

The inherent fruits of educational endeavour

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Abstract

This contribution begins by reviewing a widespread inherited idea in Western civilisations: that education is an undertaking to be controlled, at least in all essentials, by some superior body; not by educational practitioners. As a subordinate practice then, and depending on the political, religious or ideological colour of the controlling body's outlook, education may be called upon to serve widely different purposes, often conflicting ones. Against this historical pattern I propose the notion of education not as a subordinate practice but as a practice in its own right, with demands that arise from its own inherent purposes. Despite being overshadowed by institutionalised forces in the history of Western education, the philosophical ancestry of education as a practice in its own right is robust and energetic. It reaches back beyond Plato and Aristotle to the example of Socrates, specifically the practical Socrates captured in the early dialogues of Plato. In supporting the case for education as a practice in its own right, I will explore the kinds of experience that lie at the heart of the practice and the character of the kinds of fruit that flow from it. These features distinguish education from other practices and from deficient forms of educational practice itself. Arising from this exploration, an analysis will be carried out of the capabilities and relationships that constitute educational practice, as the particular kind of practice that it is.

Keywords

Inherent fruits, practice in its own right, subordinate practice, relationships of learning

Introduction: The case to be made

Practices like law, medicine and nursing, which nowadays operate as autonomous ones in democracies, have histories that reveal recurring drives, by a monarch or church or despotic ruler, to shape both the goals and the conduct of the practice (Robinson et al., 2000; Wolf, 2006; Sturdy, 2011). In the case of education, such efforts to control the enterprise have been more continual than recurring. Prior to the Protestant Reformation, and in more sectarian forms after it, a pronounced

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ecclesiastical-hierarchical order pervaded all aspects of education; so much so that it was taken for granted in the European lands commonly known as ‘Christendom’ (Bowen, 2003; Boyd and King, 1995; Huizinga, 2020). It was not until the 18th century Enlightenments and their turbulent aftermaths that such hierarchies were challenged in vigorous and sustained ways (Israel, 2011). In countries and territories where the challenges were largely successful, a new kind of order was installed. Characteristically this new order, which had many variants, included written guarantees for certain rights and freedoms, together with provisions for a separation of powers between the different arms of government, between church and state, and for curtailing authoritarian rule. Although the newly enshrined order did not apply to all – often only to a literate minority of males while also preserving the privileges of an elite (Colley, 2021, Ch 6) – it provided a basis for advancing more radical reforms in the future. It made possible successive battles, through constitutional means, for more equal treatment of the plurality of humankind in any particular society. It also enabled professions to become progressively more organised, and more independent of their former patrons or superiors (Carr and Hartnett, 1996).

The struggles continue in our own day, not only for equal treatment on the part of excluded minorities, but also for a more adequate understanding of equality and plurality themselves, and of the practices that might cultivate them. Among such practices public education remains a central concern; not least the kind and the degree of autonomy it needs to pursue its own distinctive goals and to be properly answerable for the fruits of its work. I should stress from the start that the ‘autonomy’ of education here refers not to anything absolute, but to the scope and authority needed by any worthwhile practice to enable it to develop and flourish. It is by capably using such scope that it makes its particular and most beneficial contributions to human welfare.

The later 1960s and early 1970s witnessed in many countries a climate hospitable to new egalitarian initiatives in educational research and practice (UNESCO, 1972; Elliott, 1983). However, the 1980s and subsequent decades have seen successive waves of state-sponsored reform internationally that have largely rebuilt a hierarchical order in education (Peters, 2011; Sahlberg, 2016; Hargreaves and Shirley 2012, Ch.1). Historically, such hierarchies sought submission among teachers and scholars to the powers of ecclesiastical authorities. But the more secular tenor of 21st century educational reform has installed neoliberal doctrines in the premier place enjoyed by theological ones in earlier centuries. The punitive machinery of the historical order involved public humiliations, excommunications and various forms of terror (Clanchy, 1999, Ch.13; MacCulloch, 2009, Ch.18). By contrast, today’s mechanisms of control utilise funding to secure conformity in more adroit ways. The new order is clearly less violent, but also more comprehensive, supported as it is by digital resources for advanced levels of monitoring and data-gathering (Lewis and Holloway, 2019; Robertson, 2012).

Making a case for the autonomy of education today, as I propose to do here, has to acknowledge these realities and to engage seriously with them. This means calling on resources not only of social-scientific educational research, but also on historical and philosophical resources – and on any further resources that might help to draw up and present that case in its fuller dimensions. For instance, comparing pre-modern and contemporary educational contexts can provide some instructive insights for current analyses. It can show tellingly how the daunting thrall of near-absolute powers can shrivel, rapidly or piecemeal, yielding not to a world where equality and participation unambiguously prevail, but to something that might also be newly daunting, yet differently so. In relation to the case to be made, it needs to be said that this case is not a partisan one, whether of the left or right, or of a liberal or conservative stance. The issue in question is the *adequacy* of our understanding of educational practice. Accordingly, the emphasis must be on elucidating understandings of educational practice that seek to do justice *to what actually happens*, wittingly or

otherwise, when experiences of teaching and learning take place. Equally important, the enquiry needs to focus on what kinds of practice might make such experiences most promising and defensible, in a non-partisan sense, bearing in mind the *individuality* of experience itself and the inescapable *plurality* of humankind.

