PROFESSOR-STUDENT RELATIONS

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One of the reasons practical ethics need periodic review and rewriting is that conceptions of our obligations to others change, along with notions of what constitutes doing good to and for them. Ours is an age that has brought considerable challenge to traditional conceptions of the morally obligatory and the morally prohibited, in our dealings with others. Much that was earlier recommended has now been questioned as paternalism or infantilization, or exposed as forms of social control. For example, there are, we have been told, definitive "limits of benevolence"--and "chicken soup can be poisonous."[1] The changed perspective along with other changes, is important as we attempt to explore the ethics of professor-student relations in the contemporary scene.

The first thing I want to note, which is presupposed in much that is to follow, is that we observe and educate into two fairly distinct ethics, one governing public interactions with institutions and strangers, and the other governing personal relations with family and friends. The former is the ethic of universals demanded by large-scale organization and impersonality; the latter is the ethics of particularity, which Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings have suggested is the ethics of caring. The two have quite different orientations and make quite different demands upon us. It is the public ethic and virtues that are represented in schools as the moral guides to student-teacher relationships.

Public institutions owe their clients justice and equity, which call for impartial treatment based on universal principles for dealing with strangers. These principles relate to such matters as fundamental decency, civility, respect. Collectively, they define the morality of impersonal relationships, or secondary associations--since in our dealings with friends, they seem somehow superfluous, extraneous, or even wrong.

Schools have accepted this public ethic and have taught teachers to act in accord with it: The school is the child's first extensive encounter with a public institution--and as rapidly as possible the relationship between teacher and pupil should reflect the secondary association pattern appropriate to the individual-to-institution relation. Of course, kindergarten teachers can't treat five-year-olds as store clerks treat customers--but by the time a youngster is twelve, we place her in an educational institution so

structured as to make primary associations between child and teacher all but impossible: the teacher is expected to deal with 120-180 students a day, and the youngster is expected to cope with six or seven different teachers during the same time period.

Now all of this pertains in two very important ways to the ethics of professor-student relations: first, it accounts for what appear to be the relationships currently sanctioned in principle and reinforced in practice within today's schools and colleges. For if we expect single-purpose associations to suffice for twelve-year-olds as they make their way within educational institutions, then such associations are certainly presumed adequate for people ready for higher education.[2] Second, the background with which I began seems relevant to the question of professor-student relations because almost everything germane to the processes of educating teachers also relates in some way to the substance of their preparation: in interacting with our students we are also instructing them as to what we believe to be a proper approach to student-teacher relationships. And this is certainly a part of what they need to learn and know as prospective teachers.[3] I want to separate these two considerations for purposes of analysis, though, looking first at the ethics of professor-student relations and then at the orientation we ought to impart to prospective teachers regarding such relations.

The individual dialogic relation which Buber urged is certainly one sort of ideal for professor-student relationships. It is hard to contribute to another's growth and development without some detailed knowledge of that other. Dialogue is a superior way to generate the preliminary understanding as well as a good way to pursue many kinds of knowledge. I also agree with Buber that the relationship, although personal and caring, is not one marked by the mutuality of friendship--and that the teacher abrogates his or her unique nurturance function in seeking such mutuality.[4]

What Buber recommends is a role that is highly demanding for the teacher. One who would teach must establish an intimate connection--genuine human dialogue--not just with some students but with every single one whom he or she is to affect. What Buber's dialogic account provides is an awsomely sensitive rendering of what happens when two human beings make significant contact. He has provided an inter-physic analysis of an education best structured in the mode of Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and the student on the other. But alas, such structural organization does not and cannot obtain in schools (as the mechanized procedures we audaciously call "individualized instruction" attest); and Buber's account rarely seems to apply to the interactions actually occurring in classrooms.

