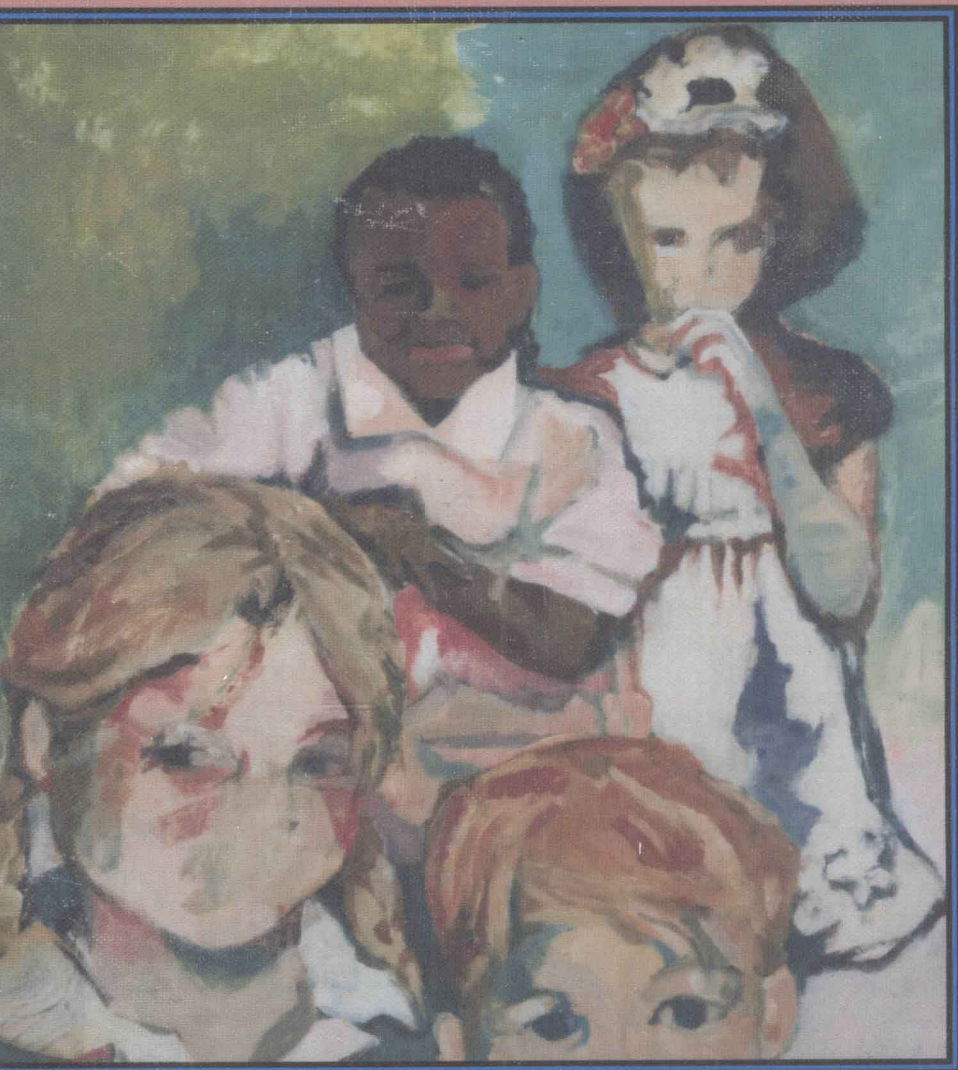
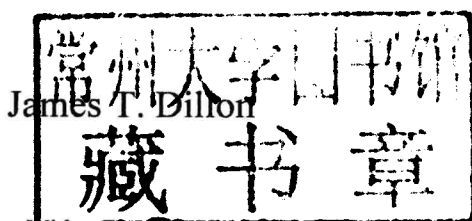


THE BASIC QUESTIONS  
OF EDUCATION



# THE BASIC QUESTIONS OF EDUCATION

What to Ask Ourselves  
When Educating Our Young



With a Foreword by  
Hans van der Meij

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To my loving children

JAY and DIXIE, JOHN and JAMES

What a blessing in life to be your father!

