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quality education and professional teachers

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Quality education requires qualified professional teachers. They should be well-trained and have the opportunity to upgrade their skills throughout their careers. Administrative burdens and other non-teaching responsibilities need to be reduced to the minimum and educators should be supported so that they can concentrate on education.

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French writer Albert Camus and his mother and brother escaped war-time France and settled in Algeria. His father, who returned to France, was killed in WWI. His mother was illiterate, and the family was very poor. A teacher, Louis Germain, gave young Camus a chance. After receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957, Camus expressed his appreciation in a letter to his former teacher:

> When I heard the news, my first thought, after my mother, was of you. Without you, without the affectionate hand you extended to the small poor child that I was, without your teaching and example, none of all this would have happened…It gives me the opportunity to tell you what you have been and still are for me, and to assure you that your efforts, your work, and the generous heart you put into it still lives on in one of your little schoolchildren who, although older, has never ceased to be your grateful pupil. (Camus, 1996, p. 319)

Relationships and Learning

Those relationships in education are often under-valued. That may be because they are difficult to measure. They are, however, fundamental to the success of education. As John Dewey wrote more than a century ago, “the reality of education is found in the personal and face-to-face contact of teacher and child” (Dewey, 1902, p. 23).

This is true for small children, but it is also the reality for secondary and university students. Relationships are not old-fashioned or out of date just because they were already important pre-screen. As Pamela Hieronymi (2012) wrote,

> Education is not the transmission of information or ideas. Education is the training needed to make use of information and ideas. As information breaks loose from bookstores and libraries and floods onto computers and mobile devices, that training

> becomes more important, not less. (Hieronymi, 2012)

Many studies confirm that good teacher-student relations increase motivation and performance (see Gablinske, 2014).[1] The OECD, in its periodic papers and studies, including its PISA reports often come back to the relationships factor. For example, in "PISA In-focus 50", they report:

> PISA suggests that positive and constructive teacher-student relations are associated with better performance in mathematics – and can be a key vehicle through which schools can foster the social and emotional well-being of students. On average across OECD countries, when comparing students with similar socio-economic backgrounds and performance in mathematics, students who reported that they enjoy good relations with their teachers (e.g., they get along with most of their teachers; most teachers are interested in their well-being; most teachers really listen to what they have to say; they will receive extra help from their teachers, if needed; and most teachers treat them fairly) were more likely to report that they are happy at school, that they make friends easily at school, that they feel like they belong, and that they are satisfied with their school. They are also less likely to report that they feel lonely at school, or that they feel like an outsider or awkward and out of place in school. (OECD, 2015, p. 2)

School Reforms That "Crowd Out" Relationships and Quality Education

When we hear about the thousands of violent attacks every year on schools; on students and education personnel, whether the attacks are by terrorists, by government troops, by political extremists or the deranged, we, of course, focus on the victims, on their families. We also take measures to help the survivors deal with trauma and make new beginnings.

Such attacks do not have physical effects alone. They create climates of fear and make it difficult to concentrate on learning or teaching. Such attacks or the threat of them destroy the school socially and, therefore, educationally.

However, the school community and the relationships that make it a community, can also be destroyed without firing a shot. That has been, among others, the negative impact of some, misguided school reforms.

The school community is woven from relationships. Those relationships are between students and students, teachers and teachers, and students and teachers. As a community, it functions best if it is stable, healthy, and safe. In addition to being physically secure, without danger and harassment, it is a safe setting to be what you are, to think freely, to discuss, to be creative, and to draw outside of the lines.

School should not be a hustle where everybody looks out for "old number one" and "succeeds" by cheating or profiting from others or even by acing a test. It should not be a competition where students are fighting in an arena (see Renkl, 2019).

It is, rather, a collaborative environment where the individual becomes strong and independent by being nourished by the group rather than being pitted against it. It is a village where one learns from

others and not just from books or screens, where the values and cultures of society, including freedom and democracy, thrive and develop.

Many concrete examples of the damage of the wrong kind of school reforms were provided by Education International member organisations. Two examples are from the Republic of Korea and one from the United Kingdom. The KTU (South Korea) reported,

> First, competitive culture has been introduced to the teaching profession because of the [neoliberal-based education policies] like merit-bonus payments, standardised testing, teacher evaluation systems, and so on. Governmental policy makers wanted to show people the government's big efforts to bring innovative change among teachers, but it has resulted in no positive fruit. Rather, those policies have played a role in breaking the cooperative culture among teachers.
>
> Second, students' interest in learning has declined because of teaching to the test. It has brought about students' bad behaviour that teachers can't control, school violence, and many burdens on teachers.
>
> Both are factors that have reduced teachers' status. (Symeonidis, 2015, p. 34)

Teacher surveys by the National Education Union (NEU, UK) of teachers and students revealed stress and fear. The NEU gathered information from 730 participating education staff working in early years, primary, secondary, sixth-form colleges and further education colleges and found an alarming increase among students in signs of mental health problems as compared to five years or even a year earlier. Overall, 49 per cent of students were reported suicidal, 56 per cent were engaging in self-harm (81 per cent in secondary schools), 45 per cent had eating disorders, and 49 per cent of educators reported that students were experiencing panic attacks. (National Education Union, 2019).

