Everyday Courage in the Midst of Standardization in Schools

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There are many ways to respond to school standardization, one of which might be to prepare students for the exams while preserving alternative spaces that sustain and nourish our practices as progressive educators.

In The Plague by Albert Camus, the physician, Dr. Rieux, chooses to fight the plague overcoming the town of Oran and alleviate the suffering borne by his fellow man. Yet Rieux realizes that there can be no assurances that what he does will make a difference. He is aware that statistical studies of previous plagues predict an inevitable rising, plateauing, and ebbing of casualties. But he believes he must do what he can. Through his actions, Rieux demonstrates resolve tempered by modesty and common decency. Camus here provides us with a way of understanding courage. Courageous acts bearing ethical import express an alertness to what endangers well-being, steadiness, and the yearning to shape a personally meaningful life.

The kind of courage Camus portrayed in Dr. Rieux is also informed by a sense of the tragic. If the suffering of the other is the starting point of the ethical relation, holding a tragic sense of life reminds us of the inevitability of suffering, for the plague is sure to return at some point. One can acknowledge this but still refuse to cast this inevitability in fatalistic terms. As Burbules (1990, 471) puts it,

By maintaining the tragic sense, we admit to ourselves and to those engaged with us in an activity the inherent difficulties and uncertainties of our efforts — which may in fact bind us together more strongly, inspire more persistent and conscientious effort, and help us maintain a more realistic appraisal of the worth of what we are trying to accomplish.

Camus speaks to a kind of courage that needs to inform our work as educators. If valued and cultivated, it has a chance of reckoning with practices justified by the ethos of standardization so prevalent in
our schools. Similar to the plague in Oran, the ubiquity of standardization tempts the educator to regard this condition as normal and predictable, something to be witnessed and suffered with resignation. High-stakes testing, tightly scripted curricula, fixed blocks of instructional time, and all the associated practices and policies that drive toward uniformity and sameness regardless of interest, need, and the best judgment of educators situated in specific contexts present a danger and cause suffering.

One can choose to act in the midst of this, and not acting is a choice too. Given the degree of standardization in place in our public schools — particularly those serving poor and working class communities — an educator’s commitment to democratic schooling is tested. This troubling condition raises a formidable challenge to exercise what Dewey aptly referred to as an educator’s moral and intellectual maturity around matters such as curriculum design, student assessment, scheduling, and school governance. At present, the role school plays in the formation of an engaged, thoughtful citizenry is trivialized and treated as superficial.

Fundamentally, what it means to be morally accountable to one’s self, colleagues, and students and their families is too often framed in the abstract, depersonalized language of test scores and the degree of conformity to mandates established beyond the purview of a school’s stakeholders. This has the effect of alienating — or, worse, absolving — the educators who face and work with each other on a daily basis from a collective sense of moral agency.

One could take a radical position on eradicating the suffering caused by standardization. Educators could decide, for example, not to give the tests. Parents and students could choose, as some have, to boycott the tests. But this position holds substantial risk for the school, the educators and, most importantly, the children and families and could easily result in having fewer options and exacting even more suffering. Further, the extremeness of this form of resistance could lead to resignation, cynicism, and an ever-diminishing belief in one’s ability to actually make a difference in the face of pressures that emanate far beyond the reach and control of a school community. In either case, moral steadiness is put at risk.

Conversely, one could concentrate most of one’s efforts in preparation for the test to assure greater levels of mastery across the school population. But unquestioning compliance risks enlarging the surface of vulnerability, embeds further the harm wrought by a regime of standardized testing, and shifts the meaning and value of schooling to severely limited, questionable ends. Radical positions in either direction tend to generate equally extreme opposing positions.

Camus suggests that one takes a stand in the midst of what constitutes a present danger. A director of a new progressive charter school captured this stance and the challenges confronting him in the following journal entry:

We’ve been thinking a lot about test scores recently. They are, of course, the essential piece of our continued survival, the currency of our deal with New York State. They will never be the thing that we value most or the way we really assess our students, but they will always be the sword hanging over our head, and something that we need to put a lot of thought and effort into so that we as a school can be as successful as we need to be. Test scores have not been so prominent in our thoughts as we gain solidity as a school and define who we are. We were glad to start with only kindergarten and first grade for many reasons, but among them is the fact that our kids won’t be taking high-stakes tests until our third year. But that also means that the scores in our third and fourth year, the scores of our current kindergarten and first grade students, will determine whether we get our charter renewed or not.

Not long ago, a former graduate student of mine conducted an action research study in her school. The study focused on how teachers who value planning their inquiry-based curricula around themes and across disciplines and assessing student learning through portfolios, public presentations, and student research projects are coping with the steady onslaught of high stakes, disciplinary-based State Regents examinations. She called it “creative compliance.” She found that her colleagues recognized that these examinations profoundly contradicted their
beliefs about how and what to teach, but they still prepared their students for the exams. At the same time, they preserved and protected alternative spaces that sustained and nourished their practice as progressive educators. Another teacher in a similar school has developed two ways of marking student essays: his own based upon his judgment honed over many years of teaching and the State Regents coding system (1 through 4). Each avoids unbending positions and ultimate solutions, and uses his or her professional expertise to navigate treacherous conditions and to fight back. They are resourceful, nuanced in their response to what troubles them.