## FOREWORD

One of the key views presented in this amazing book is that education is not a production facility. Education cannot produce, it can only induce. An interesting rhetoric used by the author to support this stance runs as follows: “The assumption is seriously defective that learning is produced by teaching, leading to the absurdity that, where learning does not appear, there teaching has not in fact occurred.” But rhetoric plays only a small part in the author’s attempts to convince the reader. All matters of education discussed in this book are consistently founded on a systematic analysis and comprehensive account of all the issues, factors and actors involved, their interactions and the specific circumstances.

On this particular view, the author’s main argument is that education can only induce because it is a moral enterprise. It is a joint undertaking in which teachers and students collaborate, making both the process and outcome uncertain. How enlightening it is to perceive education as an “enterprise that induces the young into the good” where the good is not, and cannot ever be, settled upon one-sidedly and fixed once and for all. How refreshing this perspective is against the rampant accountability movement.

Another gem lies in the author’s method of inquiry, yielding various schemes of questions about critical topics in and on education. In a succinct chapter (10), the author explains the categorical approach that led him to these schemes. Constructing such schemes is extremely difficult, but the aim makes it all worthwhile. It should reveal “modest and elementary distinctions” that are “firmly rooted in humble everyday questions”. This is well illustrated with the scheme of seven elemental questions of education presented by the author: Who should teach? Who should be educated? What should people be educated in?

Where and when should education occur? What is education for? How should teacher and students act and interact? What should come from education? The author makes it clear that these questions are deceptively simple; they are fundamental and comprehensive, motivating inquiry.

For the major part, the book concentrates on giving us the questions and what they presuppose. We receive only part of the equation that knowledge consists of answers to questions. No answers are given. Why not? The author argues that the answers to the questions of education will be forthcoming in practice, where the method must not be indoctrination, coercion, or seduction, but genuine interaction (“our practices represent particularized answers”). More generally, no answers to the questions are given because the author wants us to reflect. It is important to wonder about the questions and their origins.

The book also offers many suggestions for action. A particularly interesting one is the idea to construct a dummy answer before addressing the question. As researchers we are advised to do so to better understand what we would like to know and what we value. (“Is this the thing that I want to know?, “Can I use something like this?”) Not only researchers can benefit from this advice. We also find strong effects on elementary school children who are asked to create a dummy or provisional answer before posing their question to the Internet. Where before the children tend to diverge or forget their original question altogether, the provisional answer makes them reflect more, helps them keep focused and genuinely interested in the answer.

This book summarizes key views on education in extremely well thought-out schemes of questions with corresponding suggestions for researchers, teachers and students, using a highly valuable method of inquiry in the process. Now it is for us to take this book and use it to bring out the Socrates within us.

Hans van der Meij  
Twente University

**Dr. Hans van der Meij**, a long-time member of the Faculty of Educational Science at Twente University in The Netherlands, is the author of the pioneering study, *Student Questioning*. He is recognized around the world for his research on questions in education, publishing widely in leading journals with colleagues from Europe and the United States.

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## **Part One**

### **THE NATURE OF EDUCATION**



## Chapter 1

# THE FIRST QUESTIONS OF EDUCATION

Of any human enterprise important to us we seek to know just what it is so we may find out how to do it aright. About education too our questions are at bottom pressing matters of practice. The overall question would run:

*What education should we give to our young?*

In facing this question we wonder about what things to teach children, for instance, and to what good purpose. We have further questions of how to go about helping the young to learn these things in the proper way and at the right time to good effect.

And then we have other kinds of questions about how to decide these pressing matters and how to think clearly about them in the first place, so that we might know better what to do about them.

