

Thought and Practice: (1987-1991) the Journal of the Graduate School of Bank Street College of Education

Volume 1

Number 2 *Must Schooling Interfere with Education?*

Article 5

1987

"I Want To Know Why" or Tolerance for Ambiguity in Education

Leah Levinger

Follow this and additional works at: <http://educate.bankstreet.edu/thoughtandpractice>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Educational Psychology Commons](#), [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Levinger, L. (2016). "I Want To Know Why" or Tolerance for Ambiguity in Education. *Thought and Practice: (1987-1991) the Journal of the Graduate School of Bank Street College of Education*, 1 (2). Retrieved from <http://educate.bankstreet.edu/thoughtandpractice/vol1/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Centennial Collection at Educate. It has been accepted for inclusion in Thought and Practice: (1987-1991) the Journal of the Graduate School of Bank Street College of Education by an authorized administrator of Educate. For more information, please contact kfreda@bankstreet.edu.

"I Want To Know Why" or Tolerance for Ambiguity in Education

Cover Page Footnote

Leah Levinger has been a member of the faculty of the Graduate School at Bank Street College for a number of years, a consultant in psychodiagnostic testing at Montefiore Hospital, and in private practice as a clinical child psychologist.

"I WANT TO KNOW WHY" OR TOLERANCE FOR AMBIGUITY IN EDUCATION

Leah Levinger

As a professor in a graduate school of education, I teach young and some not so young adults. Hence I know that all of them come with at least sixteen years of formal schooling. I assume a certain amount of education has occurred, and that they have tools, facts, concepts, and certain approaches to new tasks, making further education possible. Still, with every new class I must look at each student, one by one, trying to surmise the losses and limitations that his previous schooling may have imposed upon him, as well as the powers. Thus to varying degrees, an amount of unlearning and relearning is a component of further learning. In order for the students to grow into effective teachers of children, it will be necessary for them to have awareness of their own learning processes. This will involve a deliberately planned "regression in the service of the ego," as Kubie described the process of artistic creation. Some individuals will need to recapture the wonder of early childhood, some the delicate balance of precision, curiosity and groping toward ambiguity of the middle years child, some the emotional passions and painful awareness of ambiguity, internal and external, of the young adolescent.

Ideally this should be examined through a series of case histories of students' experience at Bank Street. But in this paper I will limit my writing to generalizations, without case examples. I shall deal first with young adolescence (a time of life that remains highly accessible to almost all adults, as they still are dealing with some of the same unresolved issues), then with the middle years child, and for the bulk of the paper with graduate students.

"I Want To Know Why," a short story by Sherwood Anderson, gives the quintessence of a young adolescent's anguish as he recognizes the complexity of human beings. The hero worships a jockey and the horse whom he rides, and is in a state of ecstasy when they win. Then following his idol he sees him go to a brothel. At the end he muses that he wants to know why it can be that a man could ride a horse like that and kiss a woman like that in the same day. One can see this conflict of times reiterated in A.E. Housman's poems which

are so popular with adolescent readers because of the way they constantly juxtapose love and beauty with life betrayals and death.

Much of the pain and the ultimate growth during adolescence and young adulthood is in first recognizing and then learning to endure diverse views. It is also a special pain because the young adolescent is so unsure of his own identity at this time and the passion that he has, such as Anderson's hero for horses makes him veer toward unthinking commitments.

Although Piaget emphasizes the ability to recognize divergent points of view in the formal operational stage in adolescence, it may also appear in the preoperational stage. Younger children also reveal this, but since it is not considered to be a common quality at that age it is often ignored by adults. We tend then to sell children short, emphasizing the absolutism and following the rules of the game, from the Piagetian viewpoint, or the concepts of latency, repression, and obsessive rigidity and matter of factness as described by the Freudians and neo-Freudians. But such qualities can coexist, particularly with certain children, along with the groping toward dealing with ambiguity. Hence the riddle and the pun are such favorites for the six to eight year old. They are by now conceptually well beyond the concepts of object permanence and many children of this age may be beyond the confusions of conservation of matter. Riddles and puns are the logical next stage, as the child "fools around" with language, discovering that a word can be actually *two* words with very different meanings. Further, the very act of telling the riddle to an adult is dealing with sudden insight which David Elkind calls "cognitive conceit," that the child himself may know the answer to something that will confound the supposedly omniscient adult. The content of many riddles and puns and tongue twisters should be considered too, as the innocent and silly surface can so adroitly conceal another and forbidden meaning.

