

Decision-Making and Professional Autonomy

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Serious concern over the various facets of policy-making shown in the articles of this issue of *Educational Perspectives*, for example, is indicative of the fact that education has become a topic of general interest and heated discussion in our society. Laymen—parents, businessmen, labor leaders, and others—have joined with professional educators in seeking answers to many complex policy-making questions. In this intense educational debate, one of the vexing, but fundamental, problems is who is to make what decisions. Many discussions have generated more heat than light because of disagreement, frequently implicit and unrecognized, and ambiguity over the position taken on this basic question. There-

fore, a general, though brief, discussion of this problem may be helpful in putting the succeeding articles in proper perspective.

Characteristics of Education

This problem in the decision-making process arises because of two fundamental characteristics of education. On the one hand, education is characterized as a *social function*. In the words of the Commission on Social Studies of the American Historical Association, "Being a form of social action, education . . . is a function of a particular society at a particular time and place in history; it is rooted in some actual culture and expresses the philosophy and recognized needs of that culture."¹ This

is to say that the kind of education that exists will vary with the quality of life that prevails in any particular group of people. In the United States, the society which education is set up to maintain and improve is by declaration and institutional organization a democratic society. That the ideals of democracy are not completely fulfilled in all areas of life cannot be denied, as the Negro problem all too clearly attests. However, it is also undeniable that the American people are committed by their heritage, by long practice, and by their sense of values to a democratic society. Among the basic ingredients constituting democratic theory, the one most relevant to our discussion is the following: "*the constitutional respon-*

sibility of the ruler to the ruled."² According to this principle, those in authority are held accountable to those over whom authority is exercised and the masses share equally in the formulation of the conditions under which they are to live. Thus, it is argued that society at large has the right and the responsibility to make decisions on educational matters, particularly problems related to educational policy. The argument here is that the educator is not endowed with "final authority in the determination of the ends, the processes, or the content of education. Final authority in all these respects rests with the enlightened and informed judgment of the whole people."³

On the other hand, however, education is also characterized as a *profession*. What is the significance of this characteristic for the problem under consideration? It means that education, in common with other professions, possesses or should possess certain traits. Lieberman lists eight of them: (1) A unique, definite, and essential social service; (2) An emphasis upon intellectual techniques in performing its service; (3) A long period of specialized training; (4) A broad range of autonomy for both the individual practitioners and for the occupational group as a whole; (5) An acceptance by the practitioners of broad personal responsibility for judgments made and acts performed within the scope of professional autonomy; (6) An emphasis upon the service to be rendered, rather than the economic gain to the practitioners, as the basis for the organization and performance of the social service delegated to the occupational group; (7) a comprehensive self-governing organization of practitioners; (8) A code of ethics which has been clarified and interpreted at ambiguous and doubtful points by concrete cases.⁴ These traits

are inter-related, but the one most relevant for our discussion is trait 4. To say that education is a profession is to say that it has a high degree of professional autonomy. And, professional autonomy in education refers to the scope of independent judgment reserved to educators because of their expert skill and knowledge. In other words, the general principle according to this second characteristic is that if an educational decision requires expert skill and knowledge, it should be reserved to the educators and not to the laymen. The question, then, is what kinds of decision fall within the rubric of professional autonomy. Although there is no unanimity on the matters which should be decided by educators, there are certain ones over which there is relatively little disagreement. Lieberman has summarized these as follows:

The subjects to be taught and the materials (such as textbooks) to be used in teaching them; the criteria to be used in deciding who should be admitted, retained, and graduated at all levels; the forms to be used in reporting pupil progress; school boundary lines and the criteria for permitting students to attend schools outside the boundary lines; the qualifications for entrance into teacher training; the length and content of the teacher training program; the standards of entry into and expulsion from education; the standards of professional conduct and the power to judge if and when practitioners have violated these standards; and who should lead the profession and speak for it on matters of broad professional concern.⁵

Role of Educator

Even a cursory examination of the quotation from Lieberman indicates that the second characteristic calls for a different role to be assumed by the educator in the decision-making process. Whether the two fundamen-

tal characteristics ascribed to education necessarily lead to mutually contradictory results is a problem requiring further analysis which lies beyond the scope of this paper. It might be noted, however, that one suggested resolution of this problem has been the oft-repeated formula: Let the society at large determine the educational goals or policies, and then let the professional educators determine the means which their expert knowledge shows to be necessary to implement the goals. That this formula is much too facile is seen very clearly when we recognize the continuity between means and ends. It may be well also to call attention to the fact that the ultimate authority residing in the people does not mean expert judgment has no role to play or that the educators' possessing professional autonomy does not imply denying laymen the opportunity to voice their opinions.

Although the final resolution of the problem may still be in the future, it may be well for educators to keep in mind these two positions in decision-making and to be careful not to relinquish too readily their professionally autonomous role in the decision-making process in the name of encouraging the democratic process by obtaining wide participation of laymen.

¹American Historical Association, Report of the Commission on Social Studies, *Conclusions and Recommendations of the Commission*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934, p. 31.

²David Spitz, *Patterns of Anti-Democratic Thought: An Analysis and a Criticism, with Special Reference to the American Political Mind in Recent Times*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949, p. 4.

³B. Othanel Smith, William O. Stanley, and J. Harlan Shores, *Fundamentals of Curriculum Development*, Revised edition, World Book Company, Yonkers-on-Hudson, New York, 1957, p. 544.

⁴Myron Lieberman, *Education as a Profession*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1956, pp. 2-6.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 91.