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Edwin & Phyllis

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Abstract Edwin, a person contemplating a career in teaching, has a conversation with Phyllis, a teacher and amateur theorist, about reasons to become a teacher.

Keywords Teaching · Educational theory · Philosophy · Ethics · Democracy

Persons of the Dialogue:

PHYLLIS, a teacher and amateur theorist
EDWIN, a person who is contemplating a teaching career

Scene:

The House of Teac in the middle of the West

EDWIN: I'm thinking of becoming a teacher.
PHYLLIS: Oh, why?
EDWIN: Because I love children.
PHYLLIS: I see. Do you know of any person who does not love children?
EDWIN: Well, unfortunately there are people who abuse or neglect children.
PHYLLIS: Yes, and tragically there are children in the world who suffer miserably. Would you agree that people who willingly abuse or neglect children are sociopaths?
EDWIN: Yes, of course.

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PHYLLIS: And, obviously we agree that sociopaths should never become teachers. But other than sociopaths, it's perhaps universal that people love children. Do you mean to imply that anyone other than a sociopath has a good reason to become a teacher?
EDWIN: No, I guess not. When you put it that way, I guess loving children is not sufficient reason to become a teacher.
PHYLLIS: So it seems. Do you have any other reasons for wanting to become a teacher?
EDWIN: Yes. I really love mathematics and art. I would like to share my love of mathematics and art with other people.
PHYLLIS: If you love mathematics and art, why don't you become a mathematician or artist?
EDWIN: Well, I suppose that would be one way to go. But wouldn't it be great to share my passion for these subjects so that other people can enjoy them and experience the sense of gratification that mathematics and art give us?
PHYLLIS: Certainly there are people who thoroughly enjoy mathematics and art, but they probably don't need teachers to encourage them in those pursuits. However, not everyone enjoys intellectual life. In fact, most people are not interested in studying; they prefer more practical kinds of work. Very few people choose academic careers, and even some professors are not happy, even though they are paid to be intellectuals. Do you think teachers should turn people into academics or try to persuade others to love a subject?
EDWIN: Not exactly. Teachers should offer people a chance to experience new subjects so students can decide for themselves what kind of work they like, but it's probably not a teacher's job to push people to enjoy intellectual life or to turn them into university types.
PHYLLIS: Then we agree that love for subject matter is not sufficient reason to become a teacher. Do you have any other reasons?
EDWIN: Yes, in fact, I do. I also want to make a difference in the world. I would like to give back to my community, to help make society a better place.
PHYLLIS: I admire your heartfelt commitment to serve the public good. In general, would you say our society is basically fair and equitable?
EDWIN: No! According to law, all people are supposed to have equal rights. But in reality, the fact is that rich people have easier access to better education than poor people have. So in that respect, the system is not equitable or just. Across demographic groups there are deplorable inequities in degrees of access to basic resources and quality education. These huge gaps signal fundamental injustices in our society.
PHYLLIS: You have an admirable social conscience! Do we agree then that our existing society, including the education system, is fundamentally unjust?
EDWIN: We agree that the injustices in our society are reprehensible. But are you saying that we need to have a revolution instead of better education?
PHYLLIS: That's not what I said. I'm just asking, since you are the product of an unjust system, and teachers work within that unjust system, in what way does that give you good reason to become a teacher? If you want to "give back to your community," it seems that you would have to transform the system, wouldn't you?
EDWIN: Yes. We have to transform the system to make society equitable and just for everyone.
PHYLLIS: But why do you think that becoming a teacher would be an effective way to do that? You might remember the words of the poet: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

