

Title Page.

Title: The Complexity of Judgement in the Everyday Work of Educators

Acknowledgments. Thank you to Ron Pelias for ‘An Autobiographic Ethnography of Performance in Everyday Discourse’ (1994, Spring).

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The Complexity of Judgement in the Everyday Work of Educators

Abstract: We experience judgement in everyday life: the process and the outcome, making and receiving. In this piece I turn to John Dewey's notions on how judgements are situational, interpretive, (con)temporary, active and relational. Contrary to everyday connotations of the word *judgement*, Dewey reminds us that judgement is more contingent than propositional.

The aim of this piece is to re-consider our understanding of judgement in everyday educational work. Crafted from a range of sources, anecdotes are alternated with statements about judgement in the work of school principals and teachers, one to illustrate the other. The form chosen for this project echoes that of Ron Pelias' 1994 piece on performance in everyday discourse.

Keywords: judgement, Dewey, principal appraisal, education

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Opening statement

Judgement, as a process and as an outcome, is a common human experience and act. In our everyday lives people make judgements and are the subject of other people's judgements. In everyday terms, we can make quick judgements, suspend judgement, hold on to an earlier judgement despite new evidence, and we can develop our ability to make sound judgements.

Judgements are made in social interaction for purposes determined by human beings (Blumer, 1969). As Beista and Burbles (2003) put it, "human beings do not simply react, but [they/we] react on the basis of their interpretation of our actions" (p. 75). It is human beings

who develop judgement (discernment), exercise judgement, and judge how to proceed. Those involved are reciprocally responsive in their actions and interactions. The judge uses reflexivity and evaluation in “selection, determination and interpretation” (Frega, 2010, p. 603). Judgement entails weighing and selection, and, by consequence, the discarding of other possibilities. Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2008) state, “At issue here is the realisation that every act of knowing is *partial*—in the two-fold sense of ‘incomplete’ and ‘biased’. Such selections are not innocent nor benign” (p. 7). John Dewey described judgement as “the selection and rejection decisions regarding relevant evidence for an evaluation; that is, the gathering of what is important to take into account and what is not.”² Judgement is therefore interpretive and involves both a process as well as an outcome.

School principals and teachers experience judgement as well as make judgements in their assessment and evaluation practices related to children’s learning. For example, in classroom and school data-based or evidence-based decision making, “Any thoughtful person engaged in data collection and analysis, of course, quickly discovers that these essential processes can entail considerable judgment making” (Duke, 2018, p. 2). Judgements are involved in determining what evidence to collect. Manageability factors such as available resources in time and costs may be taken into account. Consideration of what evidence to give weight to in subsequent decision-making also requires judgement decisions (Duke, 2018). Judgement is therefore integral to educational assessment, evaluation, appraisal, decision-making and problem-solving.

The context or situation of judgement is a significant aspect in Dewey’s understanding of judgement as this is where judgements are made and the enactment of consequences plays out (2006[1916]). In any situation, being judged through interaction with a judge or appraiser, along with the consequences, can feel very personal, at least, for the person who is

the subject. Thus, when attempting judgement of individuals, we need to recognise that there are relationships between judge, subject, and the situation.

Judgement concerns what is valued, whether specified or not, and whether it is clear whose values are involved in judgement. That is, evidence is not there to be “observed, assembled and arranged” (Dewey 1938, p. 489). Judgements are made on the basis of evidence in relation to some reference point. This reference may be explicitly apparent (such as formal standards or criteria), more tacit (such as the judge’s point of view or values) or broader perceived socio-cultural norms. It is likely that the reference points used in any judgement will be a mixture of these things.

Dewey also emphasised the temporality of judgements (Dewey, 1938). Frega (2010) summarised Dewey’s idea:

Temporality is a constitutive trait both of situations and judgements; situations evolve over time, and judgement is not the punctual utterance of a propositional content but is rather a spatial-temporally complex process subject to contingent constraints. (p. 599)

Although connotations of the word *judgement* seem harsh and absolute, Dewey reminds us that judgement is more contingent than propositional. According to Dewey, any judgement is, therefore, not as fixed or as final as commonly-held connotations of the term, or uses of the outcomes, might suggest (Earl Rinehart, 2017). Things that are settled and unquestioned can become unsettled through change and new questions arise. In education, for example, situations, relationships, values, people, policy and purposes change, past judgements need to be reviewed and revised. A continuity of further processes of judgement is required.