In that way the nature of education becomes also a question of practice. As a domain of human practice, education can usefully be viewed as a set of particularized answers in action to the basic questions of education. Right practice would then be viewed as giving good enough answers to the right questions here and now. Hence we first need to know the questions of education.

### Overview of Questions

The first questions of education concern its nature and character: *What is it? What is it like? How does it compare with other enterprises? What forms may it take?* This chapter discusses these first questions in an introductory and explanatory way, with an interest in getting the questions clear. It is not a matter of theory, nor of research. The questions are treated as a matter of practice, getting straight on how to think so we can get right on how to act.

Questions of the elements of education are formulated in Part Two. There are only seven of them but they are formulated in all their detail. They are seven basic questions about the seven basic things that constitute education: teacher, student, subject matter, circumstance, aim, activity, result. These seven specify that which is in question when we face the overall question of education, "*What education shall we give our young?*" For instance, *What shall we teach them?* gives the question of subject matter.

Questions of the various domains of education are identified in detail in Part Three: questions of curriculum, of teaching and learning, of educational controversies and issues. The overall question of curriculum, for example, runs: *What ought the curriculum be, and how shall we determine it?* The elements of curriculum, as of teaching and learning, are not other than the seven elements of education, but the questions assume a form proper to the domain at hand, while further questions yet are particular to the domain (e.g., questions especially characterizing curriculum).

Questions in educational research and in educational practice are discussed in Parts Four and Five, showing how the questions function in these two broad pursuits. *What questions do educational researchers pose about education?* for example; and *How might teachers and students rightly use questions in classroom discussions?*

### **Character of Education**

We start by wondering about what education is as a human enterprise. And what is it like? How should we think about these first questions of education?

#### **Moral enterprise**

Education is a moral enterprise of inducing the young into the good. It is moral in the ends proposed (*the good*); in the means undertaken (*inducing*); and in

the object of its action (*the young*). Even where these are judged bad, evil or irreligious their enterprise is a moral one.

The end that educators strive for is the good of the young. They and their sponsors propose to intervene in young people's lives and change them for the better. They look at the way young people are – how they think, feel, act and what they know, desire, do – and they seek to change all that for the good. In effect, educators look upon the young and say:

*Look at the way you are. We will show you a better way to be. Come learn these good things from us and you will have a better life. You will be a better person and our society will be better for it.*

The stereotype can be as simple as passing by idle youth in a parking lot, tsK-tsking over the fact that they do not know how to read or spend their time well, and trying to get them into a reading program: *If you learn how to read you will be a better person living a better life in a better society.* There is the end of education, and it is a moral one: a good person living a good life in a good society.

Education is also moral by reason of its means, for inducing the young into the good. The intentions of education are benevolent, the methods inviting, and the processes collaborative.

Educators wish the good for their pupils. No one who is malevolent can be an educator, by definition, nor any one who is indifferent to children's good. Where the intentions are not benevolent the enterprise is recognizably not education but some other way of changing people's behavior.

In intending the good, educators use methods that invite the young and engage processes that involve them. Educators induce the young; they do not push them. Nor do they seduce the young or coerce them, manipulate or trick them. Educators do not in fact act *upon* young people but with them in a collaborative process where educator and pupil are both of them agents of change of the pupil's behavior. They are joint agents, co-actors, co-respondents,

collaborators. Where the process is not collaborative but the agency is one-sided, and where the methods are not inviting but coercive or manipulative, the enterprise is demonstrably not education but some other means of changing the way people think, feel, and act. There are many non-educative ways to achieve non-educational changes in people's behavior.

On this point a curious feature of education emerges. Other ways of changing people's behavior are far more effective. Other methods and processes more surely and quickly produce results. But educators will not use these other means. They induce the young into the good by benevolent intentions, inviting methods, and collaborative processes with the other person a co-agent of the change. These means by their very nature cannot promise to achieve effective results. The public may well clamor today that schools produce results. Educators can only wince and cower, for while they do intend and strive for good changes in their pupils they do not realistically expect of people to change as intended. Educators cannot anticipate success, nor will they act to guarantee the results.

