An Existential Perspective on the Concept of Inspirational Teaching

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Abstract

Existentialist and dialogical approaches lay special emphasis on the educator's personality in the educational process. This stance holds that inspirational educators have no less of an impact, and perhaps even more of one, by virtue of their personality and humanity than by virtue of their teaching or philosophy. Accordingly, educational practice in a deeper sense rests more upon identification and inspiration than any other foundation. This insight suggests that education's impact may not be primarily rational and intellectual in essence but rather emotional and existential. However, underlining the centrality of the educator's personality in the pedagogical process raises a challenge, because contrary to the accepted wisdom regarding the criteria that define "good teaching," nailing down the cluster of personality traits that inspirational educators should possess turns out to be a rather elusive task. Thus, we are faced with a complex situation: on the one hand, the educator's personality is acknowledged as a key component in their evolution into a figure of influence and inspiration, while on the other hand, its ambiguous, singular, and dynamic nature frustrates conceptualization, not to mention impartment. This article examines the dialectical complexity of the educator's personality whilst attempting to establish the argument that educators' capacity to express their authentic self in the school setting serves as a threshold not only to enhancing their impact and potential to become inspirational teachers, but also to achieving a sense of personal meaning in their work.

Keywords   authentic; educators; teachers; personality; process; pedagogy

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Introduction

The word "inspiration" in English has its roots in the Latin verb *inspirare*, which means "to breathe" or "to blow into." Over time the term acquired the religious-figurative meaning of "breathing life into (something)"—hence the inextricable link between "inspiration" and "spirit," which comes from *spiritus*, the Latin word for "breath.". "Inspiration," then, appears upon etymological examination to be infused with a distinctly spiritual dimension, charged with an extraordinary potential to extricate the human soul from the tedious routine of everyday life, and elevate it to more exciting heights, by dint of "muse," "spirituality," "Eros" and "creative power."

Inspiration's mysterious ability to uplift and motivate people was soon transformed into practical economic terms, designed for commercial ends. Soon enough the expectation from the artist, chef, scholar, teacher was no longer just to create, but to inspire, move, excite, supply some unique, extraordinary value, "greater than the sum of its parts." Moreover, inspiration has often been detached from creative work and assigned a value in its own right as "feeling." Everywhere today we find people whose "art is inspiration"—namely, marketing gurus, who "move and inspire audiences."

While there is nothing wrong per se with stimulating entertainment and the feelings of excitement and release it elicits, in education, whose deeper essence is grounded in practical day-to-day work and actual relationships, it becomes somewhat disturbing. Nowhere is this trend more obvious than in Hollywood films about education. These deal with education so to speak, but in effect, seem to be really about "superheroes," all of whom share one special super-power: the ability to inspire. A narrative so repetitive, familiar and yet attractive—winsome stars of the silver screen, charismatic and sincere—enter classrooms bubbling with unruly inner-city youths, indisposed to do their lessons. In no more than 90 minutes running time, and condensed into a few emotional scenes, they have the pupils overcoming longstanding conflicts and difficulties, attaining their diplomas, and embracing each other jubilantly to the sound of a hit song.

In the brief article that follows, I attempt to struggle with the above mentioned overly simplistic and formulaic conception of inspiration and the dangers it entails, in my view. Proceeding from a radical-existential outlook, I argue that inspiration is neither a formula nor an engineered product, and that the very attempt to define and market it, as such, undermines and distorts its true nature, which is in fact profound, unique and elusive. Indeed, when considered from an existentialist point of view, inspiration proves to be expressive of the artist/educator's unique personality and the singular, inimitable way in which they cope with the (personal and pedagogical) challenges in their lives. To develop my argument, I draw insights from the thought of such existential-dialogical philosophers and educators as Friedrich Nietzsche,

Erich Fromm, Martin Buber and Janusz Korczak. I hope you find the discussion intriguing—if not necessarily inspiring…

Inspiration as an Expression of Authenticity

In this section, I attempt to grasp the meaning of inspiration via ideas and categories associated with existentialist philosophy. This orientation probes human phenomena such as happiness, anxiety, artistic creation, hope, caring, love, and so on, through the concept of "authenticity." Authenticity is portrayed as an expression of our ongoing existential struggle to find meaning in life, while consciously confronting its temporality and finality (see Golumb, 1999, p. 70). The existentialist perspective, as Kierkegaard (1835/1959) puts it, seeks not to obtain a "cold and naked" (p. 44) truth but rather to help us answer some lack, some profound need within, and formulate for ourselves understandings deeply bound up with our personal daily existence. This authentic grappling, embodied in the sum of one's experiences, loves, joys and torments in life, is forever unique and individual, thus constituting the person on some small scale as an "artist" and their grappling as tantamount to a "work of art." An "aesthetic phenomenon" in the phraseology of Nietzsche (1872/1910, p. 9), who viewed this facet of existence as perhaps the most audacious expression of our humanity.