At the same time that this new use of language occurs some children of this age are also engaged in struggling with complex moral issues. One of the most poignant and psychologically sound depictions of this is in James Agee's classic *A Death in The Family* where seven year old Rufus is plying his mother with questions which are in essence the unanswerable ones from the Book of Job. Can God be both all powerful and all good? And if he is so then why did he let the dogs in to kill the rabbits? Why does he let people be tempted into doing bad things?

A teacher of preadolescent children, while he needs to be aware that some of these issues do occur at certain times for a certain number of children, must restrain himself from prematurely imposing a curricula and an approach which will demand more recognition of ambiguity than most children are ready to take. Encouraging the riddles and puns as a "normal" part of growing or dealing with some of the moral puzzlements when the children bring them up themselves by admitting that grown-ups do not always know how to reconcile certain ambiguities either, is most likely about as far as the teacher can go.

The task of an educator is quite different teaching adolescents and particularly when teaching adults. The young adolescent is in a world of multiplicities of ambiguity, with changes in his own body, new relations with his parents, siblings and friends, new expectations thrust on him by the adult world or by his own need for autonomy, and a frequent blurring of boundaries, of where he must still be a child and where an adult. So he is emotionally as well as cognitively ready to deal with ambiguity in learning. It may (itself an ambiguity!) mean he may feel overloaded, with nothing he can count on, or better equipped by his new powers of thinking in formal operations, to cope with some of life's other bewildering burdens. In contrast, the adult graduate student has often spent his last few years working hard to establish a defined unambiguous sense of who he is and where he stands in the world.

To be able to juxtapose or view different facets is a lifelong educational task. Sometimes it is a matter, in Hegel's terminology, of reconciling opposites. But more often, particularly at the graduate student level, it is important for the teacher to help the students grasp that many things are not dichotomous, but rather are additional facets of the same broader thing which contains them.

Getting graduate students to return to some of the adolescent intensity and conflicts is, I believe, one of the most important tasks of the graduate school teacher. They lost something in many instances going through high schools which emphasized being able to get high marks and pass the SAT and then through colleges which again emphasized doing the right thing in order to get good grades for the next step. For even many of the bright graduate students, docility has taken the place of intellectual curiosity and docility is an equivalent of intellectual death. Students are in many instances reluctant to name authors and books which they consider distasteful, wasteful of time, or harmful. It is as if they have been so brain-

washed they dare not say that their opinion stands up against that of something in hardcovers and probably with many statistical tables. During their experience at Bank Street College they gradually learn that they can quarrel with so called "authority" and use their own direct experience and emotional convictions to defy neat formulae and theories.

For many years I have taught two required courses, Child Development and Observing and Recording Child Behavior. In different ways each of these courses often manages to shake the students' prior convictions and trust in authority. That is certainly my aim in teaching and I have found that it means accepting not only a good deal of anxiety on the part of the students but often real hostility as well. But it works. Sometimes the use of a pronoun will illuminate how it is beginning to work. A student who earlier in the term brought in a late paper saying, "Well, I've got *your* paper done" now says, "I have finished *my* paper." As a teacher I can only take partial credit for this, as whatever goes on in the classroom and in the reading the student does is constantly illuminated and challenged by the supervised field work. It is direct application of theory to practice which defies too great neatness and plausibility of theory and continually forces the student to question and enlarge it.

Specifically in Child Development when students are introduced to the concept of stages it is essential from the beginning to make it clear that some of the old "common sense" "folk" ideas of children's stages have still something viable. Further, they should never think that a Skinnerian formulation is automatically all wrong, and the Piagetian one or a Freudian one is absolutely correct. The question has to be explored continuously of what portion of human growth is adequately described by each theory and what portions are left unrecognized by any theoretical formulation. This should not be taken to be the same as a wishy washy eclecticism, but rather a relentless search for the range of variables involved in human growth and personality; a search for what each theory can contribute and what tools a theory may offer for further exploration through direct observation, reminiscent of one's own childhood and rumination. Simplistic dichotomies such as the old nature-nurture controversy can no longer be sustained. The developmental interaction approach as described by Shapiro and Biber is especially useful in dealing with the nature-nurture aspects more dynamically as well as with interrelations of the cognitive and affective approaches to the stage theory. Further, the developmental interaction approach

allows recognition of the internal changes and the child reacting with and modeling the world.

