

RISK AND FAILURE IN EDUCATION

by

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Risk as a Characteristic Factor in the Field of Education

Every educator knows of situations in the daily practice of his profession when something goes wrong in education, when he does not reach the goal he has been striving so hard for, when his relation to children becomes more and more a conflict in which he is finally defeated, and when, in the end, he even fails in his whole engagement. That is the painful and shadowy side of his profession. He does not like to talk about it. It is understandable that theoretical thinking in the field of pedagogics does not concern itself with these things. They have been considered accidental instances that unfortunately might occur to us as imperfect human beings, but which, in principle, could have been avoided with a better and more skillful program of education. The possibility that failure has a far deeper foundation, that it is actually founded in the essence, even in the dignity of education itself, has never been thought of. In reality, however, risk will be an innermost essential characteristic of education as long as education is considered a form of association with free beings, who are basically unpredictable in their freedom because they do not act mechanically. For the pupil always has the chance to evade the intentions of the educator, to turn against these intentions and to thwart them for inscrutable reasons. Therefore, the possibility of failure has been a determinative factor in the act of education from the beginning. One has to accept it consciously if one wants to carry out education in its full sense.

This connection remained hidden so long as education was thought to be

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analogous to a kind of handicraft work. As a matter of fact, it is still viewed that way today even if it is not often admitted. Like the craftsman who produces what has been ordered from the material he has been given, or like the sculptor who wants to carve his sculpture out of rock, so the educator supposedly forms his "student material" according to the rules of psychological knowledge with a view toward the educational goals laid down for him. If he fails in this formation, the failure results either from a mistake in practising his craftsmanship, or from an inadequacy in the material, although he should have recognized this by virtue of his knowledge and thus such an oversight also amounts to an error in his craftsmanship. Basically, this should not have necessarily happened to him. The success of educational activity depends solely on the efficiency and carefulness by which the educational act is carried out. Therefore, success lies primarily within the realm of conscious human planning.

The same conclusion holds true, by the way, if one starts from the idea of organic development. For in this case, education is restricted to avoiding disruptions of the child's own unfolding according to his own nature, something which cannot fail. If occasionally the educator does not reach the goal he had expected, it is, according to this point of view, either because he made the wrong conceptions about the available talent or because he showed a lack of attention in efficiently preventing external disturbances. In both cases, the failure could have been avoided because success, in this conception, lies basically in the realm of human planning. However, an overwhelming disaster might intrude from the outside; for example, a disease or accident might violently interrupt a promising beginning in development. But in this case, the cause is an outside factor that could not have been considered at the outset of the student's education. The educator need not blame himself in this instance. It is a mishap, but no real failure. It has only affected the educator in an external sense and has not struck a blow at his inner self.

Both positions can be applied within limits, and they can illuminate certain aspects of the educational process significantly. However, the initial approach of both positions already represents a misunderstanding of the real nature of education, which is that here a free human being encounters another individual in a demanding way, and that from the beginning the educator in his educational approach has to consider the pupils' freedom, which generally eludes all predetermination. Recognizing the freedom of the other human being means, at the same time, affirming the daring character of education, because in this recognition lies the possibility that an attitude may arise from the freedom of the other individual that may reject the teacher's educational attempt and eventually destroy it. This is some-

thing totally different from a deficiency in the material or an absence of ability on the part of the student. It is also something different from a mishap coming from the outside. It is an active resistance of the other's will to the intention of the educator. And so, I always have to include the possibility of real failure if I am at all willing to acknowledge the other human being in his freedom, a freedom to move toward what appears to me evil in regard to my educational goal. The pupil always has the possibility of thwarting the well-intentioned educational attempt. This is no longer just an educator's failure in a practical task; it is a failure in his innermost self. But to attempt to abolish the so-caused condition of daringness in education, and in that way to avoid the danger of failure, necessarily degrades the other human being to a mere material for my manipulation and thus offends the dignity of this other person and the dignity of education itself.

