

# World War II and Schools

SEYMOUR B. SARASON

*Professor Emeritus, Yale University*

My interest in educational reform has very personal roots. Needless to say, the roots of the educational reform movement require a social-historical explanation but, I assume, that kind of explanation can be illuminated by personal accounts which, albeit idiosyncratic, says something about the social-historical context. I have long been intrigued by the fact that some of the more well known participants in the reform movement come from very different backgrounds and life experiences. It is my impression that the number of these participants is greater than in any previous era. That in itself points to the importance of a distinctive social-historical context. For what it is worth I begin with a personal account.

In 1993 I wrote a book *You are Thinking of Teaching?* To begin this personal account I can do no better than to give the following excerpt from that book.

When you review your twelve years as a student, which teachers come quickly to mind? Let me personally answer the question. Because I am undoubtedly a very senior citizen, I have to point out that the teachers I remember now are the same teachers I remembered when I was much younger. For example, when I was in graduate school – approximately six or seven years after being graduated from high school – a number of my student colleagues and I were discussing the nature of memory, in the course of which someone suggested that each of us write down the names of the teachers we had in our public school days. We were quite surprised at the relative shortness of our lists. (We could recall in our mind's eye several teachers whose names could not be dredged up.)

My list then was what it is today, and in this order: Miss Stephenson, Mr. Coleman, Miss Collins, Mr. Triest, Mr. Hunkins, Mrs. Schweig, Mr. McDonald. The last two names were not teachers. Mr. McDonald was the principal of my elementary (K-8) school, and Mrs. Schweig was the assistant principal. But they were unforgettable because I and others viewed them as fearsome, punishing, if not child-devouring. The fact is that I can recall not a single instance when I interacted in any way with either of them, and I can recall no instance when I saw them in any way punish or discipline a child. But to the children in that school, Mr. McDonald and Mrs. Schweig were to be avoided like the plague. If you were in the hall and you saw either of them, your heartbeat mightily escalated, especially if they appeared to be approaching you. Why are they, who were not my teachers, on my list? For one thing,

I cannot think of my elementary school days without their images being conjured up, I feared them. For all I know, they may have been lovely, decent, sensitive, supportive people, but you couldn't prove that by my testimony or that of my classmates. They never did or said anything to give students the feeling that they could be trusted. There is a difference between fear and respect. We feared them. We saw them as seeing us as potential criminals. We loved and respected Tom Kelly, the police officer who directed traffic at the busy intersection where the school was located. He was a delightful, friendly, joking, lovable person. When he was killed by a car at that intersection, we cried. If that had happened to Mr. McDonald or Mrs. Schweig, we probably would have been sad, but we would not have cried.

Why do I start with Mr. McDonald and Mrs. Schweig? For one thing, I wish to emphasize that how a child views an adult in the school may be dramatically discrepant with how that adult intends or would like to be viewed. I have no doubt whatsoever that Mr. McDonald and Mrs. Schweig did not want to be feared. But I can recall nothing said by either of them or any of my teachers to change my basic stance of fear, my belief that if they approached me, I was in trouble. (It was not until I was an adult that I learned that that is precisely what many parents believe: if they are asked to come to see the principal, they are going to hear bad news. Parents are not accustomed to being summoned to school to be told good news.) The more general point I wish to make is that young children, like everyone else, form impressions of others less on the basis of what they say or do not say and more (much more) on what they experience in their give-and-take with others. And by experience, I mean circumscribed instances in which the needs, expectations, and goals of a child are positively or negatively affected by the words and actions of an adult. It is not that actions speak louder than words but that actions are incomparably more fateful than words. I may very well have been told that Mr. McDonald and Mrs. Schweig were not to be feared, but there was nothing in my personal experience to lead me to change my mind. Fear is the enemy of trust, and trust is the interpersonal vehicle by means of which different personal worlds can begin to overlap. I had absolutely no basis for trusting Mr. McDonald and Mrs. Schweig.