In making the case, I will proceed as follows. In the next section (second section), two prominent historical examples of efforts to grant autonomy to educational practice will be reviewed; efforts that respectively embody American and European instances of Enlightenment thinking. That review will also trace how such pioneering ventures can become overshadowed by consequent events; events that enable more traditional patterns to be restored and to continue in new forms. The questions about autonomous and subordinate practices that arise from the historical review will then be pursued in the third section, which will closely examine the notion of practice itself, and the related notion of practitioner. Here the argument will be advanced that education is properly to be understood as a practice in its own right: a *sui generis* practice as distinct from a subordinate or derivative one. In supporting this argument, I will investigate the kinds of experiences and fruits that lie at the heart of education *as* a practice, that distinguish it clearly from other practices and from deficient forms of educational practice itself. This investigation will call in turn for an analysis, in the final part of the essay, of the capabilities and relationships that *constitute* educational practice – as the particular kind of practice that it is.

A pattern that changes but persists

Early exemplars of an Enlightenment spirit of autonomy in education, more particularly higher education, can be seen in Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) in America and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) in Europe. A major project of Jefferson's during his retirement was the founding of a new kind of university (The University of Virginia). He envisaged it as being free of the religious and other controls that prevailed in existing centres of higher learning in the United States. In a letter to William Roscoe in December 1820, Jefferson wrote: 'This institution will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind. For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it'. (Jefferson 1820). In Europe, a decade previously Humboldt had, in his brief period as Prussia's minister for education, taken a similarly courageous lead in founding the University of Berlin. Sharing a deep intellectual friendship with Schiller and Goethe, Humboldt was determined to create a centre of learning that recognised that educational purposes had their own integrity, or 'integralness', distinct from the designs of king or emperor or church. This conviction emerges clearly in the following extract from one of the founding documents for the new university.

The state should not look to the universities for anything that directly concerns its own interest. It should rather cherish a conviction that in fulfilling their real function, the universities will not only serve the state's purposes but serve them on an infinitely higher plane. On this higher plane, more is comprehended and forces and means (*Kräfte und Hebel*) are brought into action which are quite different from those that the state can command (Humboldt, 1810/1970, § 20).

The boldness of Humboldt's venture can be appreciated when one considers that he successfully accomplished it in the aftermath of Prussia's major defeat by Napoleon at Jena-Auerstedt in 1807. Humboldt's conception of the university moreover was to serve as an influential one for other universities in Germany and Europe in the 19th century and later (Benner, 2003, Ch.4).

The difference between Humboldt's understanding of education and the paternalistic conceptions then dominant can be clearly seen in his insistence that educational purposes are distinct from those of the state. This would also be largely true of Jefferson. In Humboldt's case, the difference is also evident in his insight that energies that are properly educational can be released on a 'higher plane' *only when the state explicitly respects them and enables educational practice to cultivate them*. The striking nature of Humboldt's reforms of Prussian schooling more generally can best be appreciated when these are compared to reforms in France. There Napoleon secured a centralised control and imposed a nationalist-secularist uniformity on education to replace the ecclesiastical hierarchies of the *Ancien Régime*. Where the Prussian reforms reveal a concern for identifying and catering to the individuality and plurality of students, the latter disclose how self-servingly Napoleon consolidated 'the gains of the Revolution' (Dwyer, 2010: p.357; Thompson 1990: pp.56–59). The Napoleonic reforms meant that education in France exchanged one set of masters for another, the new order being as hierarchical and as centralised as the old, though decidedly more secular. Above all, the new regime in education, influential well beyond France, was tightly tailored to the priorities of the Napoleonic state. In Napoleon's own words: 'we must secure unity: we must be able to cast a whole generation in the same mould' (Thompson, 1990, Ch.16; Markham, 2010).