The possibility of failure constitutes the difficulty, and often enough the tragedy, of the educational profession, because failure in this profession means something quite different from failure in any other. In the case of the latter, we mostly have failure in performing certain practical tasks. The concerned person may then turn to other tasks and remain unaffected by the failure in his inner self. The educator, on the other hand, fails in his innermost core because he collapses in a situation where he has identified himself existentially with all his strength. The educator not only has to overcome the passive resistance of the material day by day, he also has to break the active resistance of his reluctant pupils. It is in this circumstance that we find the reasons why teachers are worn out and get old before their time. To fail in the innermost core is the tragedy of the educational profession. It weighs so much heavier, for it will not be glorified with the hero's laurel, but mostly elapses in the curse of ridiculousness without glory. The real tragedy of the educator has not yet had its poetic presentation, and therefore, has seldom found sympathy from fellow-men.

Trial, Gamble, and Risk

We will first try to point out through conceptual clarification the nature of genuine educational risk by distinguishing it from two other phenomena that, in a similar way, are exposed to the possibility of failure but cannot be called a risk. These two are "trial" and "gamble". Both are data in the field of educational reality (a fact that cannot be denied) and frequently interfere with the idea of risk. We will first try in a more general sense to point out the nature of these concepts, and then we will investigate their importance for education¹.

A person can try something. In this connection, one can say, perhaps more

precisely, that he is testing something. This is already the case with each work of handicraft. The artisan tries something new because he considers the old method insufficient and wants to better it, or he wishes to find out whether he should not replace the usual material with something better and cheaper; or he tries a new knack or new method of production, and so on. First, one tries it only because he does not know if the expected result will really materialize; in other words, whether it will work. One simply tries it. As an often-used proverb says, "The proof of the pudding lies in the eating", and this means that prior reflections are very limited and that one wants to see the results of the new experience. The results will then determine the correctness of the attempt. Also, the experiment may fail. Perhaps "fail" is too harsh a word, because if the experiment does not work, it will not be unusual and need not affect the person involved in his innermost feelings. He is sorry, of course, because he has spent time and effort. But an unsuccessful trial produces a result. It shows what will not work. One has simply to try something else, and man learns through the continuous testing of new things.

There have been trials of this kind since man's beginning. Modern science has developed the trial into a well-ordered method by making possible causal and systematic research through reproduction of the experimental conditions and variations of the factors involved. This happens in the experiment, which, in this special sense, is no longer just a groping trial, but a well-planned procedure that serves to enlarge knowledge systematically. In this context, we need not discuss it further.

Moreover, man may let the matter take its course by gambling on something. This leads us into another field, which cannot simply be compared with "trying" or "testing". One can sample the tightness of a rope by exposing it to a test before its use. But one can also do without a foregoing test and merely rely on its being all right without it. In an experimental situation, one wants to learn something, one is concerned with the discovery of noticeable principles. In gambling, one exposes himself to an unpredictable chance. In so doing, he remains passive, with no influence over the outcome of the event. He merely lets the matter take its course.

Sometimes, gambling cannot be avoided. The merchant, for example, necessarily gambles in his planning, for the outcome of his business depends on the market situation and other unpredictable factors, even though modern insurance represents an attempt to reduce the extent of the gamble. Another proverb says, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained" and this is exactly what we are referring to as gambling. At the beginning of a trip, one gambles as far as the weather is concerned, even if today insurance companies try to lessen this risk. Thus all of life is full of small and large

gambles, and in planning one has to try to estimate correctly the extent of every gamble.

But to make an avoidable gamble is foolish and leads to punishment, for it derives no longer merely from external circumstances, but goes much deeper. Whoever gambles with his life, for example, acts without responsibility, for life should not be exposed to any kind of gambling. Gambling always refers to something that is at one's disposal. To gamble with life is to reduce it to something that is at one's disposal. On the other hand, one might risk one's life for something, but this differs from gambling with it, for one is consciously accepting danger because of a deeper responsibility. Unlike gambling, this case involves accepting a real risk.

The concept of true risk leads us to a totally new field. We can determine the difference best by saying: I always gamble something, but in the final analysis, I risk myself. Wherever I risk something, at the same time, I am charging myself with my own person. From an ethical point of view, a gamble may appear indifferent and often even hazardous, but a real risk always occurs because of genuine ethical responsibility. Thus the failure of a real risk weighs much heavier. When an experiment happens to fail, this will not affect man in his innermost self because it happens on an objective level. When something "goes wrong" in a gamble, it may be painful in a single case, but it too merely affects man from the outside. But when a real risk fails, then the person who dared it is hit by the failure in his innermost core. In this case, an unsuccessful risk always means genuine failure. Concealed in every risk as such is the possibility of failure.

Application to Education

Now all three forms reappear in the special field of educational activity. A teacher who wants to meet the changing requirements of his profession has to test many things. He tests a new teaching method, he watches how the students react to various new materials, and he tries hard to match their interests. A teacher only remains "alive" by always trying something new. Also, a trial can be carried out systematically as in a scientific experiment. But in that case we are already in the province of educational research and not in that of immediate education itself.

The educational trial can fail, and especially an experiment in teaching. For the educator, this does not generally mean anything else than the failure of an experiment. In a single case, he might regret this failure, but he will learn from it and it will lead him to new experiments. So trials are part of the educational practice, and they are important devices for the progress of education. But an unsuccessful experiment does not mean a failure at all.

Sometimes the educator has to gamble as well, especially when quick decisions have to be made and he has very little time to reflect on them thoroughly. Basically, such situations are no different from those that require gambling in general and are not really typical of the nature of the conduct of education. Therefore, we might skip them here.

The real risk, on the other hand, is connected with the conduct of education in a special way. Boys and youth have to be dared, says Herbart in a well-known work; and by that he does not refer to just any gamble where the educator lets the development take its course and where failure might be accepted as a mishap². But the very nature of educational necessity requires this risk. In order to become men, Herbart continues, the students must not be prevented from testing their youthful courage and perhaps their recklessness. In education for freedom and ethical independence, there is no way to avoid this risk, and exaggerated caution and fearfulness in the name of "protection" prevent the growing person from coming of age. The mother duck, cackling helplessly after her lively swimming ducklings, is an adequate image of the protective tendency of the helpless educator.

But here too the real risk must be sharply distinguished from mere adventurousness. The adventurer seeks danger and enjoys its special appeal. He risks everything for the fascination that danger brings, not for the goal he wishes to attain. An analogy exists in the case of the adventurous educators. Quite a few might be found among the leaders of the "youth movement". They are those who become intoxicated with the influence they exert over young people and who endanger the young by driving them into situations that they probably are not able to cope with. The genuine educational risk distinguishes itself from mere adventurousness to the extent that it is necessary and is carried out with the highest ethical sense of responsibility.

In any single case, this risk can be of various kinds. There can only be an attempt in a groping way to point out some typical possibilities in order to illuminate the common factor of the risk in each of them. The difficulty lies in the fact that we are moving in a field closely bordering on the unexpressible, and we have to be satisfied to gain some more definite features of a subject not easily determined, features that might become the basis for further illuminating attempts.

A Simple Example as a Starting Point

It may be easiest if I try to illustrate the daring engagement of the educator by means of an example that I am most familiar with in my own

educational situation, even though it stands on the lowest level of the phenomena to be treated here – I mean the relation between the academic teacher and his doctoral candidate. When a candidate begins a research project under the conduct of his teacher, it is a joint enterprise in which not only the student but also the teacher may fail. It is already a risk to suggest a topic for a certain person to work on. Everybody needs “his” topic, and it is not foreseeable in the beginning how a particular individual will get along with his topic. Today only a few students understand that one has first to find a topic, that one has to try and give up various projects until the topic to be investigated crystallizes slowly out of the vague compass of possibilities.

However, this idea will not be pursued further at this point, although the tensions that arise from the different perspectives in the matter will be indicated. The teacher, for example, who recognizes that it is important for the student to find his own way, yet sees the pupil on a false road, tries nevertheless to shorten the detour for him if he is afraid that too much time will be wasted and especially if the student’s economic condition requires a quick completion of the work. Or if he sees his pupil laboring with tasks that exceed his abilities, he advises him to give up his favorite way. This too is not easy because the person in question is very much attached to the preliminary work that leads into the problems and cannot be dissuaded from it. And even more difficult are the cases in which the student is really on the wrong track and is caught in wrong thoughts. In such cases, the educator must interfere. One recognizes the whole delicacy of the educational risk in this kind of interference.

Everybody is fond of his own thoughts, or at least he stands close by them. As a result, he does not listen to causal explanations. One really has to make one’s criticism direct and sometimes even harsh in order to make the other person listen. Sometimes, one even has to evoke a crisis in the work with a sharp reproof. Then the wrong path may be given up, and the work can proceed in a correct way. But the person in question may instead become frightened by the criticism and lured into contradiction with himself by his teacher. Then the success of the work is a question mark, and both the pupil and the teacher fail.

There is, in a manner of speaking, both a soft and a hard way in directing a work. To follow the soft way means that one encourages one’s student, supports him, and refrains from speaking his own doubts, in the hope that everything will straighten out in the course of the later development of the work. However, as often happens, everything is not straightened out and then one has to use the hard way, using sharper criticism, revealing weaknesses unsparingly, and trying to manage a revision of the work. How

far one can go and how far one must go, are exactly those matters that pertain to the question of risk. With helpful criticism, one might make possible a breakthrough. But one can also cause a termination of the whole work or make the pupil suspicious for a long time. Generally, one cannot foresee what will happen, but one must risk the interference nevertheless. Moreover, very often the teacher is thrust into situations without preparation. The fervor of discussions may develop things so fast that one must act on the moment without being able to measure the single consequence. Thus the honest intention to help often creates an irreversible disaster. Then not only has the pupil failed, but also the teacher, even though the public does not notice the failure because of the loneliness of educational responsibility.

In my position I have often painfully noticed such difficulties. But corresponding situations can be found in any educational field. One has to give orders, make decisions, and so on, in cases where the consequences are not foreseeable and immediate decisions must be made. This is not a scientific experiment carried out for the benefit of experience, in which one is interested only in the objective results that do not involve the individual who carries out the experiment. Sometimes, an educational situation of this type almost shades over into gambling when one runs a risk in the hope that the decision will be correct. But this situation is also a genuine risk because my whole person becomes involved in it and because I consciously accept responsibility for the outcome. Therefore, failure is not simply a pitiful mishap, but a real breakdown in which the person involved is hit in his innermost core.

Risk in the Practice of Authority

After this preparatory example, we must try to analyze some typical possibilities of risk and failure in education. One occasion of unavoidable risk can be found in the daily occurrence of a disciplinary difficulty for the individual since this, to a smaller and larger extent, belongs also to the nature of education. I am not practicing real education when I am able to force the child to obey me, either through physical superiority or through the enforcement of school regulations that are based on the general public order. Education begins when I order something whose fulfillment I cannot achieve by force and that I know I cannot force. I always get into situations in which I have to give orders if I want to reach my goal. On one side, I can give orders because I can depend on the child's own practical and ethical understanding to cause him to respond to the appeal of my order. But in this case, a moment of unavoidable uncertainty on my part is always

involved, for I do not know whether or not the child has this insight and whether or not it will be effective in this case. To an extent, a gamble is surely involved. On the other hand, I cannot limit myself to cases in which my orders are certain to be followed, for in such cases, my orders would be merely carried out mechanically and would lack any educational value. In anticipation of this result, I have to give those orders that I cannot be sure will be carried out. From this uncertainty arises the real risk of giving orders, a risk that educational responsibility requires me to accept.

This fact leads us to the problem of the use of authority. Giving orders always makes me throw my authority on the scale. But the nature of authority is not to enforce things in a causal-mechanical way, but rather to turn to a free individual who submits himself to the authoritative demand. The voluntary quality of this submission, however, must be produced through the process of education. So the educator again and again comes to that border where he has to face resistance, or injustice, or mere disorder, with nothing behind him but the power of conviction that is derived from his ethical sincerity. If in the process he encounters the resistant child or youth, fully conscious of his own external powerlessness as a teacher, he accepts a risk to which he resolves with his strength – his existence as a human being. Only by taking this kind of risk can educational success be attained. And the more convincing an educator is in his whole personality, the more certain success will be. However, he can never be totally certain. He may assume the risk and fail, and then not only has he lost a gamble, but he has failed in his primary function. In everyday practice, the risk usually occurs in a trial of strength of the educator's position of authority after the authority itself has been called into question. In the rarest cases, the educator is able to restore the loss of authority by external means and then he really is defeated in the eyes of his pupils. After this defeat, he can never hope to rise to authority again. He really has failed.

The Risk of Trust

Another possible necessary risk that includes the possibility of educational failure lies in the trust that the educator must show toward the child. The idea that the healthy development of the human being can only take place in an atmosphere of trust has been discussed extensively elsewhere³. Any distrust that I show toward another person changes him. It makes him as stupid and lazy and perfidious as I expected him to be. Vice versa, every instance of trust changes him in a positive way into the better person he had been expected to be. One can make a person better by believing that he is better. As Nicholi Hartmann once said: "Moral strength coming from the

one who trusts is an eminently educational power." He adds, "trust can transform man towards good as well as towards evil, be it whatever he believes" ⁴.

Trust shown toward the young is especially required in critical situations in which an individual student has been brought back from his wrong direction by educational interference, whether through exhortation or punishment, and in which he displays timid and vulnerable signs of new life. The steadfastness of any new resolution does not depend on the student alone, but also upon the trust the educator shows in his resolution. For example, when a person, after any mistake, honestly promises to do better, the strength with which he makes this new commitment depends on the educator to whom he promises it. The educator trusts the student in question to keep his promise. Without the help of this trust, even the most solid resolution comes to naught. Indeed, nothing is colder and more discouraging than an educator's declaration in plain words that he cannot trust this promise after so many unkept promises, that he is convinced that the person involved will retrogress despite all good resolutions. This skepticism, no matter how much it is grounded in past experience, has a destructive effect because it deprives the person, despite all his honest intentions, of the strength to carry out his promises, which in turn, always depend on trust in the one to whom the promise is made. Therefore, in spite of all disappointments, the educator must constantly renew his strength for trusting.

But a difficulty arises in that this transforming power of trust (quite similar to the effect of authority), is not a type of mechanical effect. That is, trust does not necessarily achieve results. It too is based on a risk that the educator always has to initiate anew. In the same way, Hartmann points out: "All trust and all belief is a risk; it always requires a fraction of ethical courage and strength of soul to achieve it. It always happens with a certain engagement of the person." And further: "The one who trusts yields himself into the hands of the person he is trusting, he risks himself." ⁵ Therefore, the risk of trust shown to the child may succeed, and if so, then the educational involvement was worthwhile. But at the same time, there may also be failure, and then the educator appears as the one who had lacked necessary precaution, one who had acted with irresponsible credulity and stupidity. The educator then must bear ridicule as well as experience failure in his work.

A situation of this type occurred after 1918 when social welfare education (Bollnow refers to reformatories, ed.) did away with the customary bars and locked doors, and trusted that their pupils would not run away despite the lack of such external compulsions. It is known that great educa-

tional success has come from taking this risk. Such a trust, however, always remains a risk, and thus, as in the case of any other risk, we accept the possibility of failure. Therefore, success can only be achieved when the effort is backed by all the internal strength available to the teacher, and it will fail immediately as soon as this strength recedes and trusting becomes a matter of routine.

Trust always means exposing oneself without reservation to something that is unprovable and unenforceable because it depends upon the unpredictable free will of another human being. Therefore, the one who trusts must always become involved with his whole human strength, and in this way expose himself to possible failure. Because his whole personality is involved, he is hit most deeply when there is a lack of success. In this case, the lack of success means a genuine failure through which the educator is somehow destroyed. So not only has the reputation of the educator been deeply hurt through this failure, and thus his prospects of succeeding in other instances with the one who has let him down have been injured, but he has also failed with all the other students.

One must always remember, however, that the educator does not fail because he may have made a mistake that could have been avoided through better understanding. The consequences of a failure are found in quite a different area. The educator may fail even when he has done everything correctly. The possibility that trust can bring disappointment is one of the factors that is in the nature of risk, factors that are basically unpredictable because they are not evoked by any cause. In this possibility lies an element of fate, which here breaks into education and destroys everything that can be reached by careful human planning.

Now the educator might try to avoid the gamble of trust simply by telling the child (or any human being) that he trusts him, since he knows that the child needs this trust as a backing for his development. But the educator may not identify himself completely with this trust, but rather use his "realistic" knowledge of human weakness to construct limitations and reservations so that from the very beginning he takes into account certain possibilities of disappointment. An approach like this may be very realistic, and the educator involved may know how to protect himself. But from the educational point of view, it has no value. For educational reasons, it is not sufficient that the educator merely pretends to trust. He must honestly convince himself of his own trust. He has to get involved wholly in this trust of his, or he will not appear trustworthy to the child (or to the other person). Again, this does not mean that he may yield himself carelessly and credulously to cheap illusions. No, he needs all his skeptical-realistic knowledge. In his own soul, however, he must have faced the conflict of this

knowledge and the risk of trusting irrespective of how it may look to the outsider. Despite all his knowledge about the danger of disappointment, he must trust honestly if his trust is to have meaning for the other person.

Above all, these demands of trusting indicate the special difficulty of the educator. It necessarily lies in the destiny of his profession that he may be disappointed in his trust. The trust may backfire, and the danger of becoming resigned or becoming bitter is always present. There is no way to avoid the fact that many educators are given over to bitterness and practice their profession as a mere external routine. The educator's function, however, is always to rescue himself from resignation, and renew the strength of trust in spite of all disappointments. This effort almost exceeds human strength, and one may say that the educator continuously asks too much of himself in the face of the demands of this trust. These excessive demands may be the ultimate reason why so many educators grow old before their time. By the same token, however, the opposite may be true, and the vitality of this trust causes them to remain inwardly young.

The Risk of Uncovered Openness

Another form of educational risk lies in the fact that the teacher may not only expect from the child that which he is capable of doing without much difficulty at his particular level of development, but also something in excess of that requirement. The teacher talks with the small child, for example, not at the level of speech that the child himself uses at that age, but rather in the form of the next higher level of speaking in order to challenge him toward further development. That is, the teacher creates a "tide of development" that pulls the child forward. At the same time, a risk is also run when too much tension has been created, and so the child fails under this tension and becomes discouraged. The teacher, at least for a certain length of time, has to expect things from the child that approach the limits of the child's strength, not only in the intellectual field but also in the ethical requirements of self-sacrifice or demands against oneself.

This process leads to a special extending of the risk. In this case, the area concerned is not so much practical skill and knowledge, but things that appeal to a human being in his emotional sphere and that somehow touch the realm of what is "sacred" to man. Such things can be found in the great figures of literature or in questions of human culture. Children have to be given more than they are prepared for or are capable of receiving at their respective level of development. But there is always the danger that children may not acquire these things and that they may develop negative judgments that will become ingrained and bar them later from an adequate

access to life or that they may simply fight against these things in a momentary attitude of defiance. In assuming this type of risk, the teacher exposes his own innermost self, for there is always the danger that he will become suspect or even ridiculous from the students' point of view in terms of those things that concern him most.

This leads us to a decisive point. The teacher always has to fight for the spiritual values that he seeks to convey; and because of this, he must not exclude his students from the innermost sphere of feelings and convictions that man usually hides as the most vulnerable core of his soul. The teacher must open, so to speak, the intimate part of his soul to the not-yet-mature person because this is the only way to introduce this sphere to another human being. Everyone has the right to protect the sphere of things that concern him most deeply from the observation of others. He has, one might say, the right to have a mask behind which he may hide his most sacred feelings, revealing them only in rare moments to another trusted person. Only the teacher is forced again and again to talk about the most sacred and most fragile matters to persons who will accept them in a manner that he cannot predict. The poet is in a much more favorable situation because he can write down his innermost feelings in the loneliness of his room and need not defend them before any audience. Only the teacher – and in a similar way the minister – finds himself in a situation where he has to talk about the things that concern him most deeply. Do not misunderstand, this does not mean that he has to talk about himself and his emotional life. Such action would be perfidious indeed and contrary to the detachment that is always necessary⁶. But by talking about things with sincerity and without an ironic overlay, he reveals his own feelings because his feelings are so much connected with his inner self. The educator simply cannot avoid this. It is the price he must always pay to achieve the risk of openness. There arises the danger, of course, that these inner things will become for him simply teaching materials that he presents to others without inner inhibition, perhaps even with a feeling of satisfaction. Then he can easily take an unctuous and sentimental tone that only embarrasses the listeners, for the good audience experiences the same shy reticence as the good speaker. A good audience is moved only when the speaker's reticence is noticed, and this is necessary in order to speak of these delicate matters in public.

Thus, the inwardly vivid teacher always constantly struggles against his natural desire to protect himself, a desire that he has to overcome in order to speak of the things that are so important to him. Only then will he succeed in conveying these lasting values. And like Orpheus, who forced the wild beasts to be quiet through the strength of his singing, so the

teacher – through the sacrifice of his uncovered openness – brings things within reach of his students that they never would have gained by themselves. He may succeed in this endeavour. But it always remains a risk. At the same time, there is always the danger that communication with the other person is not achieved or is interrupted, and that he will appear strange and may even gain nothing but ridicule from the students at that point which affects him in his innermost self. The teacher, we may say, has to show his soul openly although everybody else may hide it behind protective covers. Because of this risk in openness, something that he has to achieve anew each time, the teacher's fate, in a very special way, lies in the hands of his students.

The Failure

Another feature can be clarified with an example that does not quite belong to the sphere of real failure but that leads into it. An amazing impression is left in the minds of school boys, even after decades, by the proper apology of a teacher to his student because of the teacher's mistake, or because of a suspicion he had held that proved to be unfounded, or because of a thoughtless scolding. A mishap of this kind is far from a failure. The teacher has apologized for the mistake, and the apology has had a far greater effect than any flawless educational experience could have had. So we ask, what is the basis for the unexpected positive result and the unproportionate effect? The reason might well lie in the fact that the teacher has left the throne of perfection, and by this act, he has acknowledged an ultimate equality with students, removing the usual teacher-student relationship. The student feels himself elevated by this acknowledgement and the teacher has lost nothing in the eyes of his student. Furthermore, the teacher has gained something, for by deciding to overcome himself, he has gained greater respect from all his students.

But one can go a step further and point out other cases where teachers and educators have failed in the real sense of the term because student resistance broke the teacher down in human despair. With this defeat, it happens (not always, but quite frequently) that the teacher's failure and his despairing breakdown (one cannot say any longer that this is educational), has an extraordinary effect on the young persons. They experience something as a consequence of their unexpected success in making the teacher fail, and they are affected by this in their innermost self. Through their chance experience of succeeding recklessly with their own power, they appear to recognize the senselessness of this power and the superiority of the teacher's high form of existence. They find these conclusions obvious

because of the teacher's inability to protect himself against raw force, which reveals the inner superiority of his ethical position. Such is the striking experience of a regretful conscience that never intended the situation to go so far. Put even more bluntly, the one who arouses respect radiates all his purity because of his vulnerability and his inability to protect himself against treachery. An experience of this sort apparently cannot be gained by merely observing others, but only by going through the shameful experience of having offended respectability⁷.

In this manner the defenseless failure of an educator can become obvious in a singularly shocking experience of boys breaking down a teacher, which need not always happen. When it does, the failure of many educators is final. It will occur, however, mostly to those whose quality already has become obvious in another context. And therefore, successful teaching in this instance, if it occurs, cannot be realized as conscious planning but as an excusable mistake. Whoever wants to provoke such an experience consciously would degrade the seriousness of the process to a mere spectacle whose inner dishonesty would soon be recognized. On the other hand, at the border of conscious planning and of education itself as such, this fear of failure arises that really moves man in his depths and will purge him in the manner of a genuine crisis. Here we have the experience of a genuine borderline situation in a person's life. Something as absolute as fate has broken into everyday routine.

At the same time, this is a borderline case and one must not overemphasize the observation, as if these things belonged to the daily life of education. Although one must note that the danger of failing is a constant threat, one has to be careful not to exaggerate it. Certainly, failure of this type is terrible for the educator. Fortunately, however, such events do not occur in the regular everyday life of the educational profession, but are very rare. Not the failure, but rather the possibility of failure, must be considered in the educational behavior at any moment of the risk of trust. Fortunately, failure is still the exception; it is an exception that does not stem from an external accident but something that existed in the nature of education from the beginning. But below the level that is marked by the danger of failure, the life of planned education goes on at its regular pace. The necessity for careful planning and for thwarting disturbances, of course, remains uncontested.

This leads us back to the more general context. As we pointed out in the beginning, we are not concerned with trying to replace the traditional "classical" education of steady processing in life and education with a new "existential" education of unsteady forms. That would present too simple a picture and it would mean exchanging one bias for another. We rather have

to understand existential events as exceptions that structure the educational events as a whole and from which one discovers a whole new educational understanding. The correlation between these two spheres, between unsteady and steady proceedings, has to be pursued and must be the object of further intensive research.

I will stop here. These thoughts represent only a beginning. I am painfully aware of their provisional and fragmentary value. But it seems to me – and here I ask for understanding if this hope should seem unrealistic – that this start will lead us from the narrowness of present educational problems into a free level of fertile new questions.

NOTE

¹ I refer to G. KUDRITZKI, "Wagnis und Scheitern: Eine phänomenologische Erörterung in pädagogischem Hinblick" ("Risk and Failure: A Phenomenological Discussion under the Aspect of Education"), dissertation, University of Tübingen, 1959, in which the problem is approached from a different side and these ideas are pursued much further.

² J. F. HERBART, *Allgemeine Pädagogik*, Sämtliche Werke, edited by K. KEHRBACH (Langensalza, 1887), Vol. II, p. 19.

³ Compare O. F. BOLLNOW, *Neue Geborgenheit* (Stuttgart, 1955), pp. 19 ff.; *Wesen und Wandel der Tugenden* (Frankfurt/Main, 1958), pp. 175 ff. A. NITSCHKE, "Angst und Vertrauen", *Die Sammlung*, 7. Jahrg. 1952, pp. 175 ff.; H. HAUCKE, "Die anthropologische Funktion des Vertrauens und seine Bedeutung für die Erziehung" (dissertation, Tübingen, 1956); R. SCHOTTLAENDER, "Theorie des Vertrauens" (Berlin, 1957).

⁴ N. HARTMANN, *Ethik* (Berlin, 1926), pp. 429 f.

⁵ N. HARTMANN, *op. cit.*, 426 f.

⁶ Compare E. MEINBERG, "Das distanzlose Kind" (dissertation, University of Tübingen, 1959).

⁷ Concerning the connection between respect and shamefulness in general see O. F. BOLLNOW, *Die Ehrfurcht* (Frankfurt/Main, 1958).