

Towards an Educational Philosophy of Personal Responsibility

A Summing Up

No man is fit to educate unless he feels each pupil an end in himself, with his own rights and his own personality, not merely a piece in a jigsaw puzzle, or a soldier in a regiment, or a citizen in a State. Reverence for human personality is the beginning of wisdom, in every social question, but above all in education. (Russell, 1977, p. 152)

No one can be entirely free. You have to obey laws. You must drive on the left side of the road. You have to obey the policemen. What I mean by freedom is inner freedom. If a child doesn't want to learn mathematics it is no one else's business but the child's, but if a child wants to play a trumpet while others are asleep, then it is everybody's business. We try at Summerhill to distinguish between the two. . . . In a good home the child and the parents have equal rights. In a bad home either the children have all the rights or the parents have all the rights. (Neill, quoted in Snitzer, 1964, p. 11)

During the winter of 1919–20 I left home to live in a disused part of a former military hospital converted by students into an extremely primitive student's home. I wanted to be independent. . . . If I thought of a future, I dreamt of one day founding a school in which young people could learn without

boredom, and would be stimulated to pose problems and discuss them, a school in which no unwanted answers to unasked questions would have to be listened to; in which one did not study for the sake of passing examinations. (Popper, 1992, pp. 40–41)

"What to leave out and what to put in?" (Popper, 1992, p. 1). This problem, which I call the problem of information selection, appears at the beginning of Karl Popper's (1992) *Unended Quest: An Intellectual Autobiography*. And as I once again attempt to select information for commentary on educational questions that have interested me for nearly half a century, I am trying my best to avoid a sense of being overwhelmed by thoughts that began years ago when I was a bored and bewildered high school student who participated in a conventional educational program in a public school in the city of Chicago, Illinois. And one thing that I am now remembering from my high school days is that I desperately wanted to talk with my friends and teachers about a question such as the following: Why should I learn what is being taught to me at school?

The above problem can be called the problem of a student's dilemma; this problem is discussed in the first paragraph of my PhD dissertation (Swartz, 1971) where I stated,

In 1962 I was greatly interested in the problem of a student's dilemma. And I began seeking answers to this question. . . . Unfortunately, I was never quite satisfied with the solutions offered by my teachers; the few teachers who were able to find the time necessary to talk with me about my question usually assumed that I was too young or immature to understand the great worth of the knowledge that I was being taught. Thus, I was often told to wait until I was older and wiser before I could question the wisdom of those who had carefully constructed a curriculum for me to learn. (p. vii)

A number of decades have now passed since I wrote about my memories of dialogues with a few kind high school teachers who were able to talk with me about the problem of a student's dilemma. But, still in the winter of 2012, I have yet to join the ranks of those who think they are wise enough to construct a curriculum for all students who participate in public educational programs. As it turns out, for 40 years or so I have occasionally decided to spend some of my time writing about educational problems that I wanted to understand. Moreover, at times I have chosen to do my written work in a format that made it possible for me to publish papers in a variety of journals and books.

Although I am acutely aware of the fact that what I have written so far in this summing up does not provide an adequate beginning for giving an

as a whole, my writings suggest that Dewey and most other academic educational theorists and practitioners have not yet adequately considered the work done by Lane and his group. The work of those who have developed educational programs for personal responsibility needs to be further studied and perhaps replicated. These learning situations for personal responsibility may eventually be seen as being good as, and perhaps, just perhaps, better than the numerous educational programs that follow in the progressive educational movements inspired by Dewey and others.

Should social reformers be encouraged to create and study in detail educational programs such as Homer Lane's Little Commonwealth, A. S. Neill's Summerhill, Janus Korczak's Orphans Home and Daniel Greenberg's Sudbury Valley School? This problem can be referred to as the problem of creating personal responsibility schools. In a sense, I have been able to articulate this question partly because I began my quest for understanding educational programs when struggling to solve the problem of the student's dilemma (Why should I learn what is being taught to me at school?) And in many ways the essays collected here clearly suggest that the problem of creating personal responsibility schools should be answered in the affirmative. Throughout my written work my claim is that one thing that unites the educational reform work of Lane, Neill, Korczak and Greenberg is that in some form or another these educational reformers helped to develop a policy such as the following: All school members, students included, are fallible authorities who should be personally responsible for deciding their own school activities and many of the policies that govern a school. Throughout my writings I refer to this policy as the policy of personal responsibility. Moreover, a school that endorses this policy can be referred to as either a personal responsibility school or a self-governing school.