There is, however, another sort of ideal that I believe is viable for classrooms--or at least could be. It is Dewey's notion of school and classroom as a community. Although Dewey did not stress this dimension of it, classrooms can become communities in the Gemeinschaft sense of Tönnies. The secondary association patterns earlier described of course make most American classrooms communities of the Gesellschaft sort. I have become convinced that such contractual forms of association are not good for human beings in any sustained enterprise; and they certainly are not good for them in classrooms. I find it morally obligatory, then, that we provide classrooms where the primary associations of Gemeinschaft are stimulated and abetted. This means that the moral virtues we ought to seek within them are much less those of the public than of the private spheres: it is not so much justice, equity, and universality that we ought to be pursuing in classrooms; rather it is compassion, empathy, altruism, help and cooperation. There is much evidence--from research into private schools and alternative schools, and from studies of alienation--to suggest that such a shift in orientation

might prove as restorative to schools as to the individuals who spend their time within them.[5]

What would this mean specifically for the ethics of the professor-student relation? The fostering of Gemeinschaft within colleges need demand little time, and it can even be nurtured to considerable academic advantage in classrooms, through joint cooperative assignments. If it is impractical to hope that an instructor can establish genuine human dialogue with each student, it does not appear visionary that within a class each student can make that sort of contact with someone. Beyond this, I want to recommend only a very few specifics--specifics easily recognized and widely accepted, but often violated.

In their relationships with students, I think professors owe them the kind of deep fundamental respectfulness that permits the student's dignity as a human being to remain continuously intact. This and an assortment of other obligations stem from the very considerable power of professors where students are concerned. They can wound and shrivel as well as inflict more concrete forms of punishment. Students are entitled, I think, to compassion from their instructors--as protection from the various large and small cruelties of power at a professor's disposal. On the positive side, I think students are entitled to support from their professors: given the role we know this plays in human well-being and development, it seems to me a moral obligation of the professor's role.

It would be a mistake, however, to interpret these obligations as a call for the elimination of all that is negative or that could hurt. Negative judgments are an inevitability if a professor is honest, and honesty must for several reasons be a part of that relation too. For the professor of education, the ultimate client must remain the students of his or her students: the classes a prospective teacher will eventually teach. Thus, the moral obligations of a professor of education are not identical to those of a professor of liberal arts, and the relationships must differ accordingly. Nevertheless, to a far greater extent than is true in preparing for other professions, liberal arts objectives--the development of the teacher as a person--are integral to the individual's professional preparation. This is so because as we ask the teacher at whatever level to mediate between the student and some aspect of the world, the mediator is never merely a funnel. No matter how much the "teacher-proofers" might wish it otherwise, the teacher herself or himself is, in a significant sense, a part of the curriculum. Thus, it may be hard to separate the requisites of development as teacher from those of development as person--and the education professor must remain cognizant of both.

I want to turn briefly now to a second matter alluded to earlier: what we ought to teach our students about teacher-student relations. I believe this to be crucially important--not only to our students' relationships to their students, but to their relationship to teaching as an endeavor and their continuing commitment to it. I am convinced that we do our students a disservice when we lead them to orientations totally at odds with the world of the school--that is, when the professional ethic they are taught is so inconsistent with the ethic the school reflects and imposes. For the professional ethics often conveyed in schools of education is not so exclusively a matter of the public ethic of impersonality. And the ethics of prospective teachers often look a lot more like the ethics of caring. I am continually struck by the fact that such an overwhelming number of young beginning teachers have such high goals and standards for themselves: they are never going to do to their students what has been done to them.

The time it takes for that kind of orientation to depart is tragically short. It has been estimated that alienation on the part of teachers begins to set in between one and five years from the time

of their entrance into the profession.[6] A major part of the reason is the discrepancy between the expectations beginning teachers' ethics impose, and the possibilities which schools actually afford. Now if that is true, several approaches are possible: one would be to deliberately set out to lower the sights of prospective teachers and equip and dispose them only toward the ethics of secondary associations. This would have the advantage of constituting more realistic preparation than we typically provide prospective teachers, but we have already suggested that such an ethic is inappropriate.