The collection that follows alternates literature references and anecdotes to illustrate judgement exercised and experienced in the everyday work of principals and teachers. My aim is to re-consider our understanding of judgement in everyday work of these educators. The structure and form chosen for this project echoes that of Ron Pelias' 1994 piece on performance in everyday discourse.

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Body

To start with: there is no *judgement* if criteria are simply “taken from outside and applied.”³ Judgements are made in relation to values. What is being valued? Whose values are being used?

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The advisor for senior boys, Mr. Dennys, was very concerned that Aaron did not always wear socks to school. Aaron's mother, on the other hand, slept through mornings, including on school days. Dennys did not succeed in his attempts to get her opinion.

**

Both judge and judged are in *the situation* with reference points related to expectations, values and norms. They are *in relation* and “partially constitute the points of reference.”⁴ Judge, judged and points of reference are inextricably linked.

**

The new school principal thought the school's annual Santa lunch—with carols sung by a 60 member children's choir—both frivolous and too religious. After hearing the response from

teachers he reversed his decision and allowed the lunch to go ahead. Still, he was surprised at the large turnout of parents and how much everyone enjoyed the choir singing songs like 'Deck the Hall'.

**

Dewey thought of judgements as actions that are “better, wiser, more prudent, right, advisable, opportune, expedient etc.”⁵ Are they always? What about quick judgements or judgements held unquestioned and unexamined for some time? When put into action, is a judgement simply the imposition of a judger’s values over another person’s?

**

Ruby told me she did have a husband and wife come and see her once, early on in her time as principal there. They'd both been on the school board and she knew that they had caused a huge ruckus. She said, “They just wanted to put me in my place. So, I don't know, it was all about their kids but honestly, it was just all about them coming over here and asserting themselves a bit actually. So that was interesting, because I didn't really know the purpose of their visit, and I just said to them, 'I can't say I agree with you.' I just kind of stood up to them nicely”.

**

Parker Palmer wrote in *The Courage to Teach* (1998) that “a good teacher must stand where personal and public meet, dealing with a thundering flow of traffic ... as we try to connect ourselves and our subjects to with our students, we make ourselves, as well as our subjects, vulnerable to indifference, judgement, ridicule.”⁶

**

Carys told us she dyes her hair because she knows that the children in her class do not want a grandmother for their teacher. A mother? Well, perhaps. We listening women nodded: obviously.

**

Interpretation, by the person who is making the judgement, is necessary, and is that which connects what is happening in the specific situation to the reference points being used.⁷

**

The District office staff receive the results for Grade 4 tests from Mountainview School. “Oh dear,” they say.

With a steady school roll of 112 but a typical turnover of one third of students, Mountainview’s school leaders are more focused on attendance and transition issues.

**

Decisions about the relevance and importance of evidence are made in relation to “the situation at hand.”⁸

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According to the Washington State principals I spoke to, they are hardly ‘seen’ by busy superintendents. Really, it is the appraisal evidence they load into the online repository that gets counted/weighed in the evaluation of their work. These principals commented that this evidence is often, then, of tasks they need to do anyway, such as completion of state testing or completion of teachers’ appraisals: the filling in of spaces in an online template.

**

Inference and judgement belong “to action, or behaviour, which takes place *in the world*.”⁹

**

[E]ducation, healthcare, construction and the public sector in New Zealand appear to be most lenient regarding the acceptability of tattoos. "Ten years ago lots of people had tattoos but they were invariably covered up in some way to be able to do certain types of work, but now, ... you see everyone with tattoos, it's great."¹⁰

**

Judgements are of the time. Judgement is more complex than a timely decree. Situations change. Judgements are subject to the constraints of existing conditions.¹¹

**

One principal's appraisal report included this statement: "Disclaimer: This report concerns the performance of the principal as defined in her job description and performance agreement. Although related to compliance and accountability, this report should not be regarded as a complete analysis of such matters."¹²

**

The outcome of judgement modifies consequential action(s) and is the basis for future action.¹³

**

A teacher felt the student's attention slipping away and decided her unease was because what she was teaching was too easy for the student. Her response was to modify the lesson to make it more of a challenge. The student's attention increased and "the flow of teaching was re-established."¹⁴

**

Deweyan judgement *aims* [emphasis added] to assess the quality of an *effect* on a *situation* and not to define the intrinsic *value* of something.¹⁵

**

From the way school board members had talked at his interview and subsequently, Sydney felt confident he was a 'better match' than 'the last principal' as 'the kind of principal' the school was looking for. They had made it clear they expected a school principal to be present, visible, and active during school and at relevant events. He said, "We had Agricultural Day last week and I was running around like a blue-arsed fly, and they said, "It was great to see you out there, talking to the Kindergarten people and helping with the sausage sizzle, do the raffle prizes and all that."