Our vitality and the strength of our humanity, accordingly, are measured in existential terms of authenticity—of our capacity as individuals to write the book of our own lives honestly and faithfully. From the standpoint of authenticity, the human phenomenon we refer to as "inspiration" is ignited when we are "blown away"" by the vitality, beauty, sincerity of the work of art and/or the artist, by the sense that something special, unique, and original is occurring, which triggers excitement, desire, involvement, movement. The inverse of "what inspires," on the other hand, is that which is fake, ugly, dull, synthetic, static, generic, banal. Like the term "aura" coined by Walter Benjamin (1935/1969, p. 221) in relation to aesthetic judgment, inspiration signifies a unique and sacred quality that defies mechanical, generic reproduction. Accordingly, it cannot be born of standardization, homogenization, or the application of any single set of universal rules (reduction); it is neither a commodity nor a synthetic effect, nor can it be achieved by means of commercial reproduction techniques. Its sui generis existential nature implies that it is knowable and recognizable only by way of experience, movement, internal dialectical tension, and a vast multiplicity of possible perspectives. Implicit in this conception is the understanding that inspiration's existential power is often inversely related to its definability (and, by the same token, its reproducibility). And yet, notwithstanding its conceptual elusiveness and inaccessible nature (from an epistemological standpoint), inspiration can imbue an otherwise hopelessly gray and humdrum life with (ontological-existential) meaning, purpose, and vitality. Against

this background, Nietzsche's (1889/1997) famous aphorism "Without music life would be an error" (p. 10) is particularly resonant.

The Existential Significance of Personality in the Field of Education

A person's uniqueness, as conceived in existentialist philosophy, is realized in their sui generis personhood. Nietzsche (1874/1997) opines that "In his heart every man knows quite well that, being unique, he will be in the world only once and that no imaginable chance will for a second time gather together into a unity so strangely variegated an assortment as he is" (p. 127). In other words, from an existentialist perspective, our singular personality is what distinguishes each of us from others, what expresses our unique and uniterable existence in the world. Thus, when we say someone lacks a distinctive personality, we imply a sort of facelessness, a reluctance to stand out, a lack of pretense, a desire to remain neutral, a prosaicism, a drabness, etc.

Highlighting the existential dimension of the human personality and the potential for authenticity latent within it discloses the foundational significance of the art of education. Indeed, existentialist and dialogical approaches place a special emphasis on the educator's unique personality in the educational process. Nietzsche, for instance, attributes greater importance to the human qualities of the educator than any other pedagogical foundation. Exemplary teachers, according to Nietzsche (1874/1997), constitute themselves as role models in their "outward life and not merely in [their] books—in the way, that is, in which the philosophers of Greece taught, through their bearing, what they wore and ate, and their morals, rather than what they said, let alone by what they wrote" (p. 137). That is to say, significant teachers educate by force of their personalities: the more presence they have and the more credible they are, the more influential and edifying their arguments are likely to be. In a similar vein, Abraham Joshua Heschel (2011) wrote: "What we need more than anything else is not textbooks but text people. It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read: the text that they will never forget" (pp. 250-251). In this framework, Buber's (1973) famous statement "Teaching itself does not educate; rather it is the teacher that educates" (p. 249) may be better understood. Implicit in this existential perspective is the notion that in the field of education the practitioner and their work are inseparable in a way that may not be the case in other realms of endeavor, such as the work of a painter, composer, or engineer. In other words, the educator's influence is wrought no less, and perhaps even more so, by dint of the strength of their personality and humanity than by dint of their work or philosophy. This, it seems to me, is what Zvi Adar (1963) meant when he wrote, at the end of a long and complicated discussion on the ideological underpinnings of various educational outlooks, that "The best teachers are better than their philosophy" (p. 66).