Today in the 1980's Sigmund Freud is often criticized and written off by many students, by most because he is a male chauvinist and sexist or by the more sophisticated students because his thinking is deterministic. There is also a small minority of the students who have latched on to some of Freud's specific concepts, such as the Oedipus complex, penis envy, and others which are particularly prone to be treated with reification. (Reification will occur with people who need something that concrete in their thinking for any one of the theoretical schools. Conservation, for example, is treated by equally rigid Piaget followers as a fact and a definite place rather than a developing process.)

But Freud can be utilized as one of the most seminal thinkers in our world today provided that one does not get over-involved in the controversies about biological and supposedly universal aspects of development but rather looks at his two major areas of changing our thought about personality. These lie not in such specifics but rather in a new mold of thinking about human beings. First there is the concept of multidetermination. This is very hard for the beginning student or often for quite experienced scholars to accept, as it does not allow the simplistic one-to-one correspondence of event and consequence. Rather the emphasis must be upon further investigation of what was the state of the organism at the time the traumatic event occurred which made it of traumatic proportions. Once this is recognized we can better understand why with seemingly equally depriving or equally salutary life histories certain children appear relatively strong and exuberant and others are warped. The other major concept that Freud has offered is so taken for granted now but needs reiteration as part of any schema of teaching about the developing child. This is the presence of the unconscious. Again it is important to warn against reification, but to recognize that within the mental state of even infants but certainly by the time they reach toddlerhood or later childhood, many experiences are counter to and sometimes illuminating of rational findings.

In *Observing and Recording Child Behavior*, the concepts of multidetermination and of the presence of the unconscious as well as unconscious experiences and motivations are utilized so that observation becomes far more complex. No longer can the observer say, "The child did this for no reason" but rather must admit, "for no apparent reason." One of the major contributions that this course

makes to development of the teacher is his recognizing gradually that his own needs, biases and complexity of feeling play such a large role in his observing and also in his relating to and teaching of children. In the course we start off with a detailed study of an individual child. For most students the process leads to a study of the self and to the interplay between knowledge of the child and self-knowledge.

For some students this latter experience becomes almost unbearable. In their complaints that they "just can't understand" why the child does what he does or why their own efforts at helping the child fail to work, or even when it works but they do not understand why, students may be pitched into the same kind of stress that the boy in Sherwood Anderson's story had to endure. Sometimes this stress is of such dimensions that it prevents them at the time from finishing the individual child's study and accepting as part of what they must write that they do not know all of the answers. Then one of the harder tasks of the teacher is to get the paper finished with the recognition that it cannot be a final word.

In preparing graduate students for becoming teachers (or experienced teachers for becoming more adept at what they are doing already), it is necessary to examine this approach of stimulating such a high degree of questioning and recognition of ambiguity. In working with children a teacher always has to act and do something, whether it makes full sense to him or not. The myriad of questions concerning the meaning of the situation, the meaning behind it and the possible plethora of causes cannot be allowed at the time when action is required to serve as a detriment or even a paralysis to such action. Rather, part of the learning must be to tolerate one's self acting intuitively, drawing upon only partially understood knowledge and yet moving with conviction. Afterwards, whether the particular action turned out well or ill, one must be able to reexamine it and learn from it what the next steps may be. This will never be an easy task but over the years people may become firmer in their balance between theory and practice.

There are some instances within the classroom or dealing with individual children and particularly adolescents where ambiguity may also play a role in action. But that is another quite complex issue that is beyond the scope of this paper. But I would suggest that certain immutable convictions can be held simultaneously with a skeptical questioning attitude. One of the ambiguities which makes

for the creative teacher is the duality of tolerance for the unknown and the rock on which one builds one's faith.

Leah Levinger has been a member of the faculty of the Graduate School at Bank Street College for a number of years, a consultant in psychodiagnostic testing at Montefiore Hospital, and in private practice as a clinical-child psychologist.