

Schools and the Interhuman

Frank Margonis
University of Utah

It has been a pleasure to reflect upon Alexander's provocative essay. Alexander's thesis, that educators are prone to "create 'schemes and steps,' instead of relating to the children directly" offers a powerful and disconcerting critique of much educational reform. He believes educators should strive to attain the right type of teacher-student relationships, not site-based management, schools of choice, or assertive discipline. Such schemes, in his mind, cannot create strong educational relationships; site-based management might occur with or without "an interhuman dimension, that is a thick layer...of 'actual happenings' where people regard each other not as objects, but as 'partners in a living event.'" Alexander offers the "interhuman" as an embodied standard, a dimension characterizing the most fulfilling relationships, which might supply guidance to future educational endeavors.

To my mind, Alexander has adopted an extremely promising path. I share his belief that a characterization of meaningful relations may supply the most fruitful ethical guide for educational practice. The historically most influential educational ethics face difficult philosophical obstacles.

Liberal arts educators must show that a single body of knowledge provides the understanding requisite to becoming a fulfilled human--a position depending upon universalistic claims regarding the nature of rationality and the nature of humans.¹ Progressive educators have also traditionally relied upon universalistic claims regarding the character of humans.² Given the present historical juncture in which universalistic descriptions of humans and reason are often seen as a means of legitimating particular cultural traditions at the expense of others, a new philosophical direction, like that proposed by Alexander, is welcome.³

Alexander's focus upon the character of meaningful human relations may help move us beyond both liberal arts and progressive philosophies. Instead of relying upon a description of human nature, Alexander's portrait of the interhuman focuses directly upon intersubjective understanding--including understanding across differences. Instead of asserting that any particular body of knowledge is required to reach fulfillment, Alexander focuses our attention upon the quality of relationships and thus upon educational process.

With the stakes of this debate in mind, let us take a closer look at Alexander's position. Alexander's recommendations for educational practice rely upon his vision of the "interhuman," which combines Buber's description of interhuman relations with Bakhtin's multivocal conception of consciousness. From Buber's work, Alexander appropriates the description of face-to-face encounters characteristic of the interhuman. Here participants view the other, not as objects, but as "partners in living events." Entering the interhuman means "giving oneself fully"--not adopting the partial approaches which lead people to view interactions through the lenses of their own emotions or their socially defined roles. Participants strive for a balance between recognition of the other and self assertion. The other is listened to and accepted for who they are, whether the result is disagreement or mutual affirmation.

Alexander hopes to adopt Buber's description of the interhuman while discarding both Buber's romantic belief in an authentic self and his dyadic model of relationships. Unlike Buber, he believes

there is no "genuine, authentic self...buried under the cocoon of distorting little voices." Rather "the self is full of contradictions, inconsistencies, and foreign materials." Drawing upon Bakhtin's multivocal conception of self, Alexander is suspicious of Buber's dyadic model. In a perspective suggesting that each consciousness is the conglomeration of diverse voices, we can understand Alexander's contention that "the dyadic relation is a pure abstraction."

Before considering the educational implications of these ontological claims I will note one challenge faced by Alexander's version of the interhuman. With Buber's conception of an authentic self wisely abandoned, it's not clear how the distinction--important to Alexander--between "seeming" and being can be maintained. According to Alexander, it is "efforts to *seem* that prevent us from entering the interhuman." The idea that posturing prevents the direct relation of individuals is engaging and may contain the seeds of a post-romantic conception of authenticity. But, how will we know seeming from being? If each of us are a mass of inconsistent and sometimes conflicting selves, from what vantage point does one determine that the self which emerged is indeed not us? "Seeming" might simply be a case of one self disclaiming another self--with neither self having a rightful claim to primacy.