**

Judging and judgements are relational in terms of being multifaceted and subjective.¹⁶ The process, the outcome, and any consequences of judgement are experienced by the person on the receiving end.

**

"I've been disappointed overall with the school board's involvement in my appraisal. I feel that I don't get the acknowledgement and I feel let down by that. The school's running along well. The principal has had an appraisal. It's obviously gone well - great, what's the fuss? I haven't made a fuss. I just think if it wasn't going well, the board would be in there wouldn't they - so why can't I have the good feedback?"¹⁷

**

Judgement of practice is ... "a necessary and ongoing activity. Necessary, because human beings constantly need to make decisions and settle questions and because judgement accompanies situations in their dynamic evolution and should be responsive to the changing nature of factors, needs and aims."¹⁸

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Closing statement

Principals and teachers as educators make judgements and are *also* judged in their everyday work. Duke's (2018) definition of judgement highlights the decision-making in the face of the unknown, temporary or contradictory in the making of judgements: "Judgment is the ability to arrive at and make a choice when faced with incomplete information, uncertain conditions, and/or competing goals or values" (p. 6). Thus, judgement is a process and an outcome, situational and interpretive. Judgement involves social/human interactions for human purposes.

To someone outside a given situation, a specific judgement may seem irrelevant or harsh. For example, whether Aaron wears socks to school or not is a judgement I consider irrelevant to his learning and I said so to Mr. Dennys at the time. Judgements, as interpretations involving values, may be left unspoken by the individual, acted on in interaction with a subject in a specific situation, or naturalised through policy with extensive implications for unknown as well as known subjects. As such, judgement may be an explicit exercise of power. Blumer (1969) emphasised the influence on a judge by those who are 'powerful'. The person making the judgement will weigh another's opinion by who they know, who they represent, how organised they are, if they might get "vociferous, militant and troublesome" (p. 201) or be quickly forgotten. The question is, then, whose judgement counts in judgement?

The illustrations presented here remind us that the person who judges is present in the circumstances of that judgement. The 'criteria' or reference points used in making a judgement may not (all) be explicit nor shared and that, contrary to common connotations,

judgements are better understood as temporary. It was this understanding of a temporal dimension that justified Dewey's hope for *better* future experiences. Dewey's understanding that the stability of knowledge (values or norms) as only for *a time* signals a need for further inquiry, further judgements and further decision-making. The purpose in formal and informal judgements in the everyday work of educators is, for Dewey, for education "to be more enlightened, more humane, more truly educational than it was before" (1929, p. 39).

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¹ Thank you, and my apologies, to Ron Pelias for ‘An Autobiographic Ethnography of Performance in Everyday Discourse’ (1994, Spring). The body of this essay follows the organisational style he uses in that piece.

² Kerry Earl Rinehart (2017, p. 82).

³ John Dewey (1915, p. 519).

⁴ Earl Rinehart (2017, p. 84).

⁵ John Dewey (1915, p. 505).

⁶ Parker Palmer in *The Courage to Teach* (1998, p. 17).

⁷ Earl Rinehart (2017).

⁸ Roberto Frega, (2010, p. 601).

⁹ [emphasis added](Dewey, 2006[1916], p. 91).

¹⁰ From article in NZ Herald by Aimee Shaw. Retrieved from

https://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/news/article.cfm?c_id=3&objectid=11542364

¹¹ Frega (2010) summarised Dewey’s idea: “temporality is a constitutive trait both of situations and judgements; situations evolve over time, and judgement is not the punctual utterance of a propositional content but is rather a spatial-temporally complex process subject to contingent constraints.” (p. 599).

¹² Disclaimer from a New Zealand school principal’s appraisal report (Earl Rinehart, 2017, p. 132).

¹³ Earl Rinehart (2017, pp. 82-83).

¹⁴ Gert Biesta and Nicholas C. Burbules in *Pragmatism and Educational Research* (2003, chapter 3, p. 64).

¹⁵ Roberto Frega, (2010) cited in Earl Rinehart 2017.

¹⁶ Darren Garside (2013).

¹⁷ An edited principal’s comment in Earl Rinehart (2017, p. 136).

¹⁸ Roberto Frega, (2010, p. 599).