The history of education is replete with further examples of using education, and more particularly schools and colleges, as an instrument to be deployed by the party – or parties – in power. In Western civilisation, this idea is as old as Plato's *Republic* (Plato, 2008), where its regimented provisions are elucidated through the mouth of Plato's 'Socrates'. Interestingly however, the idea seems to have had little practical effect in Plato's own time. Indeed it did not become widely influential until the latter half of the first millennium. By that time an Augustinian Christianity had become adopted as the official religion of the Roman Empire (Brown, 2000: p.486ff; MacCulloch, 2009, Part IV). Roughly speaking, during the thousand-year period from the coronation of Charlemagne in 800 AD as Holy Roman Emperor to 1800, education in Western civilisations was largely determined by the tenor and scope of the Church's interests. In the 16th century, the Reformation and Counter Reformation strengthened rather than weakened this pattern, each Christian denomination using its schools to make its teachings more exact, and more exacting, for its followers (Boyd and King, 1995, Chs. 7 & 9; MacCulloch, 2009, Chs. 17 & 18). Recurring battles between church and state for the control of schooling featured strongly in the educational history of the 19th century, the state eventually achieving the upper hand in most cases. This victory was confirmed in dramatic and sometimes violent ways during the 20th century, when autocratic governments in many countries secured a coercive grip on education. Examples include Italy under Mussolini, Spain under Franco, Germany under Hitler, the Soviet Union and its satellite states under a succession of rulers, China under Mao, Chile under Pinochet, Cambodia under Pol Pot, and the list goes on (Guidici et al., 2020). The pattern continues in the 21st century – in a range of different but highly manifest ways in Islamic republics and kingdoms, and significantly also in a newly assertive China. It also proceeds in less violent but emphatic ways in those democracies where governments assertively seek to use public education to extend their own preferred views of economy, society, religion, or culture (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2012; Sahlberg, 2021; Yosef-Hassidim, 2021).

In fact, as indicated initially in the Introduction, in many democracies the idea of education as a subordinate arm of state policy has become newly embedded. This development can be linked to the successive waves of education reforms internationally that originated in the Reagan-Thatcher era of the 1980s (Abrams, 2016; Murgatroyd and Sahlberg, 2016; Ringsmose, 2017).¹ The neoliberal rationale underling these waves of reform steadily achieved the standing of a conventional wisdom. It has made popular the view that as the government is the body that pays the piper, why shouldn't it call the tune? And, this standpoint continues, if the government's educational policies make schools

act in ways that arouse the concerns of students or parents, can't that government be unseated at the next election? One might plausibly ask what could be amiss with such a democratic view of the relationship between educational policymaking on the one hand and educational practice (i.e. implementation) on the other? Does it not betoken a healthy separation of powers between the makers and the implementers of policy?

Tackling questions such as these in the investigations that follow here will hopefully enable many key issues to be clarified and misunderstandings to be overcome. I hope to show that cultivating and harvesting the fruits central to educational endeavour make it necessary for educators to enjoy a discretionary scope analogous to that of practitioners in other occupations. In using the term 'practitioner', I am drawing parallels with practitioners in other fields – nursing, law, medicine etc. – where it would now be odd to raise questions like those just mentioned, particularly the one about the government calling the tune. In all occupations that are accurately described as practices, practitioners need a particular range of incisive understandings and experiences to pursue the goals of the practice properly. Equally important, they need the scope to practise their art without undue pressures from outsiders to the practice. These points now call for a closer examination of the notions of *practice* and *practitioner* in human affairs, especially so if we are to understand the meaning and promise of education as an autonomous practice.

Practice, practitioners and educational experience

The familiar idea of viewing education primarily through something like a political, religious, or ideological prism loses sight of one key point: that there may be priorities, or worthy goals, that are educational *before* they are anything else. This needs to be stressed from the start as it underlies everything that is pursued in the following pages. Such priorities would identify the occupational commitments that are *central* to educational practice. They would clearly distinguish this practice from other fields of human endeavour that have their own characteristic purposes. Of all living beings only humans can engage in what is called *practice*. Of course other animals – for instance sheepdogs or sniffer dogs – can be trained through 'regular practice' to perform tasks that humans might find impossible to accomplish. But such habituation of animals, for all its benefits, cannot rightly be called practice. Neither, for that matter can the actions of persons who routinely describe themselves as 'practical' men or women, but who are ill-disposed to offering justifications for their decisions or reflecting on the consequences of their actions. The notion of practice, with its origins in the Greek *praxis*, captures *informed* and *deliberative* human action that seeks to achieve worthy and defensible goals for a community or *polis*. It was Aristotle who characteristically identified and stressed this defining feature of practice (Aristotle, 2011, 1140a-b), both for his contemporaries and for subsequent generations.

Drawing upon this Aristotelian background the enquiries of authors like Alasdair MacIntyre (1985) and Joseph Dunne (2005), have developed and refined the notion of practice for contemporary contexts of life and work. Their efforts have provided rich insights into key issues confronting the different major occupational fields in our own day. Dunne has focused on educational practice so I will engage particularly with what he has put forward. He offers the following definition of practice to begin with:

A practice is a coherent and invariably quite complex set of activities that has evolved cooperatively over time. It is alive in the community who are its insiders (i.e. its genuine practitioners), and it stays alive only so long as they sustain a commitment to creatively develop and extend it – sometimes by shifts which at the time may seem dramatic and even subversive (pp. 152-3).