However, it's not obvious that Alexander needs a conception of authenticity to make good use of his understanding of the interhuman. Alexander suggests that where powerful educational programs are underway, it is due to the interhuman dimension that is an ongoing part of students' and teachers' relations. Alexander, quite interestingly, portrays the relations in these schools--not as familial or intimate--but as loose and nondominating. In pursuit of "whole," rather than partial relations, Alexander suggests that schools should "provide a place and occasion for children and adults to meet in a variety of roles." Students and teachers come together in pursuit of a common project, like the sixth grade class in George Wood's book, *Schools That Work*, who in response to a local chemical spill, became water chemists of the first order. Having studied chemistry, mapped the local system of streams, taken and analyzed water samples, shot and developed photos of spills, as well as written policy papers for local government, students and teacher became a community focused on a joint project.⁴

Such classrooms are, without a doubt, the creation of particular people and not the result of that awful notion, educational reform. But, I was a bit uncomfortable with Alexander's initial suggestion that schemes have nothing to do with creating the interhuman. Being a schemer myself, I looked closer to find that Alexander provides what I take to be policy recommendations near the paper's end. He states "a school must be given a chance to develop, to have its own history, and not be pre-modeled." To me, this recommendation suggests that teachers and students ought to have types of institutional support which few have at present. Teachers need the authority and time to create relationships with students. As Grumet has powerfully argued, at present, the relation between students and teachers is appealed to in a sentimental fashion, to make us feel good about our schools, while the actual institutional conditions of schools makes the accomplishment of meaningful relations rather difficult.⁵

Being in substantial agreement with Alexander's efforts to develop a relational ontology as a means of guiding educational practice, while remaining aware that this is an unfinished project with many significant challenges, I ended "The Pedagogy of the Interhuman" reflecting upon a couple questions which hound much of the philosophical work--of existentialists, hermeneuticists, and feminists--which employs some variety of relational ethics.

One of these questions arises from the ongoing debates concerning the universality of philosophical discourse. Theories of human nature and knowledge have justifiably been criticized for legitimating dominate white groups by building culturally-specific claims into their most basic descriptions of human being and truth. Is it possible that a universal description of relationships is also likely to legitimate the standards of one group over others? For example, does Alexander's description of the

interhuman reflect the to-and-fro motion of western intellectuals' dialogues more than didactic oratory characteristic of many Navajo meetings?⁶

A second question concerns the relationship between philosophical discourse and educational practice. Arguing from ontological premises concerning the basic nature of relationships may lead us to neglect critical aspects of the complex world of schooling. For example, some of the most pressing educational issues involve cross-cultural relations where "whites" wield disproportionate power. Ontological theories may lead to more optimistic accounts of the possibility of cross-group understanding than some of the anthropological accounts of such relations in public schools. If we, like John Ogbu, consider ways in which historical patterns of oppression and contemporary struggles over jobs create ongoing tensions in African American-Anglo relations, we might be a bit less confident about the likelihood that close relations between white students and white teachers will transfer to African American students.⁷ Do issues like job discrimination and tension between groups need to inform our ontological descriptions of human relations? To what degree can universal descriptions of human relations supply dependable conclusions about classroom practice?

These quandaries aside, I thank Alexander for extending our understanding of the possibilities the "interhuman" holds for furthering exemplary educational practice.

1. See, for example, P.H. Hirst, "Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge," and R.S. Peters, "Education and Human Development," in *Education and Reason*, ed. R.F. Dearden, P.H. Hirst and R.S. Peters (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972).

2. Frank Margonis, "Leftist Pedagogy and Enlightenment Faith," in *Philosophy of Education: 1993*, ed. Audrey Thompson (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1994).

3. Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions* (Cambridge: MIT, 1991); and *Universal Abandon?* ed. Andrew Ross (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988).

4. George Wood, *Schools That Work* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 16.

5. Madeleine Grumet, *Bitter Milk* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1988), 31-58.

6. On the character of Navajo meetings, Donna Deyhle, "Empowerment and Cultural Conflict," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 4 (1991): 277-97.

7. John Ogbu, *The Next Generation* (New York: Academic, 1974).