As I have looked back and replayed my school days on my internal video screen, there were very few teachers I can say I trusted. Let me hasten to add that I never feared a teacher the way I did Mr. McDonald and Mrs. Schweig. Why, then, were there so few whom I did trust? Why when I think of trust do I think only of Mr. Coleman and Miss Stephenson? One reason is that I believed they were interested not only in my academic performance but in me, that is, what I thought and felt. When I gave a wrong answer to a question, they did not say "That is wrong" and call on another student. They tried to determine why and how I arrived at the wrong answer. And they did that calmly, patiently, as if I had piqued their curiosity, which they had to satisfy. With other teachers, I would not volunteer an answer unless I was absolutely, 100 percent sure my answer was correct. With Mr. Coleman and

Miss Stephenson, I was relaxed and not fearful of appearing stupid. In fact, I enjoyed those give-and-take interactions. Their classes were interesting, they asked us interesting, even puzzling questions, they challenged us to draw on our out-of-class experience. And in doing so, they did one other thing: they revealed why and how they thought as they did. We learned a lot about them as people. If I had to put in one sentence what has stayed with me from their classes, it would go like this: "There is more than one way to think about and solve a problem."

When I think of these two people (they were more than the label teacher conventionally conjures up), the word *fair* always comes to mind. That is a hard word to define briefly. For my present purposes, let me just say that it appeared as if who you were, and how "smart" you were, were never grounds for ignoring or devaluing you. Regardless of who and what you were – and the students were very heterogeneous on any variable you can name – you counted.

Let me now tell you about Miss Collins, whom I had in the ninth grade and who influenced my life. She did not have the "open," challenging style of Miss Stephenson or Mr. Coleman. I never felt I knew her or that she was particularly interested in me other than as a performing student. She was a prim, constricted, low-key curriculum-oriented woman who in her quiet way ran a quiet class. If she rarely smiled or expressed any strong feeling, she was not intimidating. She taught Latin. In those days (shortly after the Civil War!), you took Latin if you were college-bound. You would be right if you assumed that students took Latin with the same enthusiasm they took a medicine. Then, slowly but steadily, Miss Collins began to demonstrate how some of the words we used every day derived from Latin. To me and a few other students, it came as a revelation that English mightily derived and developed from Latin. Yes, it was a Latin class, but to me it was also a class in the English language, my language. It was Miss Collins who stimulated us to look upon a dictionary as a kind of detective story. If Miss Collins was not an interpersonally interesting teacher, she was an intellectually mind-expanding teacher. She made "dead" Latin personally "alive."

Now to Mr. Hunkins and Mr. Triest (and many others whose names I cannot recall). The first word that comes to mind is uninteresting. Not only were they uninterested in me (or any other student), but they did not seem interested in anything, including the subject matter. It is as if they came to a class with a recipe (= lesson plan) that said "Do this first, that second, and that third, and if you follow instructions, you will end up with a palatable dish you will enjoy." There was nothing to enjoy! We were treated and felt like robots. More correctly, it is as if we had empty heads and hearts. The fact is that a lot was going on in my head and heart, but God forbid that I should put it into words. My job was to learn what I was told to learn even though in my "unformed" mind, I knew there was a difference between learning and understanding. And I learned one other thing: even if I learned but did not understand, do not ask questions, do not reveal your stupidity, do

not ask “why” questions, do not take up valuable teacher time. By conventional standards, I was a “good” learner. By my own standards, I was a very poor understander. The classroom was no place to seek or expect to gain understanding. It was a place to get good grades, to appear as if you understood, not a place to ask questions that nobody else seemed to have (which, of course, was not true), but a place in which you had better be able to answer the seemingly scores of questions the teacher asked. None of these teachers invited questions. On the contrary, they made you feel that if you asked questions, you were either stupid or a show-off. None of the teachers responded to questions the way Miss Collins did. I said she was prim, low-key, undemonstrative of feeling. But when you asked her a question about whether a particular word in English derived from Latin, her eyes took on an excited cast, an ever so small smile seemed to struggle for expression, and she helped you to answer your question. I can sum up by saying that in these other classrooms, productive learning was defined by the number of questions I could answer, how well I could regurgitate what I was supposed to learn. That definition does contain a kernel of truth, but only a kernel. Another way of summing up is to say that the bulk of my classrooms were uninteresting, boring, and without much point.

