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## Professor's Book Looks at 'Recapturing the Personal' in Education

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Plotters of educational reform often seem to lose sight of the fact that children are not abstract commodities, and no amount of standardized testing can adequately sum up what goes on between teacher and student.

"You're not talking about the production of grain, you're talking about people and children's lives. What is the quality of classroom life that you are creating for children?" asks Irving Epstein, professor of educational studies at Illinois Wesleyan University.

Epstein and his new book, *Recapturing the Personal*, encourage teachers to remember their humanity and that of their students. In public school systems in the United States, the setting of educational standards and policies seems to lose touch with the nature of education as an interpersonal endeavor, Epstein says. It may not be easy to reconcile broad issues of accountability with the personal aspect of teaching, but individual teachers can reinterpret the "script" they are given, he says.

"I can be told that my value as a teacher is defined in terms of my students' test scores, I might even believe that for a while, but there will always be challenges to that perception. (You can) react to those challenges by saying, 'You know, that really is incorrect, I'm going to play that role in a way that doesn't sacrifice my humanity' — teachers are confronted with that dilemma every day. That's where the possibility of change lies, because we're not automatons. There always are choices in our lives that we make."

*Recapturing the Personal*, a collection of "Essays on Education and Embodied Knowledge in Comparative Perspective," looks at schooling practices and policies in the countries of Cuba, China, Zimbabwe, Morocco, Serbia and The Gambia, examining issues such as women's empowerment, disability, Qur'anic schooling, and the hidden meanings of the school field trip.

"Embodied Knowledge" refers to the idea in sociology that it's not possible to separate an individual from his or her social influences, and it's a false dichotomy to think of the mind as separate from the body. Epstein and his contributing authors apply social theory to case studies in various countries, aiming to avoid the customary approach to comparative studies that examines trends and educational policies removed from their context. "In the abstract, (that approach) doesn't really help us understand what schooling is about and what it means to people," Epstein says.

One example is Qur'anic education in Morocco, which relies on rote memorization — a method of learning that educators in the United States would likely dismiss as not requiring a lot of thought, Epstein says.

"But in that context, the children become one with the pedagogy; they embrace it; it becomes part of who they are. It becomes embodied," and this learning takes on great symbolic as well as practical significance. "If we don't understand, if we dismiss Qur'anic schooling as simply being 'These people are brainwashed into believing in the Qur'an,' then we lose sight of how powerful education is to one's own self concept. The idea of chanting together, or being part of a group, being part of something greater than oneself, and to be able to emotionally commit to that pedagogy, is something that many of our children never (experience)."

Another essay looks at the treatment of disability in Zimbabwe that doesn't stigmatize, but takes into account the whole child. In The Gambia, resiliency in women is traced to "emotional capital" borrowed from their mothers. A common theme among the essays is that abstract ideas about education can't be divorced from daily practice; thought can't be separated from action.

At Illinois Wesleyan University, professional teacher education is grounded in the liberal arts mission of the University, with the goal of enabling future teachers to think critically and creatively about the processes of education and the role of the teacher in a diverse and democratic society.

*Recapturing the Personal* was released in December by Information Age Publishing.



Irving Epstein