Another NEU survey about teacher stress reported very high stress levels, with 81 per cent having considered quitting the profession in the previous year (National Education Union, 2018). Much of it was related to excessive workloads and too little control over work.

There are similar reports from all continents, even though many school systems have not yet been victims of such reforms. There are also reports from many countries of growing precarious work (confirmed in the EI teacher survey in 2018). This is especially true in higher education. These are factors having serious impact on recruitment and retention of teachers.

For teachers as well as learners, a school should be entered with a smile on the face rather than a pain in the stomach. As Albert Einstein is reported to have said: "It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge".

The Mission of Education and the Profession of Teaching

The teaching profession cannot be viewed in isolation from school systems, from public priorities for education and from the perception of political leaders and the public of education needs. The profession is important to society, is valued and has status only if the system and the decision-

makers and the public consider it important. If education is "served" in repetitive movements at the lowest cost possible by the least skilled personnel possible, it becomes a little like serving a hamburger at a fast-food outlet. Under such conditions, teachers become, at best, service delivery agents. That is not what is meant by professional teachers.

Although it is always unwise to generalise as there remain enormous differences at national level, there are certain disturbing trends in many countries, although there are also starting to be reactions against them as well. In other words, this is the perfect time to re-open dialogue at national, regional, and international levels about the purpose of education and about the role of teachers.

Article 13 of the UN Covenant of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights is a good place to begin to explore the purpose of education. The beginning of that article reads,

> The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to education. They agree that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. They further agree that education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups, and further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace. (U.N. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights art. 13, para. 1)

In the same year that the Covenant was adopted, 1966, the ILO/UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers was agreed (a similar Recommendation was adopted by UNESCO for higher education personnel in 1979 and many of the same principles were incorporated in the ILO Guidelines for decent work for early childhood education in 2013. They contain similar language. All three elaborate long lists of measures for teachers and the profession that are clearly and logically connected with its purpose.

Every three years, EI conducts a survey of its member organisations on the status of teachers. The last such survey was conducted in 2018. A report based on that survey was published and distributed. It also served as one of the sources of information for the submission of EI to the CEART for 2018 (Education International, 2018).

One of the most striking findings of the survey was how difficult it had become in many countries to obtain good quality teacher training at the beginning of teaching and during the career. Survey responses showed that only about 30% of teachers had access to such training. In a disturbingly large number of cases, particularly when local authorities were responsible for training, teachers had to pay for training out of their own pockets. Training, which was delivered by both public and private providers, was of varying quality, but much of it was poor according to respondents.

The recommendations elaborate major roles for teachers and their organisations in shaping education, in designing curriculum, and in developing teaching methods that are the most useful for students, as human beings, not as numbers. They stress the importance of initial and continuing training and the importance of treating teachers with respect for their contributions, but also in terms of fair compensation and conditions comparable to other professions.

If one accepts the purpose of education as defined by the Covenant and the Recommendations, a talented, well-trained, and motivated teaching profession is required.

They only element that seems to be in common between that definition and the approach of some of the reformers who seek to apply market principles to education is that they both stress that teachers must be central to any system of education.

The "reformers" may even believe it. Truth can be stranger than fiction. However, if you measure the values of education against their methods rather than their words, things just do not add up.

Take standardised testing. Testing can be useful if a teacher wants to know what is not being understood to adapt courses and instruction. But tests on a massive scale do not have that function and they can not only take the fun out of school, but also warp the purpose of education. How do they measure "the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity?" How do they measure "respect for freedoms and human rights", or "tolerance" or "friendship"? The answer, of course, is that they do not.

They measure that which can be measured and many of the most important things in life cannot. It is impossible to imagine, to get back to the beginning of this article, standardised testing and all that goes with it producing a Nobel Prize winner in Literature. That is because what you can test for has, in effect, determined that literature is not important. And, teachers often no longer have the time or the mandate to "take a small child by the hand".

The idea that education should be well-rounded and should help people live good and happy lives, participate in community life, and appreciate culture does not have to be a thing of the past just because those "intangibles" are hard to measure. Education itself is part of life, but it is often treated as if it was a waiting room for life. If education were mixed with life and available in one way or form or another at all stages of life, it would enrich societies and, for many people, would help compensate for jobs that may not be very satisfying.

Market dogma and methods and their application are bad enough in public schools, but if the values of education are to be the values of the market, it is not a giant leap to see education as an emerging market rather than a common good and a public service. In other words, commodification mentalities in public schools make the slide from children to products appear less shocking. Similarly, the robotization of teachers will reduce the trauma of replacing them with real robots.

One of the problems with dealing with the failures of reforms is that they often have vested interests attached to them. Such failures will become even more hidden if shareholders replace citizens in calling the shots. They may be failing students, but the real test of success will be the bottom line.