Lane, Neill, Korczak and Greenberg do not explicitly state that their educational programs endorsed a policy such as the one on personal responsibility. What my academic work tries to do is offer an interpretation that makes somewhat explicit what is implied by the educational programs and writings that were created by personal responsibility educational reformers. Of course, my interpretation of the few individuals who I consider to be pioneers for personal responsibility educational reform is only one possible way to view the work of people such as Lane. And, as it turns out, most professional educational philosophers have given little notice to the people who have developed a philosophical perspective that has the potential to challenge the educational philosophies that are an outgrowth of the work of well-known scholars such as Dewey.

The first section of essays collected in this book is called "Dewey Studies." And although these essays explain some of my disagreements with

Dewey's educational views, I nevertheless agree with Dewey's criticism of traditional education. As an undergraduate student in the middle 1960s, I read Dewey's well known book *Experience and Education* (Dewey, [1938] 1966). This book helped me see some of the inadequacies of the educational programs I had attended as a youngster. And throughout the last 40 or so years I have often returned to Dewey's critique of traditional education which includes the following:

Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other. For some experiences are mis-educative. Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience. . . . It is a great mistake to suppose, even tacitly, that the traditional schoolroom was not a place in which pupils had experiences. . . . The proper line of attack is that the experiences which were had, by pupils and teachers alike, were wrongly of a wrong kind. How many students, for example, were rendered callous to ideas, and how many lost the impetus to learn because of the way in which learning was experienced by them? How many acquired special skills by automatic drill so that their power of judgment and capacity to act intelligently in new situations was limited? How many came to associate the learning process with ennui and boredom? How many found what they did learn so foreign to the situation of life outside the school as to give them no power of control over the latter? How many came to associate books with dull drudgery, so that they were "conditioned" to all but flashy reading matter?

If I ask these questions it is not for the sake of wholesale condemnation of the old education. It is for quite another purpose. It is to emphasize the fact, first, that young people in traditional schools do have experiences; and, secondly, that the trouble is not the absence of experiences, but their defective and wrong character—wrong and defective from the standpoint of connection with further experience. (pp. 25–27)

The above quote by Dewey helped me gain numerous insights about, not only my own earlier education, but helped me see that, contrary to what I had previously thought, valuable learning could indeed be gotten from reading books. And as I was slowly able to find books that I found interesting to read, I began to think about the idea of writing essays related to issues I found fascinating. Briefly stated, my early encounter with one small book by Dewey contributed to a transforming experience for me in relationship to books in general. So that at a rather young age of 21 or 22, I decided that I wanted to do what Dewey had done. That is, I wanted to be a philosopher of education so that I could perhaps reform and improve the way people were educated.

Education for Freedom from Socrates to Einstein and Beyond

People say that I am a wise man. For the bystanders always think that I am wise myself in any matter where in I refute another. But, gentlemen, I believe that the god is really wise, and that by this oracle he meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing. I do not think that he meant that Socrates was wise. He only made use of my name, and took me as an example, as though he would say to men, He among you is the wisest who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is really worth nothing at all. (Plato, 1956a, pp. 27–28)

From “Learned Ignorance” to Freedom in Education

Throughout writing the many drafts of this essay I have struggled to find what I consider to be a reasonable place to begin. But I have yet to discover the perfect opening for the grandiose topic I chose to write about months ago. And as I struggle once again to start what I hope is the final version of an extremely imperfect paper I have decided to seek help from the famous and late Argentinean poet Jorge Luis Borges. In a poem titled “Limits” Borges makes it quite clear that people like myself who have passed their fiftieth birthday cannot hope to read all they planned to read when they were

younger. Borges has helped me clearly realize that whatever I write here about freedom and education can only be viewed as a rudimentary report that provides a preliminary account of the problems which I will attempt to discuss; as the years pass my understanding of what I have written here may indeed be altered or improved if I am lucky to find the time to read a few of the unread books I have now been collecting for over three decades. Thus, the poverty of my present state of "learned ignorance" (Popper, 1962a, p. 29; Popper, 1992, pp. 30–43) is partially the result of my inability to find the time to read books that might have helped me avoid some of the defects which others will no doubt see in what I have written here.