Both MacIntyre and Dunne distinguish between the internal and the external goods of a practice. (MacIntyre, 1985: p.188ff; Dunne, 1993: p.379; 2005: p.152ff). The internal goods are those essential to the practice. In the case of nursing for instance, they include providing the best standards of appropriate medication, monitoring and respectful care to patients, as well as the best supports to aid recovery. The external goods of a practice, by contrast, include things like money, social status or reputation (Dunne, 2005: p.153). These can of course be associated with success in the practice, but do not arise from its core purposes. The dedicated pursuit of inherent goods is what gives a practice its integrity, or integralness, and that integrity becomes compromised if these inherent goods have to yield to other pressures, whether political-ideological, religious, commercial or other. To the extent that this happens, the practice is subordinated to other concerns and fails to flourish as a practice in its own right.

Taking education as a practice in its own right, what are its inherent goals or purposes? As a first response to this question, I would suggest the following three, not as any *theory* of practice, but as something more close by, even inescapable, if the very notions of practice and practitioner are to be relevant here. These three purposes then, indicate in an initial way the tenor and scope of *educational* practice, prior to further elucidation and refinement:

- (a) first, to uncover those potentialities for constructive thought and action that are native to each individual human being, recognising that humankind, even in a local context, is a plurality;
- (b) second, to cultivate those emergent potentialities through renewed imaginative engagements with inheritances of learning, from the classical to the avant-garde;
- (c) third, to try to ensure that the educational environments where such purposes are pursued provide learning experiences that embody shared benefits, in the form of both social and intellectual virtues.

The first purpose here links significantly with themes to be variously found in the work of Socrates (Plato's *early* dialogues), the writings of Abelard, Erasmus, Montaigne, Kant and other historic figures in Western traditions of learning. It is true that all are deceased, male and white, but this doesn't exclude anyone from sharing in the riches they have to offer, or from engaging critically with their arguments or legacies. Another important reference in the first of the three points is to the plurality of humankind. Hannah Arendt has memorably elucidated this feature, together with that of natality, in *The Human Condition* (Arendt, 1958). Both features are of first educational importance, underlining the individuality of experience but also its socially situated character. Of plurality she writes: 'Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live' (p.8). And describing 'natality', she says: 'the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting' (p.9). Natality refers to birth in a figurative as well as a physical sense, for instance the uncovering and nurturing of potentialities particular to individuals and groups. Taken together, natality and plurality call attention to the disclosure of new possibilities for initiating actions for bettering humanity's lot in any particular circumstances. Where education is concerned, striving to do justice to natality and plurality helps to highlight where the central, or inherent, responsibilities of educational practice lie. It also provides substantial reasons for not aligning this practice, or its practitioners' efforts, to the goals of a political party, or church, or state, or any other institution. Ultimately, moreover, it also offers a more promising basis for vocational education, informed

career choice and a society's economic welfare than do incentive schemes of policymakers that seek to marshal students systematically towards particular subjects or careers.

The second inherent purpose refers to the cultivation of emergent potentialities through imaginative engagements with inheritances of learning – that is, living traditions of study in mathematics, history, science, religion, art and so on. At first sight, this may look conventional enough, if a bit ambitious. But it calls into question fundamentally the long-dominant idea that education is essentially a process of transmission. No less radically, it questions the almost routine policy aim of harnessing human aptitudes to the demands of an economy. Instead of any one-way process of delivery, or one-way traffic in influencing and steering, this second purpose reminds us, including any teachers who might forget the point, that such engagements are ever and always a *joint* undertaking by teachers and students. This remains the case even where the students resist the teacher, or absent themselves physically or mentally. The very act of resisting or absenting makes them participants, with their own stakes in what is going on, as distinct from mute observers or acquiescent receivers. Recognising from the outset that teaching and learning is a joint undertaking – experienced from different perspectives by teachers and their different students – brings to light a range of key responsibilities and relationships that tend to remain beclouded in 'transmission' conceptions. To these responsibilities and relationships, we shall return shortly.

The third inherent purpose highlights the social nature of classrooms, teaching labs, seminar rooms, lecture halls and so on. Classroom encounters with inheritances of learning enable students to discover something of their own possibilities and limitations. But this happens in a context where one's successes and shortcomings are evident, at least partially, to others. A perceptive awareness of this orients educational practice to things that might be overlooked in the routine pursuit of grades and rewards; for instance, to the ever-present potential for one-upmanship, competitive jealousy and other acrimonious reactions. The uncovering of a sense of personal identity is unavoidably underway, healthily or otherwise, in a shared learning environment. To be keenly aware of this discloses a central necessity of all defensible educational practice: the necessity to ensure, as far as possible, that one student's success is not at the expense of other students. To experience plurality in its various manifestations in a learning environment that is safe, firm and constructive, is perhaps the best way for a person to become capable of respecting plurality more widely. The quality of insight and leadership on the teacher's part is crucial here, not least in negotiating how issues of justice, conflict and compassion come to be experienced through the daily actions and relations of teaching and learning. Here, John Dewey hits the note well with his critical remarks on 'preparation for the future' in education: '[O]nly by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything' (Dewey, 1938/1997, p.49).

Practitioners' dedication to inherent purposes like these three makes teaching a practice in a *sui generis* sense: a practice in its own right. Recall here the direct link that Dunne makes between practice and practitioner. It is through teachers' duly focused efforts and their informed initiatives that their practice stays alive and develops. Without such efforts and initiatives the practice will atrophy. The implications of this are many, including the following twofold point: Not everything that goes on in schools and colleges can readily be called educational practice, and not every teacher can be readily called a practitioner. Where the practice has been colonised, partly or more fully, by outside interests or forces, teachers may themselves have become habituated in routines that sit uncomfortably with the purposes that make teaching a distinct practice, as described above. While a patent colonisation is more characteristic of autocratic regimes than of democracies, in few democracies can education fully withstand the designs of policymakers and others to harness educational efforts to current political imperatives.²

It is necessary to say something now of how educational actions at a practical level might be oriented by the three inherent purposes just considered. Bearing in mind the point that such action involves in each instance an interplay of influences as distinct from a mere transmission, it will embody features like the following:

- the unforced disclosure to learners of their *own* particular talents and limitations as they encounter mathematics, music, woodwork, languages and so on;
- the quickening of interest provoked by finding oneself in new imaginative landscapes in these and other subjects;
- the new reserves of energy and motivation springing from even modest learning achievements and their affirmation;
- the acknowledgement by fellow students and by a teacher of one's specific contribution to a topic being explored;
- the attentive restraint that enables one to listen to and think about the standpoints of fellow-learners;
- a capacity for respecting genuine differences, promoted through learning environments where encounters with human plurality are regularly experienced in concrete ways.

Features like these six are marks of high quality in a learning environment, but they are not something that can be secured, once and for all, by pedagogical effort. They are linked, first and foremost, to human qualities, or more precisely capabilities; capabilities moreover that are embodied, or 'housed' in certain forms of relationships. The import of this point is likely to be overlooked if capabilities are primarily regarded as competencies to be mastered and possessed, as if they were primarily, or essentially, forms of technique. To avoid such wrong turns, we need to explore such relationships more closely and to show how they illustrate and confirm the distinctiveness of educational practice.

Practitioner capability and relationships of learning

A capable practitioner in any particular field employs discernment, analysis, judgement, at ever more advanced levels. This remains true, but in different ways, for practices like engineering, nursing, social work, physiotherapy, farming, medicine, teaching and so on. But becoming a *teaching* practitioner involves, first and foremost, developing a strong capability in a number of key domains of relationship. This suggestion might look odd from any perspective that regards capability in teaching mainly as a matter of joining together theoretical or academic knowledge with the possession of skills that are learned on the job. If our enquiry remains carefully focused on the experience of teaching and learning itself however, a quite different perspective on pedagogy emerges. This keeps under the spotlight the inherent demands of educational practice itself – demands that have to be acknowledged and embraced if the practice is to pursue its goals with a meaningful degree of success. A consideration of these demands reveals a necessity for teachers to become capable in at least five broadly conceived domains of relationship. It also reveals that they need to have a perceptive understanding of how these domains interweave and influence each other in practitioners' daily experiences. I shall identify the five domains here, followed by some summary remarks on the importance of each in educational practice.

- (i) the teacher's relationship to his/her teaching subject(s);
- (ii) the teacher's relationship to his/her students;

- (iii) the teacher's relationship to colleagues (including school leadership);
- (iv) the teacher's relationship to parents/guardians, and to the public more widely;
- (v) the teachers relationship to him/herself.

The teacher's relationship to his/her teaching subject(s)

Subjects on a school or college curriculum are commonly viewed as bodies of facts, concepts, propositions, theories, procedures etc., all of which knowledge can be reliably contained in textbooks, electronic files, web articles and other repositories. But this commonplace understanding is an inadequate one, even a misleading one, for teachers. A well-travelled road, but a mistaken one, stretches ahead wherever the practitioner's idea of a curriculum springs from an understanding of subject knowledge essentially as a matter of cognitive possession. The stage is already largely set for a 'transmission' view of teaching and a 'reproduction' view of learning.

By contrast, a very different picture opens up when each subject is viewed as having its own distinct *voice*, or range of voices. In fact, it would be more accurate to describe each subject as *a range of active voices* – sometimes voices in tension with each other. On this latter account, the teacher's relationship to the subject(s) s/he teaches is understood as an ongoing and vibrant *conversation*. This is much more than a question of cognitive mastery, or what is routinely called 'competence' in the subject. In fact, fluency in the subject here becomes mainly a going-forth into new worlds on the teacher's part: a venturing of imagination into new regions, sometimes daunting ones, where one gradually learns to move about with more familiarity. Calling upon personal resources of energy and restraint, it means learning the language, or vocabulary, that enables one to understand a new intellectual or artistic landscape, thus becoming attuned to its distinctive features, movements and nuances. Far from any mere transmission, reception or delivery, this is an ever-renewed *interplay of address and response*, involving new concepts, ideas and insights that expand and challenge our existing outlooks. It includes becoming keenly attentive to what the subject seeks to say, as well as calling into play one's own critical capacities, actively engaging with the subject – through personal readings, seminars, regular encounters with fellow teachers and so on. In short, it involves embarking on a different path than that of mastery and transmission. Perhaps the greatest peril for pursuing that path faithfully is any form of complacency on the teacher's part. For instance, an assured sense of conceptual control arising from years of successful teaching may dull one's alertness to creeping negligence, or to biases that might slip in by the back door. Where familiarity yields to complacency the teacher becomes ill-tuned to the voice of the subject, or more precisely, to the conflicts, discoveries and vital debates that distinguish it as a field of study. Where the relationship remains vibrant, the teacher potentially has something original to say in each new encounter, some unforeseen approach to adopt, some fresh perspectives to bring, some inviting pathways to open.

The teacher's relationship to his/her students

For many this domain of relations is the most important of educational practice. This is hardly surprising as each of the six practical features considered in the previous part (Part 2) bears directly on this domain. The quality of the teacher's relationship with pupils remains central for key goals like the unforced disclosure of students' emergent promise and the cultivation of capacities for recognising and embracing human plurality

This teacher–student relationship is often described as an unequal power relationship (e.g. Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). In an important sense, it is, and of course there's the abiding danger

here of an abuse of power. But at its heart, the relationship is more about enablement than it is about power – for example, the quickening of interests, motivations and energies, the affirmation of individual contributions, and so on. If the wielding of power becomes a dominant characteristic, whether overtly or tacitly, then the learning environment, and the experiences that take place in it, are likely to suffer. Power can be taken to include different things, for instance coercion, or earned authority, or the defensible use of influence, or the unacknowledged exercise of violence. It could sometimes comprise a combination of contrasting features, including these just mentioned and many others. So it may be helpful to think here, not in either/or terms, but of a spectrum, or continuum, in viewing the teacher's relationships with students. At one end of the spectrum lie orientations that are mainly manipulative, or controlling. At the other end lie orientations that are mainly enabling and caring (Hogan, 2010: p.62). A particular teacher's basic attitude towards students could, in a fairly settled way, lie towards one end or the other of this continuum. But the teacher's disposition could also occupy a shifting position on the continuum. If these shifts are frequent and dramatic, relations are likely to be volatile, and educationally unproductive in the longer run. By contrast, where there are clear expectations shared between teachers and students about purposes, learning activities, participation, co-operation, work effort and the different joint responsibilities of teaching and learning, a more promising prospect for practice comes into view.

An important consequence of these points is that good practice in teaching requires that practitioners are regularly involved in actions that strengthen their capabilities as their own best critics. As with team members in various sports, but with the emphasis on co-operation rather than competition, practitioners need to become proficient in the discipline of analysing and evaluating their own practice. In doing so, they draw on ideas and perspectives like those being currently considered here. For instance, if, as a practitioner, my relationship with my subject(s) is strong, but there are overlooked shortcomings in my efforts to engage my students, the most promising remedy lies in seeking and exchanging ideas with colleagues. Such critical and constructive conversations, assisted perhaps by pertinent short video clips and other exemplars, play a crucial part in teacher education, including at the level of ongoing professional development. They can highlight pitfalls to be anticipated and avoided, as well as providing illuminating case-study examples of how restoration might be pursued following breakdowns in teacher–student relations.

Where does this leave know-how, or more specifically, skills – of communication, lesson preparation, questioning, illustrating, monitoring, examining and so on? These haven't been mentioned explicitly in relation to this second domain. Such skills, after all, usually take up a central place in student teachers' studies and work-placements. Perhaps the best answer is that if such skills are to have a fertile context in which to work, then critical reflection by teachers on the quality of their learning relationships with students is crucial. Practitioners' understandings of learning relationships and their importance influence decisively *how* skills are used, or misused, because it is in and through daily classroom relationships that they *become* used. It is through these relationships – successful or failed, tranquil or turbulent – that skills become embodied and embedded in teachers' thoughts and actions. Where they do so inadequately, that is, where the domains of relationship fail to become confluent in the teacher's own understanding, the teacher might still possess a well-honed repertoire of techniques, or motorised skill. Such skills can be progressively acquired by having to respond to demands for effectiveness in producing readily quantifiable exam results and test scores (Robertson and Sørensen, 2018; Lewis and Holloway, 2019). Where high levels of such technical skill are exercised in teaching, but without perceptive attention to inherent purposes or the quality of learning relationships, some creditable results may indeed be produced for the record – the indexing of grades, marks and so on. But the inescapable fact remains that it is through the teacher's presentations – arresting, mechanically efficient, lacklustre, repellent, etc. – that the subject speaks

to the student. And the *how* of that speaking has enduring consequences. So there is also a continual risk in teaching that the real heart of the matter – the authentic voice of the subject – in geography, biology or whatever – could become largely bypassed, or even silenced.

The teacher's relationship to colleagues

We have already touched on a key concern of this domain in the remarks a moment ago about teachers becoming their own best critics. Not just in teaching, but for all practices, colleagues can be valuably regarded as those with whom practitioners pool ideas, as persons who regularly seek, offer and receive constructive criticisms among themselves. But this cannot happen productively where a professional insulation and isolation of teachers prevails (Malone and Smith, 2010; Hord and Tobia, 2012), or where forms of 'contrived collegiality' have become a prevalent pattern in schools (Wang, 2015; Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018). In recent decades, research on leadership and fulfilment in teaching has increasingly stressed the importance of co-operation that is related to educational concerns of practitioners, in contrast to collaborations arising from policy decisions made elsewhere and then imposed on teachers. (Datnow and Park, 2019; Duignan, 2007; Hansen, 2021; Lieberman and Miller, 2004; Starratt, 2012).

This research has decisive consequences for how tensions between autonomy and collegiality in educational practice should be understood, and addressed. For instance, the concept of 'professional autonomy' holds that members of a profession should be free to practice their profession without interference, or undue pressures, from outside bodies. There is an obvious parallel here with what I have been arguing in relation to practices, and particularly educational practice. But unfortunately the concept of 'professional autonomy' can be misunderstood or misused, sometimes as a form of protectionism that seeks to shield a practitioner's work from observations by others – whether inspectors, official data-gatherers, school managements or even colleagues. This kind of protectionism can develop attitudes and professional cultures that are just the reverse of those cultivated by the critical reflection essential to any practice and that enables it to advance and flourish. It is a major source moreover of the insulation and isolation mentioned in the previous paragraph. The argument I have been putting forward holds that there are demonstrable merits associated with recognising public education, and more specifically teaching, as a practice in its own right. Precisely because they come into being only as they are embodied in practice itself, these merits need to be affirmed and publicly shared, not concealed, by teachers, individually or collectively.

The teacher's relationship to parents and guardians, and to the public more widely

Crucial in this fourth domain is clarity about what the teacher is, and is not, responsible for, firstly to the students themselves, but also to parents. The most important thing the teacher *is* responsible for is the quality of the students' learning experiences, including the planning, the carrying out and the monitoring of these experiences, and the provision of feedback arising from assessment. The building of mutual trust, based on such clarity about responsibilities, is also fundamental in relationships with parents. To the extent that such trust is developed, parents can enhance the quality of educational practice in major ways. Not the least of these is by helping to ensure that students are regularly supported and encouraged, and that the burden of work is shared more equitably between teacher, student and parents.

The relationship between teachers and parents is in most cases more periodic than daily. But the attention that practitioners need to give to it ranks no less in importance than the reflection that must be done on one's practice in the daily life of the school. So while parents are physically absent for

most of a teacher's practice, teachers need continually to consider their perspectives and concerns. This involves not only listening to parents. From time to time it might also involve frank discussions with parents, but always with a view to strengthening their children's participation, overcoming any mere compliance and ensuring that they receive lasting educational benefits from their schooling. In the absence of such engagement with parents, there is a recurring likelihood that parents who seek to impose demands of their own on educational practice will be more forceful than they would otherwise be.

Individual teachers rarely have a relationship to the public as a whole, unless an important issue of fitness to practise arises, or perhaps a particular teacher takes on leadership of some public initiative. But teachers as a body do have such a relationship. Teachers as a group are responsible to the public for the fruits that are genuinely those of educational practice itself, as distinct from demands laid upon on schools by the current party in power. In many democratic jurisdictions, statutorily established Teaching Councils, or Colleges of Teachers, play an increasingly important role in the relationship of teachers to the public – not least through the drawing up and approval of codes of practice and conduct. The role of such bodies can be seen here to be quite distinct from the traditional role of teachers' unions. Historically, such Councils – involving substantial numbers if not a majority of practitioners – are a comparatively recent development. Scotland's Teaching Council, established in 1965, became the world's first independent professional and regulatory body for teaching in 2012. As well as being an accountable regulator of teaching as a practice, Teaching Councils enhance the identity and the public standing of teaching as a practice in its own right. They help to make clear the boundaries between the responsibilities and rights of practitioners on the one hand and those of political, religious and other powers-that-be on the other (GTCS, 2012; Teaching Council Ireland, 2016).

The teacher's relationship to him/herself

This fifth domain is where the other relationships come together in each teacher's experiences as a practitioner. And it is this coming-together that orients, in one way or another, the teacher's thinking and actions. Far from being something that can be accomplished for-once-and-for-all however, this coming-together remains ever in play, unfinished, on-the-way. It constitutes the teacher's self-understanding as a practitioner. This may have achieved a mainly settled character in any given teacher, but it is continually being met by new challenges and possibilities. Where it *has* attained a mainly settled character, this could mean a harmonious confluence of influences in the practitioner's thinking and action. On the other hand, it could involve distortions and imbalances that have taken root in the practitioner's habits, leading to ongoing inconsistencies that the practitioner doesn't see or finds intractable. To give examples of this negative side of the picture, a teacher might have a personally nourishing relationship with her teaching subjects, but a rather lifeless one, or stressful one, with her students. Or the relationship with some students may be harmonious, but with others the opposite; or with one subject lively and another subject rather flat. In each case however, the substance and balance of these interweaving relationships influence the teacher's understanding – healthily or otherwise – of herself, her role, her sense of practitioner identity.

The unfinished – and unfinishing – character of a practitioner's self-understanding has a special importance where the practice in question is centrally concerned with learning, and with its promotion in defensible and promising forms. Where this is robustly recognised by teachers and school leaders, numerous paths open up for developing and extending the practice, and in any or all of the domains of relations we have been considering. In other words, the arena of practice itself becomes hospitable to the creative and dramatic shifts mentioned by Dunne. The reverse is the case

however where the work of practitioners is pressured to comply with policy directives that are strangers to the inherent goods of education. Such directives are fuelled nowadays by credos of a more mercenary or secular kind than those of their historical ancestors. By typically recasting questions of quality in education as questions of indexed quantity (of marks, grades, points etc.) moreover, policy directives progressively avail themselves of an extensive machinery of data-driven enforcement. This increasingly digital machinery can be penetrating in its reach, while at the same time frequently bypassing the heart of the matter. It challenges educational leaders anew to affirm and advance the work of educational practice as that practice in turn continually seeks to redefine, on its own terms, the grounds on which it is to be carried out and appraised.

Concluding remarks

Ingrained outlooks that regard education as a subordinate undertaking to be controlled and managed by a superior body cannot readily be surmounted and laid to rest. This is particularly so if such outlooks have become prevalent in international educational policymaking. So the struggle for recognition of the distinct and independent responsibilities of educational practice remains a continuous one. Far from being a fully accomplished project, it remains vulnerable to new perils. In this, it resembles the struggle for democracy itself, even in democracies. But at the same time the struggle for educational autonomy is not mainly a political struggle, at least not in any partisan or party-political sense. It is not a struggle of liberal versus conservative, of traditional versus progressive, of left versus right. It remains, rather, the painstaking effort to demonstrate the promise and defensibility of educational endeavour when conceived and carried out as a practice in its own right. Insofar as this effort influences policy it does so best through involving policymakers in a deliberative process, not so much over this issue or that, but over the longer term. This process is itself primarily educational for all its participants. Finland engaged in such a long-term venture in the last decades of the 20th century (Aho et al., 2006) and came largely to leave behind the pendulum swings in educational policymaking that characterised many other democracies following a change of government. To learn from such examples however, serious time and energy have to be spent in studying not only the successful policies, but also the underlying rationale and the main factors in the process that led to the success. These include the kinds of things I have sought to highlight in this essay, three in particular. The first is being disposed to rehearse and learn from history – from conflicts, breakthroughs and wrong turns. The second is learning to acknowledge that educational practice has its own distinct purposes and its own practitioner capabilities, the latter giving it its own intricate relationships. The third is coming to appreciate that a society's educational maturity means relying more on its own creative educational resources than on policy borrowings favoured by a prevailing managerial wisdom.

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Notes

1. The UK Education Reform Act of 1988 was an effort to change fundamentally the tenor of educational policy and practice in the United Kingdom (excluding Scotland). It followed an intense campaign by the Thatcher Administration and its allies to dismantle the existing architecture of the British educational system and to replace it by policies informed mainly by free-market doctrines. Similar legislative efforts followed in many democracies in subsequent years and decades.
2. Examples of jurisdictions that contrast with the prevalent pattern include Finland, and to some degree Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. Details of the Finnish example can be found in [Aho et al. \(2006\)](#) and in [Sahlberg \(2021\)](#). Scotland's independence of the UK in educational matters enabled it to take a quite different path than that laid down by the UK Education Reform Act of 1988. The legislative basis for education in Scotland contrasts strongly with that in England, in relation to flexibility, decentralisation of authority, consultative decision making, and not least, discretionary scope for teachers. The teaching profession in Scotland is regulated by the General Teaching Council Scotland, a statutory body which is independent of the government. Ireland, which has a statutory National Council for Curriculum and Assessment since 2001, also followed a different path to England and Wales after 1988. The decade of the 1990s in Ireland was one of intensive review and consultation on the future direction of education, culminating most notably in the Education Act of 1998. This is based on the five principles of partnership, pluralism, equality, quality and accountability. This act also set the tenor of further legislation in education in the years that followed.

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