Attempts to guarantee educational results form "an endless pathetic striving for that which cannot be attained," as Gordon Chamberlin puts it in his phenomenological analysis, *The Educating Act* (Chamberlin 1981, 173). Education is a low-control enterprise the outcomes of which are not only not within the educator's control but cannot be controlled in any event, given the nature of the process, the mediation by the learner, the multiple influences on future action. Education cannot be rationalized into procedures that will produce particular products. "The effort is doomed to failure" (80).

By reason also of the object of education the enterprise is a moral one. We educate the young as human persons. That at once requires of us to assume a particular existential stance in relation to the young person, wherein we stand together and strive together towards their good. Although involving adult and youth, educator and pupil, teacher and student, it is a fundamental human and

interpersonal relationship. As such, for the young person as well the relationship must be voluntary and participative. While the educator benevolently proposes, helps, teaches, the youth willingly responds, tries, learns.

The young person too thinks, desires, and acts along with the educator in the process of education. It is the young person's very own mind that must actively construe unfamiliar meanings and understandings, grasp and use new knowledge and novel ways of thinking. It is the young person's own heart that must actively soften and swell with more humane and lofty sentiments, values, desires, and tastes. It is the young person's own body that must actively acquire and enact new behaviors and follow new predispositions to act and to react.

The very fact that the object of education is a moral agent – voluntary and participative, actively co-agent, thinking, feeling, acting ever in play and at issue – makes both the process and the outcome of education uncertain. It could not be otherwise.

Uncertainty may be a curious or objectionable feature but it is proper to the character of education. A German philosopher of education calls educational actions "*interventions in the unknown with uncertain results*" (Brezinka 1997, 267; emphasis in original). Educators lack complete knowledge of the complex conditions for bringing about the intended learning, and cannot calculate in advance all of the consequences of any action proposed to bring it about it. "How to realize educational aims will always remain a problem which people must attempt to solve without ever knowing all the conditions for success" (194).

### **Distinctive properties**

Education is a distinct enterprise, readily distinguished from others. Nonetheless people commonly confound it. That is because they do not know what education is and what it is like by contrast with certain other enterprises that are well-known for their prominence and success in society. Hence they may treat education as if it were really something else.



Education is demonstrably unlike contrasting enterprises. It is not like rocket science, plumbing and accounting, engineering and manufacturing, business corporations, shopping malls, cell phones and computers, nor like quantum mechanics, nuclear physics, mathematics, literary theory and most other fields that can be studied in a university. Unlike these enterprises, education is not a matter of technique and procedure, of theory and research, of success and achievement, of production and result. Strikingly, experimental or empirical research cannot answer the basic questions of education, and not much can be done in practice to ensure successful results of educational efforts.

Education is a domain of action. It counts among “the helping enterprises,” wherein superior people seek to influence the behavior of inferior or novice others towards a shared good proposed for them. Parenting infants or raising children is an obvious comparison. Counseling and psychotherapy are also similar to education in this respect, as are preaching and “motivational” speaking, coaching and training, recovery, rehab and self-improvement programs. Like education, these helping enterprises are moral in character – not technical, procedural, empirical, theoretical; and similar to education they also are uncertain in their practices and unsure of successful outcomes. Their most striking difference to the lay eye is their inability to attain results, outcomes, products, successes, performances, achievements, goals, and promises. As a nationally campaigning politician demanded: “We can get a rocket to the moon, so why can’t we teach kids to read?” Make-people-learn is the demand on education; make-all kids-learn-everything is the demand on schools. The demand alone makes it clear that people do not know what education is and so treat it as something else.

Inability to produce results is widely viewed as a defect of the educational enterprise, along with uncertainties of practice; moreover, they are viewed as defects attributable to known causes and liable to certain remedies. But they are in fact nothing of the kind. They are properties of education, part of its very