The Problem of Standardized Education in the Light of Richard Rorty's[1] Concept of Contingency

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Introduction

What is quality education?

It may at first sight appear to be a simple question that does not require much thought and rumination. At closer inspection, however, this very same question can actually be challenging, if not altogether difficult. It's not that we cannot determine what quality education is; it's just that there is no single universal definition of quality education even if, the world over, we can recognize at once certain common criteria that let us identify *a* quality education[2]. Instead, there are plenty of definitions, each of which explicates what and how quality education should be[3]. This plurality of definitions stems from the fact that the terms "quality" and "education" are each, and equally, complex. For indeed, what do we mean by "quality"? What are the bases for calling a particular something "quality"?[4] This is also true for education: what is really the essence of education? What does it really mean to educate or to be educated?

While we do not have a universal definition of quality education, for the most part, the notion of quality education frequently evokes an elitist connotation. For when we speak of quality education, it is often tied to some pricey perks that can only be had in the few expensive and exclusive schools where the children of those who belong to the upper

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[1] For a detailed account of Rorty's life and philosophical views, see A. Malachowski, *Richard Rorty* (London: Routledge, 2014); R. Kuipers, *Richard Rorty* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); N. Gascoigne, *Richard Rorty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008); *Richard Rorty,* ed. by C. Guignon and D. Hiley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); *The Rorty Reader,* ed. by C. Voparil and R. Bernstein (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2010).

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[2] Cf. S. Slade, "What Do We Mean by a Quality Education?", *The Huffington Post,* 22 February 2016*,* https://www.huffington-post.com/sean-slade/what-do-we-mean-by-a-qual_b_9284130.html, (accessed March 21, 2018); see also K. Maguire and P. Gibbs, "Exploring the Notion of Quality in Quality Higher Education Assessment in a Collaborative Future," *Quality in Higher Education* 19:1, 21 March 2013, pp. 41-55, DOI: 10.1080/13538322.2013.774220, (accessed March 23, 2018).

[3] Cf. UNICEF, "Defining Quality Education," A paper presented at the meeting of The International Working Group on Education, Florence, Italy, June 2000, p. 4, https://www.unicef.org/education/files/QualityEducation.PDF, (accessed March 21, 2018).

[4] V.K. Rao opines that quality "is a dynamic idea and exact definitions are not particularly helpful." Quality may be generally understood in two ways: that is, as an absolute concept denoting "the highest possible standard" or as a relative concept pertaining to anything that meets the personal standards of a person. For details, see V.K. Rao, *Quality Education* (New Delhi: APH Publishing Corporation, 2007), pp. 13-15.

echelon of society go to[5]. Until recently, in fact, very few schools – if there were at all – anywhere in the world, where most of those enrolled were children of low-income families, could claim to have offered quality education[6]. For a long time, the rest of the populace who could not afford the skyrocketing fees of the schools of the elite had to make do with what was solely available to them: public education which, in general, unfortunately did not simply spell "average" but even "below average" quality in education[7].

Thankfully, today, the public educational landscape has markedly changed. We can now speak of quality public education[8] – something unheard of in the not-so-distant past. This change can be attributed to some public outcry demanding that the state should provide accessible quality education to all of its citizens[9]. Be that as it may, the fact remains that offering quality education is *not* the same as ensuring quality education. The two are different. And this distinction is important because many states, in response to the demand for quality education, equally demand that identified public schools not only offer but more importantly ensure quality education. This is the reason why the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), at the meeting of The International Working Group on Education held in Florence, Italy in June 2000, presented "the basic dimensions of quality education today"[10] ; it is so that the member states of the U.N. would have an easy reference, if not a uniform set of parameters, in determining and ensuring quality in their educational systems.

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[5] Ibid., p. 14. See also L. Layton, "Majority of U.S. Public School Students are in Poverty," *The Washington Post,* 15 January 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/majority-of-us-public-school-students-are-in-poverty/2015/01/15/df7171d0-9ce9-11e4-a7ee-526210d665b4_story.html, (accessed Mar. 22 2018). This telling article in *The Washington Post* speaks volumes. It clearly informs its readers that most of the poor have limited or even no access to private education where quality education is said to be found. And although the article covers only public school students in the U.S., there's practically the same reality across the globe: that is, poor students do not often get the so-called best or quality education.

[6] See for example *The History of Discrimination in U.S. Education: Marginality, Agency, and Power,* ed. by E.H. Tamura (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[7] Cf. P. Bolton, "Education: Historical Statistics," *Standard Note* SN/SG/4252, 27 November 2012, researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04252/SN04252.pdf, (accessed March 22, 2018).

[8] Cf. C.A. Lubienski and Sarah Theule Lubienski, *The Public School Advantage: Why Public Schools Outperform Private Schools* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014). Of course, not all public schools today offer "quality" education; but at least a good number of public schools are now into the business of providing quality education.

[9] Cf. *Quality Education as a Constitutional Right: Creating a Grassroots Movement to Transform Public Schools,* ed. by T. Perry, R.P. Moses, J.T. Wynne, E. