy and mean-spirited about his peers, highly conventional and conservative and hence punitive toward rather than curious about and interested in people who look, act, and live differently from himself. How much of this is attributable to the school? Well, we don't really know *do we?* because the control group has been abolished and no horizontal comparisons are possible. But vertical ones are; and we do have a lot of evidence that pre-school children tend to be much more curious and emotionally responsive, more daring and more exuberant, less irritable and strident than those who have been through third grade. (75)

Somehow these words spoken 25 years ago provide more cogent a critique of our present situation than what passes for philosophy of education and social foundations of education today. Don't get me wrong. I am not promoting nostalgia. I have participated in too many discussions that evoked all the nostalgia for the "good ol' sixties" that we need. I am not suggesting that we go back to that period. In fact, just the opposite. In the sixties there was still a possibility that the forces of transnational corporate globalization could be stopped from dominating the world. Such a possibility is no longer evident. Back then we could discuss possibilities that are no longer conceivable. What I think bothers me now is that progressive forces in education were more willing to speak the truth then and to not live in false hope (or, using Jean-Paul Sartre, bad faith) then seems to be the case today when we have even less reason for hope.

It is time for progressives to recover our own critiques and to refuse to allow ourselves to be positioned by oppressive forces into defending the indefensible. America's schools have not been set up to provide education. In our minds, we all know that, but we keep letting our hopes for things to be otherwise convince us to ignore our minds. I am not arguing that we should ignore heart and only use head. I think that we should listen to our emotional side. But perhaps we should pay a little more attention to that part of the heart that leads us to anger. We should resist the cooptation that the bureaucracy demands from us. To play with them as if they are honest is to willingly put on their chains with our own hands. As long as philosophy of education speaks in good faith, we will never be welcomed by the forces that control our schools. But as long as we speak in good faith, while also playing careful politics, we will not die and will earn a small, though perhaps, grudging, respect from our colleagues and students.

NOTES

1. Edgar Z. Friedenberg, "Children as Objects of Fear and Loathing," *Educational Studies* 10, no. 1 (1979): 63–75.
 2. Jonathan Kozol, *Death at an Early Age: The Destruction of the Hearts and Minds of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967); Edgar Z. Friedenberg, *Coming of Age in America: Growth and Acquiescence* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965); Herbert Kohl, *36 Children* (New York: New American Library, 1967); Charles Silberman, *Crises in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971); A.S. Neill, *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing* (New York: Hart, 1960); Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).
 3. See Xiaodan Huang, "The Policy Agenda for Teacher Education: The Ohio Story," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 37 (2006): 97–107.
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4. Huang, “The Policy Agenda for Teacher Education,” 97.
 5. Project for the New American Century, <http://www.newamericancentury.org/>.
 6. Kathleen Knight Abowitz, “The Ohio Transfer Articulation Guide: An Ethics Case Study for Social Foundations of Education Faculty,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 37 (2006): 117–126.
 7. Edgar Z. Friedenberg, “Children as Objects of Fear and Loathing.”
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