Borges has helped me understand that my limitations as a scholar are in part due to the fact that humans are fallible beings who cannot hope to attain perfect knowledge. And in order to help you see how Borges was able to make some kind of peace with his human fallibility I would now like to share with you the poem "Limits" which goes as follows:

There is a line in Verlaine I shall
not recall again,
There is a street close by
forbidden to my feet,
There's a mirror that's seen me for
the very last time,
There is a door that I have locked
till the end of the world.
Among the books in my library
I have them before me)
There are some that I shall never
open now;
This summer I complete my fiftieth year;
Death is gnawing at me ceaselessly
(Borges, 1970, p. 91)

It is extremely difficult for me to comprehend that over three decades have now passed since the fall of 1964 when I was an extremely disillusioned second year undergraduate student. And as I aimlessly wandered around the lovely Urbana campus of the University of Illinois I dreamed of becoming a college drop-out who would be viewed as a failure because I was unable to fill my head with the massive amount of information that professors expected their students to learn. But becoming a college drop-out was not to be my fate; as an undergraduate student I had a number of experiences which somehow gave me the desire to want to continue my studies. In this brief essay I will not be able to even begin to explain the complex circumstances which made it possible for me to somewhat overcome what I now consider

to be an overwhelming educational system which to this day is doing much to destroy the desire that students have for learning. However, in the brief time I will devote to this essay I do plan on saying a few words about two events from the fall of 1964 which had much to do with my decision to remain a university student who eventually had the good fortune to become a professor of education and philosophy.

The two events from my undergraduate school days which I will recall here are the following: (1) my chance encounter with Paul Goodman's essay "Compulsory Miseducation"; and (2) my chance encounter with Joseph Agassi at a seminar he gave for the University of Illinois, Department of Anthropology. After I have commented on these two events from my youth I will hopefully remember to return to Borges for some kind of concluding remark which will end this paper so I can once again make another feeble attempt to read a few of the books from my home library that I have not yet opened.

Educational Freedom or Compulsory Miseducation?

During one of my numerous campus walks when I was unable to escape from the awareness that I desperately feared that I would become a student who failed to make top grades I can now only vaguely recall that in the window of the university bookstore of my youth there once was a flashy display for a book called *Compulsory Miseducation and the Community of Scholars* (Goodman, 1964); on the cover of this book by Paul Goodman the publishers had printed that this new work was, "A challenging critique of the present structure of American education; by the author of *Growing Up Absurd*." As it turns out, I had a friend in high school who had read *Growing Up Absurd* (Goodman, [1956] 1962) and he loved it. Moreover, my friend gave me his copy of Goodman's book, but after many failed attempts to comprehend Goodman's message about "problems of youth in organized society" I decided at the ripe old age of 18 that Goodman's first book was not for me. Yet, when I saw the display for Goodman's second book about education I somehow decided to buy it and give it a try.

As an undergraduate student I was not in the habit of buying or reading works by authors who could help me understand problems that are of interest to me. On the contrary, inadequate attempts to be as good a student as I could be, I tried ever so hard to read only written material that had been assigned by my teachers; when I was confronted with information about one of Goodman's books years ago I acted in a way that differed drastically from my normal behavior. And for reasons that still remain a mystery to me, today I somehow walked into a strange bookstore to read a

as significant for any further discussion concerning questions such as Einstein's educational problem.

Conclusion: Students Mainly Need Freedom in Order to Learn

At this time I would like to attempt to conclude this paper with some very brief observations about how it might be possible to develop a view of freedom in education even when a person is surrounded by authoritarian circumstances. In particular, the educational work of Janusz Korczak and Jorge Luis Borges helps us see that freedom in education can become a reality in desperate social and political circumstances where authoritarianism and totalitarianism are the rule.

The life experiences of Korczak clearly suggest that a teacher can respect a student's right to function as a free individual even under the most horrid of circumstances. Korczak was in charge of nearly 200 Jewish children in the Warsaw Ghetto during 1943 when the Nazis were carrying out their "final solution." And under the sentence of certain death Korczak remained dignified to the end and he respected the right of his children to make the best possible choice when they were confronted with death. The death march to the Warsaw train station that Korczak organized and lead is indeed one of the heroic moments of the Holocaust which has been told over and over again partly because it helps us see that the human will to act as a free being is so great that even in the most totalitarian and authoritarian circumstances people like Korczak and the members of his Orphans Home may be able to freely choose to learn to die with dignity;