One of the failures of market-aping reforms has become more visible every day. It is sometimes called a crisis of democracy. People believe deliberate falsehoods because they have not learned critical thinking, because they have not learned to separate fact from opinion, and they have grown comfortable with living in bubbles behind their screens without fear of contradiction. Scepticism, free debate, ability to process ideas and facts, and active citizenship? They were not on the test.

Another Vision and Hope

Although the connection between the melt-down of some democracies and the narrowing of the

ambitions of education has not yet become a public issue or even much of a subject of discussion in academic or political circles, there is enormous interest among EI member organisations.

They clearly see the strong relationship among public schools, democracy, unions, and human rights. But many are also frustrated at the orientation of many schools almost exclusively on jobs and skills needed in the economy and little on the rest of life.

Let's look at the US and the UK where reform is the most advanced. The impact is beginning to show through even the slickest public relations.

There are indications in the US, where education reform was imposed for many years with a suffocating bi-partisan consensus, reforms have increased rather than reduced dissatisfaction of parents. For example, although it is argued that vouchers help poor people, they have the least support among poor people. Segregation has increased to the same levels that prevailed when school segregation was legally required in much of the country, again due to voucher programmes, both private and public. Large numbers of parents have boycotted standardised tests. And, even job seekers are beginning to understand that among the talents sought by employers, the ability to pass tests does not rank very high.

There have been several teachers' strikes in major school districts like Chicago and Los Angeles, largely about professional issues. And, in several states with very conservative governments and teachers forced to work two or three jobs to make ends meet, there have been strikes that have generated massive public support and, in some cases, have brought improvements.

If education is to be improved and be all that it can be, the expertise necessary is available in every school, the teachers. In the US, where teacher leadership in schools has gone out of fashion, studies show its importance. In fact, even though teachers and their organisations are the best placed to improve education and know what is happening and not happening in the classroom, many member organisations complain that they are too often not consulted or involved in education policy discussions.

On many issues, it is teachers who will be able to ensure that changes do not undermine the profession, but rather enhance it. Let's examine one current issue, the introduction of ICT in education. Is it used in a way that expands access to information, reduces administrative burdens and, in effect, strengthens the profession or is it seen as a cheaper way to teach on the assumption that ICT or artificial intelligence could really substitute for human beings? In fact, it is through a process of making changes with the participation of teachers that is the closest one can get to a guarantor of positive impact on the quality of education. If teachers and their organisations are shut out of the discussions and the only people allowed in the room are firms that are selling those ICT systems and may be, by the way, also interested in data or are paid for by those who are, the results might be quite different.

Why is there so much reluctance by public authorities to involve teachers and their organisations? It may be because what should be seen as purely positive, public authorities see as a threat. Teacher unions are independent and representative. That is part of what makes their views credible and valuable. However, so-called experts, who may come from the corporate sector or who may be paid to echo their master's voice or even NGOs, who may depend on funding from the very agencies or authorities that they are advising, are often "better behaved".

In the EI Education for all survey in 2015, many organisations reported being shut out of dialogue because they made recommendations that the authorities did not like or, in other ways, acted independently. A typical example came from the member organisation from Gabon, Le Syndicat de l'Éducation Nationale (SENA):

> At the beginning, the unions were involved in the different commissions. At some point, when we started to play our role and challenge the decisions, the authorities accused us of claiming for ourselves the State's responsibilities. The government did everything they could to take the unions out of the commissions. As a result, we are now limited to simple observers without any means to influence or change the decisions. (Education International, 2015, p. 31)

In the UK, the academies have also increased segregation and undermined the equality effects of schools. Many of the very effective reforms of the Parliament, supported by all parties, in 1947, have disappeared or been undermined. These newer reforms have made parents angry not only for quality reasons, but also because they do not like to see their children suffer. EI member organisations in the UK report that there is important support for reform of the reforms in all parties and that they are in a better position to be listened to rather than ignored than they have been under successive governments, regardless of party, for many decades.

There have also been major teacher union reactions and actions to diminishing respect for the teaching profession in the Netherlands and in Italy and in Portugal and other countries in Europe. There is strong opposition to privatisation in countries in both Anglophone and francophone Africa, in both Central and South America and in the Philippines, Korea, and other Asian countries.

The formation of Education International more than a quarter century ago symbolised the interdependence of teacher trade unionism and the teaching profession. There are no artificial barriers left between professional organisations and trade unions. However, the experience of this quarter century developed and solidified a combined, organically unified struggle. It is a struggle for teachers, but also for students, for parents, and for healthy, happy, and democratic societies. And, more than ever before, teacher unions recognise that trade unionism does not stop at the water's edge. It is a global struggle. Ideas, including bad ones, spread rapidly and the profession must respond globally as well as regionally and nationally.

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U.N. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights art. 13, para. 1

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1. The dissertation by Gablinske (2014) includes an extensive literature review that summarise and link studies showing the benefits of the emotional, personal links between teachers and students in several areas.