EDWIN: I'm aware that it would be difficult for one teacher—especially one novice teacher—to have an impact on the system. Also, I don't necessarily have the leadership skills or experience to transform a whole education system. I would have to do a lot of things that are not your typical "teaching" in order to have an impact on society.
PHYLLIS: In that case, what kind of educational preparation would you need to help you accomplish your goal of changing the system?
EDWIN: Well, in order to have any effect on changing the school system, I'd certainly have to have more than pedagogical content knowledge. I'd need leadership training as a political activist. I'd have to study ethics and power, governmental processes, history, and mechanisms of social transformation. I would also need to have strong communication and technology skills. I can see that traditional teacher education isn't sufficient preparation if my goal is to have an impact on the fundamental injustices of society. But as a teacher I could at least have an effect on my classroom.
PHYLLIS: There are some heroic teachers who have performed miracles in their classrooms. I wish there were more teachers like that! But the contributions of those extraordinary teachers have not had an effect on the school system as a whole. Schools have consistently operated as institutions of reproduction and stratification in spite of repeated efforts by many people to reform them.
EDWIN: Hard to argue against that. You're right that even when teachers accomplish amazing feats in their own classrooms, I really cannot point to examples from history, research, or my experience that teachers have had an effect on the system. Regrettably, I have to agree that there's no evidence to suggest that teachers can have that kind of system-wide impact. I guess that's not sufficient reason to become a teacher, either.
PHYLLIS: Sad, but true.
EDWIN: Okay, I can see what you mean. But, really, you can't deny that teachers can make a difference. I had a teacher once who changed my life by believing in me and encouraging me. That's a good reason to become a teacher.
PHYLLIS: I hope that teacher received recognition and appreciation! In general, how many people's lives have been improved because of education?
EDWIN: It's true that, statistically speaking, education hasn't made much of a difference in the overall picture; widespread socioeconomic inequalities have remained basically unchanged.
PHYLLIS: That has historically been true. On rare occasions, education changes people's lives, but those cases are few and far between. Despite the fact that more and more people around the world have access to education, basic resources are still not fairly distributed, and opportunities are still not equally accessible among all people.
EDWIN: Don't you think it's a good idea to become a teacher so that I could make a difference in the lives of even a few children?
PHYLLIS: Yes, I agree! It's wonderful to make a difference in people's lives. However, it's not necessary to become a teacher in order to do that. You could become a foster parent, a coach, a rural doctor, a social worker, or a volunteer in a community center. You could open a shelter for homeless people, work for Habitat for Humanity, volunteer with the Boys and Girls Clubs, fight greed and corruption, and give food to hungry families. Any of those services would have more direct benefit to children's lives than teaching in schools, which have traditionally operated as socially reproductive institutions. In schools you can reach only a small segment of the population, and probably not the neediest people. Of those children who do attend, some are in school under duress because the law compels them to be there. If you want to make a difference

in people's lives, there are more direct and effective ways to do that than becoming a teacher.

EDWIN: That's kind of depressing. It's just hard to accept that schooling has not been an effective way to help people improve their lives. At least as a teacher I'd be able to help children get along peaceably with other children, wouldn't I?

PHYLLIS: It sounds as though you want to become a teacher so you can help children develop virtues. Do you think that virtue can be taught?

EDWIN: Oh, now you're trying to trip me up with those dialogues in which Socrates argues with Meno, Protagoras, and Gorgias about whether virtue can be taught. Those are convoluted arguments, anyway. It always seemed to me that Plato was just trying to discredit the Sophists by any means necessary. Did you ever see a dialogue in which Socrates' opponent won, or in which Socrates changed his mind?

PHYLLIS: That's a good point. I guess it's kind of misleading to call those Platonic writings "dialogues."

EDWIN: Yes. The term "Socratic Dialogue" is a misnomer. They're really one-sided persuasive essays—you might even say rhetorical. But let's get back to the virtue thing. As a teacher, I could help students become better people—more compassionate, civic minded, and thoughtful. Don't you agree?

PHYLLIS: I can see what you're saying, but the teaching of virtue is difficult for several reasons. First, how are you going to know whether a particular act is virtuous or self-serving? Second, nobody can agree whether virtue should be measured by actions, intentions, or effects. Third, being knowledgeable about virtue is not the same as being virtuous. How can education change people from being non-virtuous to being virtuous? Finally, virtue is not the same across different cultures. Actions that are honorable in one culture may be immoral in another culture. Whose virtues are you going to promote in a diverse classroom?

EDWIN: Okay, I can see that cultivating virtue is not a compelling reason to become a teacher. But I have a better reason! In my classroom, the students will all have a voice in running the class because I will never be authoritarian. In my classroom, everyone will experience what democracy is supposed to feel like, and from our classroom experiences, students will develop the democratic skills and dispositions that they can take with them into the world.

PHYLLIS: How are you going to accomplish that? I mean how are you going to create a democratic classroom when the students in your class will be expecting a conventional classroom?

EDWIN: Well, doesn't everybody treasure freedom? Don't students want to be in a democratic environment where they can have a voice in the curriculum and be empowered to help run the class?