Why do Mr. Triest and Mr. Hunkins stand out in my memory? Why do I remember their names and not those of similar teachers for whom subject matter was infinitely more important than what was going on in our hearts and minds? The answer is that I did not respect them. There were many teachers who were riveted on subject matter, but in some inchoate way, I concluded that they cared about the subject matter, if not about us. Mr. Triest and Mr. Hunkins, I and others had to conclude, cared about nothing except getting through class without once getting up from their chairs. Their classes were ones in which nothing seemed to make sense. Mr. Hunkins taught introductory chemistry, Mr. Triest introductory German. We ended up having no respect for or interest in Mr. Triest, Mr. Hunkins, chemistry or German. There are people today who assert that the level of learning in a classroom is largely affected by factors extrinsic to the classroom, for example, family socioeconomic status. They never had the likes of Mr. Triest and Mr. Hunkins!

I could go on and on, but I do not see the point. I have revealed enough to buttress the conclusion that by the time I finished high school, I had had experiences quite relevant to conceptions of what makes life in a classroom interesting and challenging or boring and even deadly. Needless to say, I did not know that I had learned a lot about the ingredients working for and against productive learning. I was just a high school graduate. It could never occur to me that I had experiential assets relevant to matters educational. Who was I to pass judgment on teachers, classrooms, and the nature of learning? Is there any doubt whatsoever that my teachers would view me as without assets on the basis of which I was justified to come to conclusions? *If after high school I had entered a teacher preparatory program – and in those days,*

*you could do just that – it would have been with the attitude that nothing in my school years was of value in learning to become a teacher. I would have looked at my college teachers from precisely the same stance from which I had looked at my public school teachers: I knew nothing, they knew it all; their job was to pour in, mind was to absorb; I had only deficits, they would provide me assets; they were entitled to opinions because they had experience, I was not so entitled because I lacked experience.*

Why, for the purposes of this paper did I italicize the sentence above? Because what I expected when I went to college was almost the polar opposite of what I experienced in grade school. We were not treated by our instructors as empty vessels that needed filling. With few exceptions they were like Miss Stephenson and Mr. Coleman. They sought our questions and reactions. They obviously relished intellectual give and take. We were expected to have opinions which we should feel obliged to express. We were not made to feel that we should or had to cover a certain amount of material that day in that class. *We counted as individuals. We respected, trusted, and liked the bulk of our instructors. The world of the classroom and the “real world” looked different and connected.* I said “classroom.” The fact is that in those days *all* freshmen took the same introductory courses which were held in a lecture hall, the number of students averaging about forty in number. (Each introductory course had two or three sections.) It is impossible for me to exaggerate the difference between what I experienced in my freshman year and what I experienced in grade school. In June, 1935 I was “only” a high school student not entitled to an opinion. Two months later in September I was being treated as if I had an intact brain. I did not know it then but I was learning the *positive* aspects of the self-fulfilling prophecy. If you treat people as if they have brains, far more often than not they will demonstrate they have brains.

My first professional position (in 1942) was in a brand new state institution for mentally retarded individuals. It was explicitly to be an educational facility, not a warehouse. During the 3–1/2 years I was there I learned several things. First, I daily saw the *negative* consequences of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Second, the resistance of staff to any challenge to the *status quo*. Third, the institution had a culture one of its obvious aspects being that what people said publicly was often at variance with what they said privately. Fourth, pedagogy consisted of mindless drill, drill, drill.

My years in this institution are described in detail in my autobiography *The Making of an American Psychologist* (1989). Crucial in my development there was my relationship to Henry Schaefer-Simmern, a political refugee from Nazi Germany, who was an artist, art historian and art theorist. He came to the institution two days a week to work with several groups of the “children” (that is what they were called) in his studio. It was Schaefer who literally demonstrated to me – no one else was interested – what it meant to start the learning process *where the child is*. His book *The Unfolding of Artistic Activity* (1948) is truly a remarkable document. It is not happenstance that John Dewey wrote the foreword to that book. And it certainly is not happenstance that I began to read Dewey about whom