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EDITORIAL: The Vise of Words

Words. Our words are too much with us. Slogans have turned into tyrants. Education (the truth that will make us free) closes in to enslave us. Shades of the prison house. What we call learning narrows rather than widens possibility. And the times ahead for the profession of education are indeed bleak. The money has stopped flowing and soon, too, will the children. Our prospects are increasing constraints. It is time to construe anew. Freed from the tired refrains of set definitions, life breathes afresh. And this is the service performed by the authors in this issue. We are being asked to look upside-down, and backwards even, at our educational institutions, to strip the blinders of habitual language from our eyes and the shibboleths from our tongues. Let’s view “it” as if . . . or, again, what if . . . The mind reels. But, you say, schools are places where children learn. Yes, of course. And universities are for scholars. Bilingual education is so everyone can learn good English, and symbol systems and media can be lumped together in the world of the small child. Sounds fine — the familiar always does. But, we seem to be missing the point. No, that is the point precisely. If we are to be masters, we must reassert our control over the relationship between words and what they stand for. For too long now we have let language do the work for us. We must assume the responsibility for establishing what the referents are, both in reality and imagination. The other way lies resignation. Were education to become an open and on-going experiment, rather than a retrenchment of prescribed approaches, blooming would abound. And then we could return to what we are really about as educators: the testing of alternatives, the scrutinizing of implications. But first, as Bannister and Salmon insist, there must be alternatives, there must be implications. And once there are, we might even break through to metaphor and cast cliché out to see if our obituary has been premature.

—G.P.

Gordon M. Pradl

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Editorial offices of the New York University Education Quarterly are at the School of Education, Health, Nursing, and Arts Professions, New York University, 51 Press Building, New York, N.Y., 10003 (212-596-2031). Copies of the magazine are distributed without charge to the School’s constituents and to their colleagues in the field. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and additional mailing offices.