The emphasis on the personality element in the pedagogical relationship implies that the deeper substance of educational practice is based more on identification and inspiration than any other foundation. One ramification of this existentialist insight is that education's impact is not primarily rational and intellectual at its core, but rather emotional and existential. That is to say, the pupil identifies first and foremost with the educator as a person, with their human qualities, and only afterwards with their philosophy, views, beliefs, and so on. The child's moral education, as Bettelheim (1976/1989) suggests, in reference to the educational influence of fairytales, occurs not out of rational persuasion to prefer good over evil, but rather out of identification with the hero of the tale and their deeds:

> The child identifies with the good hero not because of his goodness, but because the hero's condition makes a deep positive appeal to him. The question for the child is not "Do I want to be good?" but "Who do I want to be like?" The child decides this on the basis of projecting himself wholeheartedly into one character. If this fairy-tale figure is a good person, then the child decides that he wants to be good, too. (Bettelheim, 1976/1989, p. 10)

This psychological insight is of tremendous pedagogical value because it underscores the fact that the root of educators' influence on their pupils is not necessarily rational, but rather is embedded above all in the existential power of the encounter with the child, in the quality of the relationship that educators form with their pupils, and in their ability to establish themselves as significant and benevolent figures in their world.

The educator's unique and irreplaceable personality serves as a foundation for spontaneous behavior and the special way in which they communicate with others on a daily basis. This foundation, which is mediated at no time by conscious thought or reflection, frees us as educators of the burden of constant judgment, and allows us to be "ourselves," to act spontaneously and naturally. The whole of our unique personality turns out, then, to make a decisive pedagogical impact, because it not only resonates consistently over time, but does so naturally and non-didactically, in each interaction with our pupils and independent of the educational context—whether during a lesson, a break, a fieldtrip, or one of the moments when admonishment or firmness are required. In effect, as Buber (1984) observes, it is exactly in these moments that the truest long-term transformational impact occurs:

> The pupil's wholeness can only be influenced by the educator's wholeness (shlemut), his total unmediated experience….His vitality shines upon them and has the strongest and purest effect precisely when

the desire to influence them is the furthest thing from his mind (Buber, 1984, p. 366).

However, underscoring the centrality of the educator's personality in the pedagogical process raises a challenge, because contrary to the accepted wisdom regarding the criteria that define "good teaching," nailing down the agglomeration of personality traits that educators should possess turns out to be a rather elusive task. This difficulty, as mention above, is immanent to the sui generis nature of the human personality from an existentialist perspective. Thus, we are faced with a complex situation: on the one hand, the educator's personality is acknowledged as a key component in their evolution into a figure of influence and inspiration, while on the other hand, its ambiguous, singular, and dynamic nature frustrates conceptualization, not to mention impartment. To continue, I will offer an existential perspective on the conceptual complexity of personality.

On the Conceptual Complexity of the "Personality" Component in Education

Young students in teacher training frameworks often grapple with the question of their pedagogical identity and the type of educator they wish to be. When the issue is discussed in the training framework, many students attest that the image of the good teacher they have in their minds tends to be based on inspirational former teachers and instructors, or (and perhaps mainly) educator figures they have encountered in books and films. In these cases, the admired figures' traits, magnified through the intoxicating power of nostalgia or the Hollywood screenplay and soundtrack, are perceived as an ideal to which the young student aspires: the charismatic teacher, the attentive one, the one with an infectious enthusiasm for the subject matter, the one who refused to give up, and so on.

Yet, the attempt to appropriate the virtues and subjective quality of the same "mythological" figures inexorably fails, because in most instances it is based on an abstraction or synthetic image disconnected from praxis. Through such a simplistic lens, pedagogical quality can be discerned only in its external manifestations, and the unique (and generally hidden) dynamics and inner complexity underlying it cannot be penetrated. Eventually, it comes to light that what once appeared simple and crystal clear is in fact complex, elusive and ambiguous; indeed, subjective quality and unique personal attributes are never quite as evident and uncomplicated as they seem at first glance, nor are they replicable through imitation of overt behaviors. The teacher trainee soon realizes that they cannot be charismatic or attentive in the same way as a favorite high school teacher; that the "amazing" teacher character in the Hollywood film bears no relation at all to the types of challenges they are experiencing in the classroom; and sometimes even that the positive attributes they believe made a committed and energetic teacher such an

influential force in their own life are experienced by fellow trainees differently, and sometimes even unfavorably.