PHYLLIS: That has not been my experience.

EDWIN: What do you mean?

PHYLLIS: Well, a couple things. First, people don't always welcome change, especially in schools. Many people think democracy is not appropriate for classrooms anyway because it's not realistic; experience with participatory democracy in a classroom is not the most efficient way to prepare students to face the challenges of real life. Second, whenever I invite students to help construct the curriculum, they accuse me of not doing my job. They say, "We are the students and you are the teacher. Our taxes pay you to fulfill certain responsibilities, and we need your expertise in order to succeed."

EDWIN: I guess they have a point. The teacher is responsible for helping students get the required curriculum. That's what teachers are held accountable for.

PHYLLIS: But those are not the only problems. Democracy is hard. People have to be well informed about issues, they have to have good communication skills, and they have to be open minded to many contradictory viewpoints. With the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are necessary in order for democracy to work, it's extraordinarily difficult to establish democratic environments. Democracy in a classroom is even harder to enact when the rest of the school is organized in the usual way with hierarchies of administration in which students are expected to follow directions and respect authority.
EDWIN: Well, as a teacher, I would be able to teach the skills that are necessary for democratic participation, wouldn't I?
PHYLLIS: I totally support those goals. But there's another problem. To be democratic means that everybody gets to have a voice in how the school is run. What do you think most people want from school?
EDWIN: I suppose different people want different things, but primarily, people want schools to give them the tools necessary to lead successful and productive lives.
PHYLLIS: I agree. And that means most parents want their children to have the experiences, skills, and credentials that traditional authoritarian schools provide. For the most part, people want schools to help them get ahead in the world.
EDWIN: But democracy is the most important thing for people to learn in school! Shouldn't that take priority?
PHYLLIS: For the majority of families, the main purpose of school should be to prepare people to lead productive lives. If you think the most important purpose of school is to rehearse democracy, then you're in the minority. How can it be a democracy if most people are voting against it? Do you want to impose democracy by forcing a cultural revolution? That would be a little ironic, don't you think?
EDWIN: But you can't be saying that teaching is totally a waste of time, can you?
PHYLLIS: I'm not saying that at all. It also depends on what you think teaching means, and how teaching is related to learning.
EDWIN: What do you mean?
PHYLLIS: Well, students do not learn everything that teachers intend for them to learn, and conversely, students learn things in school that teachers do not intend for them to learn.
EDWIN: Sure, people in school learn all the implicit or "hidden" curriculum stuff—how to sit still, how to stand in line, how to fake attention when you're bored, and when to keep your mouth shut so you don't get in trouble.
PHYLLIS: You have a good understanding of curriculum theories!
EDWIN: Plus, learning depends on the student, not only on the teacher. If people are going to get educated, they have to be actively engaged; they have to take ownership of their own learning.
PHYLLIS: In that case, how can you separate the effects of a teacher's teaching from the effects of a student's studying? Getting a good education depends on many things besides the teacher, so it's virtually impossible to verify any cause-and-effect relationship between teaching and learning.
EDWIN: I suppose that's true. But sometimes people can learn by example. Isn't that how we begin learning when we are children?
PHYLLIS: Yes, I agree there is considerable evidence that people learn by example—for better or worse.
EDWIN: So it seems I would be able teach democratic citizenship by leading an exemplary life.