For another example about how authoritarian and totalitarian political circumstances did not prevent a teacher from developing an educational program for freedom we can consider the case of Borges who saw "the collapse of classic liberalism" (Williamson, 1992, p. 544) and the rise of Juan Peron's dictatorship during his lifetime. But Borges did not allow the unfavorable political situation in his society to deter him from developing a theory of education that emphasized freedom. And in one of the numerous interviews which he became famous for Borges describes his classroom efforts with the following:

Now, I am a Professor of English and American literature at Buenos Aires. I've been teaching that at the National University for twenty years. And then afterwards, when I was pensioned off, at the Catholic University. And I always said to my students, 'Above all, avoid compulsive reading. If you don't like a book, lay it aside. That book was not written for you—as yet. . . . But

I am sure that within that very wide compass of English and American literature you will find books that will appeal to you. Then go and read these books and forget about the rest...' Before an examination I always say to them, 'I won't be asking questions. A gentleman never asks questions. I'll give you, for example, a name. For example, I'll give you Emerson. And if you say, 'Well, really, I know little bit about Emerson,' well don't worry about that. We'll try someone else. Let's have Walt Whitman. And if you say yes, well in that case you take any side of Whitman you like...' And then my students like that way of studying. They're not being hampered. (Geneson & Borges, 1977, pp. 247-248)

Korczak and Borges can be included in the group of individuals who would answer Einstein's educational problem in the affirmative. And although Einstein and Popper were not lucky enough to go to schools where Korczak and Borges were teachers, in my dreams I have been known to see the young Einstein and the young Popper in classrooms where Borges and Korczak participate in discussions about questions that have answers which students wish to learn. And these classrooms in my dreams may someday be real for children not yet born if Socratic educational theorists can somehow find a way to explain that "aside from stimulation" students "mainly need freedom" (Einstein, 1949) in order to learn.

Paul Goodman as a Twentieth Century Advocate of a Socratic Educational Philosophy

...it is not by wisdom that the poets create their works, but by a certain instinctive inspiration, like soothsayers and prophets, who say many fine things, but understand nothing of what they say. (Plato, 1956a, p. 27)

Preliminary Remarks on How Socrates and Plato Might Have Offered Different Solutions to the Educational Problem of Authority

In the last few centuries, people such as Thomas Jefferson, R. G. Bury, H. G. Wells, Bertrand Russell, Karl Popper, and others have either tacitly or directly argued that the works of Plato provide the theoretical foundations for at least *two distinct* intellectual traditions which have influenced Western thought since the death of Socrates in 399 B.C. Although there is much disagreement between those who have studied the works of Plato, a number of individuals do view the Platonic dialogues as important partly because they

Socrates' views on educational authorities have been unpopular partly because it is difficult for people to accept the idea that all levels of human understanding are far from a state of true wisdom; for the followers of Socrates, whatever is known at any moment in time should not be seen as wisdom, but instead it can be said that Socrates argued for the notion that all human knowledge is a form of ignorance. And although Socratic teachers may at times claim that their ignorance is better than the ignorance of their students, teachers following in the tradition of Socrates must always admit that what they know or think is not valuable knowledge. In other words, the views attributed to Socrates as he is described in Plato's *Apology* suggest that even the remarkable ideas developed by people such as Newton and Einstein are worth little or nothing at all when we take absolute truth as the goal of human inquiry. For Socrates, absolute truth is an *unattainable* goal which people may wish to strive for throughout their lives. Moreover, the Socrates of the *Apology* seems to suggest that the human search for absolute truth and wisdom is a worthwhile endeavor even though this quest is doomed to fail.

Statement of Central Problems and an Overview of the Argument

There are many complex historical, philosophical, sociological, and psychological reasons for why the Socratic views on educational authorities have had only a slight impact on the dominant intellectual traditions in Western educational thought. Unfortunately, I will not be able to use this short paper as a means to provide a detailed account about how the Platonic views on educational authorities have almost completely overshadowed the Socratic way of answering a question such as the educational problem of authority. But in spite of all the limitations of this essay, I do wish to use this work as a vehicle for beginning a dialogue about the question, "Can a Socratic educational philosophy be made relevant for some of the schools in Western liberal democratic countries such as the United States, Canada, and England?" This question can conveniently be labeled *the Socratic educational problem*. For the remainder of this essay I would like to discuss some of the difficulties associated with being a modern advocate of a Socratic educational philosophy. In particular, my plan here is to suggest that the educational writings and proposals of Paul Goodman help us understand why the Socratic views on schooling have been poorly understood and argued for by twentieth century Western educational theorists.

