



Liverpool College

**At the root of what we do**

## **Our philosophy of education**

### **What is education?**

Education is the process by which a person is introduced to reality. Its object is to enable and inspire a person to lead their life with affectivity and in freedom. We have identified **six factors** which in the experience of our school are necessary for this process to begin, to develop and to bear fruit in a school: **experience, meaning, relationships, culture, learning and teaching**. As a school, we judge ourselves by the criteria of the extent to which our pupils and staff are being introduced to reality and the extent they are more or less adhering to this reality. An education is therefore the content of the dynamic encounter between a person and reality.

### **What is a person?**

The person is the irreducible subject and the protagonist of education. Every person experiences the world and engages in education from a consciousness of a self and ultimately only this self, the "I", can engage in an education. No categorization or reduction of the person into any social identity, gender, social or racial category, category of disadvantage or identity other than person can form the basis of a genuine educational journey. Education deals with my identity as a person, an utterly unique and unrepeatable being with self-consciousness. This is true for pupils and staff of any age or background and at any point along the educational journey

A person is not an empty vessel, *tabula rasa* (blank slate), or passive recipient to be filled with knowledge. Nor is it a creature whose primary needs are the acquirement of skills. Nor is a person defined by the bundle of needs as emphasized in the Maslow hierarchy of needs. The position of the person as protagonist in education flows from the structure of the boundless desires and hopes which constitute the self. Indeed, these hopes and desires are structured towards a desire and hope for totality, for meaning. The person's educational activity and journey aims towards the creation of meaning in its relationship with reality. As such, the hopes, longings and desires of the person for totality and meaning are the source of the possibility of education. They are the route by which a person is motivated to extend themselves into what was unexpected, unforeseen and unknown. This nexus between the person and reality is therefore the sphere of education.

This irreducible person is the focus of all educational activity even within the obvious social context of a school, family or community. Ultimately, only a person can educate. Only a person can be educated. Learning or teaching without engagement of the person is perhaps training but is not education.

## **I. Adherence to reality in its totality? Starting from experience.**

To educate is to introduce a person to possibility of a meaning in reality. The human person is so structured that nothing is alien to its sphere of interest. Education in this sense is about everything. Its “curriculum” is reality as experienced by humanity, as experienced by the human person. Human reason does not exclude any experience or any sphere of the material world or human experience. In many philosophies of education, the reality to which pupils are introduced is bounded by a narrow positivist understanding of the scope and field of reason, namely that which can be measured, or that which can be scientifically proven and repeated, or explicated and reduced. Our own experience as persons teaches us that reality is much greater than this limited and reduced reality of the scientifically proven or validated.

Our pursuit of meaning in reality is only possible because it is reasonable. We call reasonable a person who submits their reason to their experience, and who is able to judge their experience of reality. It is not reasonable to accept as true assertions which are not matched by our experience and not proven to us.

To lead rather than only live one’s life, therefore, is to be able to stand in front of reality, to look it square in the face, and to remain in front of it, engaging with it, interpreting it, improving it, contributing to it with affectivity and in freedom without seeking escape, obfuscation, or distraction. This process is continuous throughout the life of a person. This attitude in front of reality can best be described as adherence to it. This adherence is also sometimes described as maturity or truth. The starting point for the motivation for this journey is not only our curiosity but also our experience of reality. In our experience, intellectual, emotional, creative, physical, and spiritual and in the interaction of self with the reality we experience, we find the starting point of the educational journey. It is when our person, our self, questions and engages with its experience of reality, searching for its meaning and import, that our imagination is activated and we desire to strengthen our relationship with reality. It is then that the awareness of the questions necessary for education arise within us.

## **2. Meaning: the need for a proposal**

The person is a meaning-maker. Each person connects their experience, their person’s interaction with reality, to a narrative of meaning. For the person, reality is not random or arbitrary. The nature of the inescapable interaction of the person with the reality encountered is to endeavour to make sense of it, starting with our own experience. Each person and each generation begin this process anew, but not without assistance. If each person had to make meaning “from scratch” for themselves without culture, without educators, without guidance, they would suffer greatly in their search and all of history, in the sense of the accumulation of human efforts and experiences in making meaning through knowledge and culture, would have no educative purpose and no educative meaning. Meaning arises from the gift of a proposal or hypothesis about reality offered by educators within the context of education. The person, the protagonist in education, verifies, or tests this proposal, ultimately exercising freedom in accepting, rejecting, or changing this proposal or hypothesis. The provision of an education which does not offer a proposal or hypothesis of meaning which can be verified by the person is an act similar to leaving a person in the

dark without even the benefit of a path, a light, or a guide. Our introduction to reality must always be accompanied by a proposal of its meaning for our person. Our ability to lead our life depends on our ability to grasp meaning. Meaninglessness is a state contrary to the structure of the person. No person can adhere to reality if it has no meaning.