A far preferable alternative is to arm teachers with an understanding of the kinds of structural changes in schools necessary to providing a fair chance for realizing their high ideals. The structural changes I have in mind are those which Ted Sizer has urged in his DeGarmo Lecture. They are changes of a sort which has also been recommended by John Goodlad in A Place Called School and by Ernest Boyer in his High School study. In essence, they are the changes essential to bringing about the necessary conditions for Gemeinschaft. Dr. Sizer urged professors of education to join in working toward such structural changes. He threatened them with mere ineffectuality and irrelevance if they fail to do so. I would go even further by attaching to his recommendation the force of moral obligation.

I cannot here present the full case for doing so, but I do want to cite one part of it particularly relevant to the question of relationships. Several theorists have provided new understanding of the teacher's predicament by suggesting that we view teachers as "street-level bureaucrats." These are defined as workers in public service agencies "who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work..."[7] They are the 'line officers' who are the immediate providers of the services public agencies are created to extend. They include social workers, police officers, health workers, public lawyers, as well as teachers. Studies of these workers have documented the high ideals and the relation to the ethics of caring of the callings they enter. Research has also shown the way in which the structure of their work then forces them to "develop coping mechanisms contrary to...[their]... agency's policy but actually basic to its survival."

Built into the preparation of street-level bureaucrats is the ethic of the private sphere: the human beings entrusted to them must be treated as individuals, with the flexibility and compassion their individuality demands. On the other hand, however, the way their work is structured--the case loads or, for teachers, the class sizes--makes this ethic totally impossible to carry out. What is more, to add to their difficulties, the supervisors of street-level bureaucrats--whose work is not with the agency's clients--can afford to operate with the public ethic, and have been prepared for their administrative calling to do so!

Thus, street-level bureaucrats are caught in an impossible predicament. They have been taught to "regard clients not as units to be processed but as people."[9] Yet the way their jobs are defined, the scarcity of necessary resources, the expectations of their superiors, the reward structures of their agencies--plus the sheer demands of their immediate situations--all serve to make this impossible. Thus, they devise coping mechanisms that are compromises detrimental to their clients: they shortcut and they ration benefits, concentrating them on those most likely to succeed; they indulge in deceptive reporting and cover-ups; they retreat from discretionary decisions into rendering everything in terms of Standard Operating Procedures; or they modify their conceptions of clients so as to be able to live more comfortably with themselves.

And it is at this point, of course, that students and parents report that teachers just don't seem to care. I am convinced that so long as we maintain the present structure of the school, this result--with all of its toll on all concerned--is inevitable. There is a way, however, to break the circle. A first step could be to take seriously the requisites of professor-student and teacher-student relations. I hope we will have the wisdom to do so.

Notes

1. Allusions are to a book titled Doing Good: The Limits of Benevolence, by Willard Gaylin, Ira Glasser, et al. (New York: Pantheon, 1978) and to a paper by Robert W. Resnick titled "Chicken Soup is Poison," mimeo unpublished, n.d.

2. Strangely, the only groups we seem to exempt are at the two extremes of the educational ladder--the very young beginners, and the doctoral candidates who often work in much closer, apprentice-like relations to their mentors.

3. This is by no means to suggest, as cartoons and caricatures have done, that the relation is isomorphic and professors ought to treat university students just as teachers ought to treat eight-year-olds. Nevertheless, very much the same categories of concern must be addressed in teaching both groups.

4. Madeline Grumet has recently suggested that the humanistic teacher pursuing mutuality "fails the pedagogical project" in three regards: because such a relation leads to a digression in the form of a mutual absorption abortive rather than facilitative of the search for knowledge; because it is dishonest in denying the asymmetry between the power of the two parties; and because "the ideal of equality fosters an eroticism that ensnares both teacher and student..." See "My Face is Thine Eye," Phenomenology + Pedagogy, I:1 (July 1983): 55.

5. See, e.g., Gerald Grant, "The Character of Education and the Education of Character," Daedalus (Summer 1981): 135-149; Mary Anne Raywid, The Current Status of Schools of Choice in Public Secondary Eduaation (Hempstead: Project on Alternatives in Education, Hofstra University, 1982); and Fred M. Newmann, "Reducing Student Alienation in High Schools: Implications of Theory," Harvard Educational Review (November 1981): 546-564.

6. Five is Seymour Sarason's figure in The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change (Boston: Allyn & Bacon,