Throughout this essay I will suggest that Goodman's educational writings are important partly because they provide us with one attempt to

and partial philosophy to a fuller and freer one. It is not because poetry is divorced from science that it gave Mr. Arnold's nature such satisfaction, but because his philosophic instinct was so deep and real that he revolted from the professional philosophy of the day as he found it in Great Britain, and sought refuge in the unnamed, unprofessed philosophy of the great poets of England and of all time. . . . We must bridge this gap of poetry from science. We must heal this unnatural wound. (Dewey, [1938] 1970, pp. 16–17)

As with many poets both before and after him, Goodman “revolted from the professional philosophy of his day” because he did not wish to be restricted by the conventions which normally govern behavior in groups of academic philosophers. And Goodman's decision to be a renegade philosopher has made it difficult to understand his very unconventional educational philosophy; if Goodman had been more concerned with educational reform than his own freedom of expression, then he might have been willing to argue for unconventional ideas in a conventional manner. But Goodman made the decision to express unconventional philosophical ideas in an extremely unconventional fashion. Specifically, Goodman would at times use poems as a means to explain why he continued to advocate educational changes and in his poem “At Michigan State” he wrote the following:

The old chaplain said, "You're strange. You talk so pessimistically and yet your tone—the way you are, proposing to change the schools and so—is optimistic."

I puffed my pipe and mulled it. It was true. I talked out with a kind of energy. Now I said hesitantly, "My pessimism is only on account of evidence."—We smiled wryly at the epigram—"Obviously I must have animal faith or I couldn't sit here!" I shouted. . . . "Who can afford," I ended wearily, "to be either pessimistic or optimistic: You have to do your duty anyway. A lot of my energy is rage." (1973, pp. 351–352)

Goodman's rage often stood in the way of his efforts to explain why a Socratic educational philosophy is needed in the twentieth century as much as it was needed during the time of Socrates. Unfortunately, Goodman was unable to demonstrate why we need a Socratic educational revolution in our modern world and in a sense it is correct to say that Goodman belonged to that group of poets "who say many fine things, but understand nothing of what they say" (Plato, 1956a, p. 27). That is, Goodman never realized that most people do *not* think that children are growing up absurd in the world as we know it and one of the true absurdities in modern life is that so many of us have come to accept the absurd as normal.

A Concluding Remark

Goodman was unable to convince large numbers of people that it is reasonable to offer an affirmative answer to questions such as the Socratic educational problem (i.e., Can a Socratic educational philosophy be made relevant for some of the schools in Western liberal democratic countries such as the United States, Canada, and England?). And as with Socrates before him, Goodman can be viewed as an absurd educational theorist partly because he wanted to show wise people that they were really ignorant. Stated differently, the Socratic idea that wise human beings will readily see how ignorant they are is a myth. As it turns out, it takes much work and a great deal of luck to demonstrate to the wisest among us that no human beings are wise enough to be reliable educational authorities who should decide what all children learn in school. Furthermore, if we ever begin to realize that wise people should *not* be given the responsibility for determining school activities, then we may yet be able to have serious discussions about questions such as the following: Can schools for the young be guided by many of the central political ideals which have been argued for by Western liberals such as Jefferson? Is it reasonable to have elementary and secondary schools which give young children "the freedom to go to class or stay away altogether?" How can teachers and other adults make worthwhile contributions in schools that are run as liberal democratic learning institutions? Will children be able to learn survival skills and information in schools that do not have a standardized curriculum? Questions such as these will only make sense when people endorse the Socratic notion that wise human beings are far too ignorant to be made reliable educational authorities who determine what all children learn in a school. And the hope for a Socratic educational revolution rests on our ability to see that all human beings, even the greatest thinkers among us, are not individuals who have discovered knowledge that can be viewed as any kind of truth or wisdom.

Education and Responsibility

My professional training has been in the philosophy of education, but I realize that my intellectual interests cannot be totally separated from other disciplines. Let me now explain why a philosopher of education wants to discuss issues related to reading.

To begin with, problems and question often cut across academic disciplines. But more important, a central idea of the philosophical tradition I work out of is that people are problem-solvers. This tradition suggests that if problems are important and worthwhile they should be discussed, even if they do not neatly fit into what we commonly view as an academic field (Agassi, 1968; Popper, 1962a, p. 25; Swartz, 1973). For me, philosophy of education is not an isolated intellectual enterprise. Its problems interact with those that have interested scholars in many different disciplines.

