Chapter 36
How Then Shall We Teach?

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Abstract  In this chapter, I suggest that conditions faced by youth are not new but are disquieting and reflect a sense of desperation. The purpose of this chapter is to re-establish confidence in conveying truth claims to children and young people as a foundational experience. I propose that the only reason not to give children settled views on the world and its meaning (religious and secular) is a belief that they are incapable of eventually thinking for themselves. If true, that belief undermines liberal education entirely, more so than the most rigorous forms of indoctrination.

In making my claim for a concerted adult response to confusion in the young, I describe two capacities: an ability to make prejudices explicit and an ability to perceive patterns in human experience. On the basis of these abilities, I outline a teaching method that aims to offer a reasonable foundation for formation and to develop reasonableness in youth, a capacity central to Western liberal education and to being an educated person. An issue that interferes with our confidence in passing tradition on to the young is our uneasy alliance between liberal education and religious instruction. The problem is, however, that the confusion among children and youth has to do with the meaning of life, the nature of God and their own place in the universe. These are spiritual anxieties. The young seek and use religious language to address these concerns. Therefore, we need to find ways to secure the young in traditions which they can reflect upon when they are older. This chapter makes a contribution to that educational aim.

Introduction

Children and young people are confused. Jean Baudrillard (1993), sometimes called the high priest of post-modernity, postulated that the times in which we live are best identified as the revolution of confusion (pp. 3–13). I suggest that the confusion is spiritual and intellectual. My interest is in its spiritual side. I define spirituality as a sense of felt connection (Bellous, 2006), implying that a sense of felt connection...
to a world of meaningful objects (Bellous) is as fragile as it is precious and it may atrophy. As central as spirituality is to wellbeing, it is easily silenced so that spiritual needs of children and youth, real though they are, can suffer neglect. A sense of felt connection, potential in everyone, develops through life experience to provide children with worldviews they form by early adolescence. Under some conditions, these worldviews, constructed through the meaning-making activity engendered by spiritual processes (Bellous), leave children in a state of confusion. This is due to the narrative quality of a worldview. It is the foundation for the story we tell ourselves about life and our place within it; it acts back on how we interpret experience and tells us what to expect from life. In order to feel satisfied by ultimate realities—God, oneself, other people, the world—children need an education that is responsive to their questions and offers a confident foundation for the story that directs their lifelong learning, particularly given the complexity of our modern and post-modern contexts.

In addition to being caught in complexity, modern individuals are both object and subject of consciousness. Therefore children go through three processes to achieve competence: they are formed, informed and transformed as subject and object. They learn to be both the person that thinks and the person that thinks about that thinking. American psychologist and educator Robert Kegan (1997) pointed out the demands of modern living and identified a process of development based on Piaget’s theory to describe how people make meaning consciously. In his view, we are compelled to be reflective by the complexity of our current circumstances to a degree that is novel in human history. What, then, do children and youth need given the current circumstances? I think they need confidence and methods capable of building a foundation for thinking and also for thinking about thinking.

In this chapter, I investigate relationships between spiritual confidence and intellectual complexity. My purpose is to show that religious education can ground the young in confident worldviews without creating in them a fortress against future learning. Religious education can help them build worldviews that promote the spiritual confidence that encourages them to feel well connected to truths passed on through tradition. Spiritual confidence does not foreclose on intellectual openness; rather, it is best served by developing confidence so children sense they are securely connected to the world, others, themselves, God/or ultimate ideals, and thereby come to trust that the world is meaningful and makes good sense. In contrast to confident ones, spiritually confused children feel anxious about life, an anxiety which does not relax simply by addressing the intellectual side of their confusion. Anxiety does nothing to help them deal with the complexities of life.

The purpose of this chapter is to re-establish confidence in conveying truth claims to the young by tracing the path of a belief that all knowledge is interpretation and provisional. It might be reasonable to be provisional during their formation if children were incapable of thinking for themselves; but if true, that belief undermines liberal education entirely—as much as the most rigorous indoctrination. To support my argument that spiritual confidence allows children to deal effectively with intellectual complexity, I first pick out a Socratic method to situate the learning model I spell out at the end. I then examine the belief that all knowledge is interpretation and