In light of the above, it seems appropriate to explore in greater depth the concept of personality in all its unique facets and underlying dynamics. Indeed, a radical-existential analysis of the inspirational educator figure must peel away the exterior layers of the educator's personality to reveal the complexities that lie below the surface. Human experience, understood from such a radical-existential perspective, as suggested by Erich Fromm (1947) in his book *Man for Himself: An Enquiry Into the Psychology of Ethics*, emerges out of a state of dynamic perpetual tension between contradictory forces operating within us all the time. That is to say, the personality's structure is conceived not as a fixed and static entity but rather as the product of constant interaction between an array of opposing attributes. The implication of this dialectic is that every feature of one's personality attests to the simultaneous existence of another feature that is its diametric opposite—the other side of the coin, so to speak. In other words, the structure of the human personality is a unique combination of a long list of seemingly antithetical traits (Fromm, 1947, p. 78).

This dynamic, marked by vibrant internal dialectical tension, raises fascinating insights with respect to the inspirational educator's personality mix. We see, for instance, how a teacher's positive tendency to openness and acceptance of colleagues' opinions may often be entwined with a negative tendency to passivity and lack of initiative; how the positive attitude of a highly devoted and committed teacher may be accompanied by a difficulty setting boundaries; how an idealistic educator's optimistic personality can have the flipside of a propensity to be unrealistic and to see the world not as it is but how it ought to be; and how a driven and assertive educator may also be prone to aggression and to taking advantage of others. In other words, every feature of the educator's personality constitutes, in effect, a dialogue between its "positive" and "negative" manifestations: practicality and lack of imagination, restraint and dispassion, tolerance and indifference, orderliness and pedantry, and so on. In sum, existential perspectives suggest that the teacher's unique personality, which is the most important element in their potential to become a figure of influence and inspiration, is not manifested as a fixed and simple pattern but rather as something novel and unique born of the interaction and tension between a series of conflicting attributes.

In the following section, I will offer some pedagogical insights, coming from dialogical and existential thinkers, regarding the possibility of teachers to express and realize their authentic self in their educational work.

The Fulfilment of Authentic Personality in Education

According to the existential perspective expressed above, in order to realize our pedagogical potential, we as educators must be cognizant of the unique combination

of attributes we possess, the tension between our positive and negative sides, and the contexts in which these attributes are realized. This obligation is encapsulated in the reflective imperative inscribed per the legend on the pediment of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi: "Know thyself." According to this ancient Greek ideal, our capacity to become significant pedagogical figures depends on self-knowledge—recognition of the contradictory forces operating inside us: our abilities, desires, strengths, weaknesses. Those of us who do our work in earnest are compelled to discover what brings us joy and misery, in which situations we feel essential, useful, and valuable, and in which ones we feel weak, out-of-place, and alienated; which human environments are close to our hearts, and from which ones we recoil. This process of self-discovery and the emotional and intellectual experiences that accompany it are meant to allow us to gain a genuine sense of what our unique pedagogical personality might be — where our heart and talents lie. Through the pursuit of self-knowledge, ultimately, we as educators can authentically come to terms with our capabilities and choose with greater wisdom the pedagogical setting that best suits our personality. Sometimes we find that a combination of attributes conducive to successful pedagogical work in one setting actually inhibit success in another.

The importance of authenticity in the inspirational educator's work is illustrated most exquisitely in the pedagogical philosophy of Janusz Korczak. In his writings, Korczak warns repeatedly against the use of pedagogical clichés, theoretical models, and ready-made scholarly operating instructions, because he believes that they sever the educator from the vitality and honesty of spontaneous, unmediated educational work. The educator's qualms and experiments, successful and unsuccessful alike, are expressive, in Korczak's view, of the educator's own unique path among the myriad paths that converge in the work of education. In this spirit, he writes: "the road I have chosen toward my goal is neither the shortest nor the most convenient but it is the best for me—because it is mine—my own" (Korczak, 1914/1967, p. 200). Accordingly, Korczak encouraged educators at the Warsaw boarding school he ran to experiment with diverse teaching methods and to find their own personal pedagogical voice. Such discovery cannot occur, he asserts, out of either theoretical study of neat and tidy educational methods or romantic introspection, but rather only out of sincere experimentation and studied engagement in praxis—"Good teachers are distinguished from the bad ones only by the number of errors made, and injustices done," he writes (Korczak, 1914/1967, p. 222). As for those who vacillate on the question of which path to take, Korczak advises that they act with sincerity:

> If you cannot strike an impressive attitude and exercise powerful lungs, in vain will you try to silence a noisy crowd with a loud voice. You have a kind smile and a patient look, just say nothing. Perhaps they will quiet

down anyway? They are seeking their own way. (Korczak, 1914/1967, p. 204)

In other words, at the core of this radical-existential outlook is the conviction that it is only upon a deep foundation of directness, integrity, and authenticity that educators can truly realize their potential, answer their calling, and inspire others.

Further, the moorings of Korczak's approach in educational reality and actual experience highlight the fact that reflective, introspective scrutiny must also entail a readiness to act; that is, the educator's transformation into an influential, inspirational figure depends not only on knowledge of self but also on a willingness and daring to realize oneself in praxis—the courage to become the educator one was meant to be. An ever-looming danger we as educators face is that in our attempts to conform to social imperatives or to shape ourselves in the mold of simplistic, cinematic, idealized images of the "good teacher," we risk losing or forgetting our unique personalities. It is essential, then, that we be true to ourselves, and summon a measure of courage, if we are to resist being seduced by oversimplified, made-in-Hollywood images, by the comforts of familiar, oft-travelled paths the system offers, or by the stereotypes and protocols it ordains. As educators, we must recognize and appreciate the contradictions that reside within each of one of us, confront them, and cultivate the unique powers that also lie within.

Brief Conclusion—Personality, Meaning and Inspiration

At the outset of the article, I noted that from an existentialist point-of-view, our humanity reaches fulfilment out of an awareness of life's finality and a determination to give it meaning, and that our distinctive, singular personalities bespeak the particular manner in which we do so. Through our creative work and the unique powers that inhere in our personhoods, we are able to realize our humanity and give life meaning, for, as Fromm (1950) opines,

> there is no meaning in life except the meaning man gives his life by the unfolding of his powers, by living productively; and that only constant vigilance, activity, and effort can keep us from failing at the one task that matters—the full development of our powers within the limitations set by the laws of our existence. (Fromm, 1950, p. 45)

The educator, accordingly, is one who "lives productively" through educational work; the significant, authentic, inspirational educator is one who not only finds meaning in that work but manages to express through it their own unique personality, and thus, their humanity at its best. An existentialist perspective allows us to recognize the authentic quality of inspiration in all its singularity: never an assembly-line product, or a composite of significant teachers' personalities and

attributes, or ascertainable by means of a public opinion poll, or engineered in laboratories, it is rather realized in the individual personality of the educator and in relation to the special challenges they face in reality.

Our ability and willingness as educators to give expression to our personalities in our work, therefore, turns out to be a pre-condition for our capacity to inspire. Inspirational educators are such by dint of the unique way in which they negotiate, in harmony with their individual personality traits, the special qualities and contradictions in their experience. Under certain conditions, one educator may inspire by virtue of their fastidiousness and persistence, while another may do so on account of their sensitivity, emotional flexibility, and tendency to relent and accept. Thus, a child may feel an attachment to one teacher and not another because the former's unique personality and tendencies happen to align with their specific needs at a certain time. The field of existentialist educational philosophy offers no template or mold for the "inspirational educator" that young teachers can fit into. On the contrary, it is important, and even necessary, that there be educators of every stripe in the school setting who are capable of expressing their diverse, sui generis personalities.

The school that endeavors to prescribe or insist upon—out of ideological, professional, or regulative considerations — some generic personality type (as well-articulated and sophisticated as it might be) is liable to discover quite soon that it has become not only gray and dull, but also charmless and unimpactful. In a "professional," scientific pedagogical system that professes to total objectivity and unprejudiced efficiency, the human, creative, unexpected, and unmediated element is negated and neutralized. Indeed, a generic educational space such as this takes on the clinical character of a laboratory or factory, where technical and administrative style teachers predominate, and where unique, inspirational ones with an "aura" have little place.

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