One problem has especially interested me over the years: "Which authorities should be responsible for deciding the daily activities of school members?" I think of this question as the educational problem of responsibility (Swartz, 1973, 1974a; 1974c). Here is my answer to this question:

All school members, including students, can be viewed as fallible authorities who should be personally responsible for deciding their own school activities and many of the policies that govern a school. For convenience I have labeled this statement *the policy of personal responsibility*. A school that endorses this policy is a self-governing school.

Some would say that it is absurd to think that students should be personally responsible for deciding their own school activities, but what appears to be absurd may be sound and true. After all, people once believed that it was ridiculous to think that the earth is a round ball spinning in space; we now view this “absurd” idea as reasonable and true. Not all absurd ideas are true, but the idea of letting students decide their own school activities is not nearly as absurd as some may think.

Democracy and Schooling

If parents and educators took self-governing schools seriously, they might be attacked as dangerous and harmful for children. Some adults may fear that self-governing schools will create chaotic social situations where meaningful learning is impossible and unlikely (Conklin, 1975; Hook, 1973). Do self-governing schools create chaotic learning situations?

Summerhill, the school founded more than 50 years ago by A. S. Neill, can be described as a self-governing school. Neill's school has avoided chaos because it is a working democracy that can establish rules governing some of the behaviors of school members (Hemmings, 1974, pp. 71–88). Summerhill incorporates many of the democratic and libertarian ideas that Neill learned from people like Homer Lane (Hemmings, 1974, pp. 23–33; Lane, 1969, pp. 5–13). As I understand it, Summerhill has done much to demonstrate that libertarian political theories about democracy can be used to help prevent chaos in a school.

Neill's libertarian ideas do not suggest that school members can do anything they wish, whenever they wish. Neill—like Bertrand Russell, John Stuart Mill, Karl Popper, and F.A. Hayek—has suggested that individuals in a democratic community can do what they wish only as long as they do not harm others or infringe on the rights of others (Hayek, 1960; Mill, 1974b; Russell, [1963] 1977, pp. 125–138; 1972, p. 15.) Summerhill, like all good liberal democratic communities, encourages the creation of rules that can check undesirable social behaviors.

The democratic ideas associated with Summerhill have had little effect on the dominant educational institutions in Western societies. Educators occasionally acknowledge the existence of Summerhill, but it is often

to learn this skill. We cannot force students to read. They will learn to read only if they decide to cooperate with teachers.

If we are correct in assuming that reading is one of the crucial skills for survival in our world, children who interact with this world will probably become aware of the importance of reading. Confronted with the printed word on all sides, it is highly likely that children will want to learn to decipher the symbolic code they see on billboards, on stop signs, and on packages of food. Normal children interacting with their environment often acquire the desire to read and usually ask adults for help in understanding the symbols they encounter (Gattegno, 1971, pp. 37-54; Kozol, 1972, p. 32).

"But," some may say, "we can't rely on children to decide whether reading should be learned." True, it cannot be assumed that children will always act in their own best interests. Yet places like Summerhill and the Sudbury Valley School have shown that many students can and do act reasonably. Besides, some of the immature decisions that students make can be changed. Students who decide not to learn to read by the time they are ten years old could learn this skill when they are 11. Fortunately, skills like reading can be learned at any age (Burmeister, 1974).

Much has been written about the notion that children should not be encouraged to read until they are ready to do so. Readiness theories are usually a part of some psychological theory about children's development and their ability to learn different skills, concepts, and ideas at different ages. Piaget, Bruner, and others have suggested that young children cannot understand some abstract ideas and symbols because their minds have not developed to a certain level of maturity (Bruner, 1960, 33-54; Harris & Sipay, 1972, pp. 71-95).

The policy of personal responsibility allows a school to delay teaching reading until students feel they are ready to learn this skill. But this policy needs to be associated with issues that are not often a part of psychological theories of readiness. Theories of readiness do not usually answer such questions as, "Which authorities should be responsible for deciding the daily activities of school members?" Answers to this question involve issues that have little to do with psychology. The policy of personal responsibility is based partly on the philosophical and the political assumption that it is desirable to organize some of our social institutions on democratic principles that allow a great deal of individual freedom (Hayek, 1960; Hemmings, 1974; Russell, [1963] 1977). Democratic principles may be compatible with some psychological theories, but these principles involve non psychological considerations.

In short, students who attend self-governing schools often want to learn to read because of the environment they interact with. It is common for