The effect of standardization and the extent to which it has influenced life in schools requires that we be pragmatic. Pragmatism pulls us back from the disappointments that all too often follow in the wake of heroic resistance. In his discussion of Dewey, Rogers (2009, 61) puts it this way: “Our commitments thus have a socially constituted, constructed and contingent character.” What the pragmatist is after in such a world is “attaining, if possible, workable solutions and decent human relations” (Burbules 1990, 477). The pragmatist accepts the challenge of exercising her freedom to know and to act without guarantees in a world always in the making. She acknowledges that gains might very well be offset by losses; that certainty can cripple one’s capacity to act. The cautious, melioristic tendency of pragmatism set in an unsure world buttresses our fragility.

Yet this same pragmatic tendency risks tamping down the resolve needed to contest the uncertainty we all must face in one form or another. Camus strenuously resisted establishing ethical systems, codes, or principles to regulate and guide ethical conduct. For Camus, “Vital participation [in one’s life] is both act and value” (Doubrovsky 1962, 74). This is powerfully rendered in The First Man, an autobiographical novel written by Camus (never actually finished; published posthumously in 1995). Jacques Cormery grows up fatherless in profound poverty in the company of a loving but mute mother. Jacques’ search for the father he never knew does not end in some grand revelation about him or himself. But his desire for fulfillment and happiness through this search, his gratitude for those who guide him to become the person he is and help him escape the harsh, forbidding life of poverty he was born to, is palpable and compelling. The thick descriptions and textured portraits of his mother, grandmother, friends, relatives, and mentors draw us to something essential, something elemental about living well and living joyfully. Death may be around the corner, poverty may scar us permanently, loss and abandonment may leave us yearning for what never was; but in recognizing and opening up to the pain and suffering, we appreciate, affirm, and reach for life. Camus’ ethics is about tapping into and embracing this vital force.

Sidney Hook (1974, 44-60) makes the point that not only is insecurity a reality that we must all contend with, it also contributes to the very quality of living a satisfying life. Insecurity arouses the zest to realize what matters to us. How we live with (or, better, in) insecurity speaks to our will to live a distinctive life, a courageous life of becoming. The everyday courage embedded in this position speaks to one’s ongoing commitment to continually think of creative ways of responding to the dangers educators feel moved to confront.

Foucault provides some interesting and useful insights into how we might approach this. “Definitive” solutions become new ways of manipulating, codifying, and containing what is possible and warranted. Yet courage is more than saying no. It is an opportunity for creative engagement with oneself and with others. One fights back with quiet courage, on ground that is neither high nor firm; experimenting, inventing in the midst of danger; attentive to the suffering one bears witness to. Such an ethic sees the self as text in the process of being written, as one strives to constitute oneself, despite the pull toward containment, prediction, and control. Foucault wants to keep ethical conduct open to respond flexibly to troubling situations. His call to be resourceful makes perfect sense in the present over-determined environments of public schools. Foucault remains hopeful that the imaginative capacities of persons to think differently about what is taken and accepted as true and false, if released and cultivated, will provide ample opportunities for decisive action in response to troubling constraints and taken-for-granted limitations. Both the action and the thinking that generated it are temporary, provisional, and open to further examination. Thinking, for Foucault, proliferates pos-
sible courses of action. He hitches his hopefulness to a restless, willful curiosity (see, for example, Foucault 1989, 198-199).

The dangers presented by schools to level all who enter to a deadening sameness, a single, narrowly construed standard of competence become the opportunities that can stir us to think and to act differently. As Foucault (1989, 198) once put it: “The mind is not soft wax; it’s a reactive substance. And the desire to know more and better, and something else, grows with this attempt to stuff our skulls.” To be vitally engaged in living, even as dominant forces attempt to thwart and confine us, requires fortitude to make a space for ourselves to test the limits of what is possible. It also requires faith in our creative capacity to come up with useful, interesting solutions to vexing problems wrought by standardization.

Those of us troubled by the increasing reliance on standardized practices as bottom-line measures of school success cannot afford to take refuge in a language of critique marked by stubborn negation and fixed positions. Courage, as I see it, requires faith in our capacity to come up with workable solutions to this condition, coupled with an awareness that our actions may not bring about the changes we desire to the extent we want. I am suggesting, further, that when we try to come to terms with what it means to act courageously in the current climate, that we be “open-textured.” We may very well disagree about how best to apply the virtue of courage when taking into consideration specific cases even as we embrace common principles (Appiah 2006, 58). With both modesty and persistence we are called to continue to imagine ways of keeping the conversation going about alternatives, even as we remain open to revising and rethinking how best to proceed. How we manage to keep the conversation going may make all the difference.

References