### **3. Relationships**

The person is embodied. We are physical creatures with self-consciousness and language. Our experience of and introduction to reality is always mediated through relationships and language. It is in relationships that our person, our self, with all its experience meets another person with all its experience. Our structure as persons enables us to encounter another person, to meet their unique self and to be moved or changed by this experience. These encounters create meaning. It cannot be emphasized enough that it is within these relationships that education occurs. Education is a social process. All education depends on this fundamental dynamic of meeting, encounter and relationship of person with person. Contrary to Descartes, we do not exist because we think, or even think and therefore exist. The fundamental experience of our humanity, our personhood and its education, is our capacity and need for relationship, for encounter and friendship. This is the reason we go to school and do not learn from power-point graphics, disembodied voices or algorithms. In the school setting, these relationships are primarily between peers and between adults, teacher and staff, and pupils. The meaning mentioned above is always embodied and mediated or introduced to us in meeting or encountering a person. It is a fallacy to believe that education is the pursuit of a “pure” or abstract knowledge or meaning which does not depend on a relationship or that we can be introduced to reality except through relationships. Our person is most commonly activated, motivated and awakened by encountering and being in relationships with a person. If we do not have these relationships, we can make no sense of our experience of reality.

### **4. Culture**

The person makes meaning and culture. Our person wants to do something in the world, make an impact, contribute to reality, create a culture. In its structure, our person wishes to connect to others in relationship and together create a culture, a way of experiencing reality together. This desire is so much part of our structure as human beings that our species has never lived without the building of a culture. Schools are an example of this making of culture. They are communities which are expressions of this desire to “work on the world together”. The introduction into a culture is not a passive activity. Much goes wrong when the protagonist of education, the person, is no longer required, encouraged and invited to make, to renew and to create culture but is instead invited to accept the culture as a static reality, incapable of being changed. Marx correctly identified this in economic terms as alienation, the psychological curse of an economic reality. In educational terms, alienation also occurs when the person engaging in education is unable to make culture, unable to create, and unable to participate in it as constitutive of it. A person makes culture when they act in freedom in a social context.

## **5. Learning**

There is no learning outside the learner, an irreducible person. There is no educational learning without that person, that “I”, experiencing “we”, since we are structured as human persons to learn from each other. Learning is the strengthening of the nexus between the person and reality through the dynamic of human encounter. It is an activity of freedom. Knowledge of reality, when accompanied by a proposal or hypothesis about its meaning enables the person to adhere to reality and to continue to learn, testing the proposal or hypothesis. This is the dynamic of what happens in education. Learning takes many forms but, in each case, its result in purely biological terms, is a change in the brain of the person. This change only strengthens the nexus or connection with reality through the effects of affectivity and freedom.

In order to learn, a person must have some affectivity, some love or emotionally positive connection, with reality. Absent affectivity, there is no interest in reality, only apathy. Without some trust or confidence in the goodness or positive orientation or meaning of reality, it is difficult to conceive of a desire to learn, or a motivation to learn.

Learning requires affectivity, but it is only completed through the exercise of choice, the exercise of human freedom. Ultimately, to learn is a choice, an exercise of the deepest agency, dignity and sovereignty of the person. An education which does not engage our person and does not activate its freedom is not an education and will not succeed in allowing a person to adhere to reality. By way of example, our school dog, Elsie, has been trained. She has not exercised any freedom in the things she has learned, in effecting the changes in her canine brain which now allow her to sit on command and even “read” simple messages. Attempts to “educate or train” the person in the same way would fail because affectivity and freedom in the human person require meaning, relationships, culture. In order to learn, that which we learn has to fit into a context of meaning. It is not possible for a person to motivate themselves, to activate their person to learn things which have no connection to a hypothesis of meaning. Whereas Elsie can be motivated by a dog biscuit, the person is aware of her freedom. A person, unlike a dog, is able to say with Han Solo in Star Wars, “No reward is worth this.”

We learn by doing, by repetition, by reflection with and through the example of others. We use not only our intellect to engage with abstract conceptions, using our imaginations to strengthen the nexus with reality. We also learn by doing, by repeatedly engaging in activity, by making relationships and culture, by creating changes in our brain through the creation of habits which arise from our affectivity and freedom. Schools promote or hinder this process through every aspect of their culture. Nothing is alien to this enterprise. Everything that happens in a school can be a source of learning, or not, depending on the engagement of the persons in the school with affectivity and with freedom.

## **6. Teaching**

There is no education without teaching, there is no teaching without the irreducible person of a teacher. As stated above it is in the relationships with persons that we learn. Teaching is the act of awakening the person’s affectivity and freedom. It is a relationship. Teaching occurs when a person who embodies a proposal for an engagement with the meaning of

reality, a proposal for leading life, awakens the affectivity and freedom of a learner. This is the necessary encounter of education. The knowledge “exchanged” or “imparted” is a testimony to the significance of some element of reality within a wider proposal or hypothesis of meaning. The learner sees in the teacher the embodied evidence of the value of the proposal of learning. Teaching therefore is a communication of the person, the self, of an irreducible “I” and its experience. In concrete terms this communication is by definition only a part reality, but this communication is only effective within the context of proposed meaning.