PHYLLIS: If that's true, then what's the difference between being a teacher and being a regular person?
EDWIN: You're so cynical! It seems you're saying there are no good reasons to become a teacher. But if nobody becomes a teacher, then what will happen to society? How will children have any chance to succeed in the world?
PHYLLIS: There are also no good reasons to climb mountains, compose symphonies, or write poems. Can you point to any evidence that teachers have made the world into a place that is safer, more equitable, or more beautiful?
EDWIN: What are you talking about?! What would count as evidence for such a claim? Do you mean to say that it's a bad idea to become a teacher?
PHYLLIS: I am not saying that it's bad, only that it is dangerous.
EDWIN: What do you mean by "dangerous"?
PHYLLIS: The danger is that teachers sometimes have to choose between safeguarding the collective good and preventing harm to any individual.
EDWIN: That's an ethical problem that no political or economic theory has ever solved! Now who's the idealist?!
PHYLLIS: Oh. I guess you're right.
EDWIN: So what do you mean by "harm," anyway?
PHYLLIS: As far as teaching is concerned, I'm particularly concerned about one common harmful practice that's usually justified in the name of the collective good, namely punishment.
EDWIN: You can't be serious! Punishment isn't ideal, but there's no other way to manage a classroom. What about logical consequences? Get real!
PHYLLIS: Fair enough. Logical consequences are one thing, and they are not necessarily harmful. But classroom consequences are not always logical; they're often legalistic or normative. Sometimes those consequences include an element of punishment, and that's a problem.
EDWIN: But punishment is very effective for getting results! Besides, almost everybody does it.
PHYLLIS: I agree that punishment is very effective for getting results; so are tasers and psyops. But ethically speaking, punishment is harmful; and instrumentally speaking, punishment makes people learn the wrong things. Punishment is effective for making people learn how to feel bad about themselves and to develop attitudes of resentment and alienation. Moreover, good people who punish others also feel bad about themselves for having harmed another person. Just because many people use punishment doesn't make it okay.
EDWIN: How else are you going to teach students to do the right thing?!
PHYLLIS: Well, that's what all those learning theories are for—to give teachers a range of alternative possibilities to choose from. Even behaviorism rejects punishment in favor of reinforcements! But there are many learning theories besides behaviorism including cognitivism, constructivism, humanism, critical pedagogy, invitational, facilitative, problem-based, discovery, and a bunch more.
EDWIN: How can teachers decide which learning theories to use?
PHYLLIS: For me, that's a question of ethics. The first step is to agree that punishment is ethically unacceptable. Then from there, it becomes possible to think through other alternatives.
EDWIN: This is getting complicated. How can teachers figure out what is ethical?
PHYLLIS: That's what philosophy and educational theories are for. "Ethical" can mean many different things.

EDWIN: Okay. What does "ethical" mean to you?
PHYLLIS: For me, personally, "ethical" has two parts, both of which are dynamic:

- Keep challenging my assumptions about what is good.
- Do less harm next time.

EDWIN: Wow, you sound totally pessimistic, even nihilistic!
PHYLLIS: I may be pessimistic, but I'm not nihilistic. After all, I've been a teacher for almost 30 years. I'm just saying that before anyone decides to take up our profession, it's important to know that as a teacher, it is easier to do more harm than good. There are always unintended consequences to our actions, and the stakes are exceedingly high because we have other people's lives in our care.
EDWIN: Then why are you a teacher?
PHYLLIS: That's a good question. Teaching is the most fascinating phenomenon I've ever encountered, and I guess being a teacher allows me to study teaching from the inside. Teaching is mostly hard work, but I love it.
EDWIN: Do you mean because it's so rewarding when you see people learn and succeed?
PHYLLIS: No, I don't mean that. I mean that good teaching is gratifying in and of itself. Of course, it's always delightful to watch people discover and create, but that's a separate issue.
EDWIN: So you're talking about the experience of teaching as an intrinsic value, not as an instrumental means to some end?
PHYLLIS: Yes, exactly. The crucial thing, though, is not why we become teachers in the first place, but what kind of teachers we become.
EDWIN: Absolutely. If I'm going to become a teacher, I want to become a good teacher.
PHYLLIS: That's the whole point, and the most vexing point because "good teacher" is almost impossible to define.
EDWIN: What do you mean?
PHYLLIS: Well, because different people value such different things: from warm caring relationships, to improvement of test scores, to effective management skills. For me, "What is a good teacher?" has been a life-long question and the reason I care so much about educational theories. I had always hoped that my life as a teacher could bring more peace and justice into the world, but along the way I have found that every path is strewn with boobytraps.
EDWIN: Because when we act with knowledge, care, and the best of intentions, things can still go wrong, and people can still get hurt.
PHYLLIS: Yes, that's it exactly. And that's why good teachers always think so long and hard about their words and actions.
EDWIN: What do you live by when you think about being a "good teacher"?
PHYLLIS: At the moment, my main thing is "Do less harm next time."
EDWIN: I still don't know if I'll go into teaching, but now I have a better grasp of how compelling the challenges are. I guess I'll have to think very carefully about that.
PHYLLIS: Thank you. We need more people with brilliant minds, kind hearts, and generous spirits to become teachers. Whatever you decide, I hope you'll always respect teaching as a vital responsibility and a humbling honor.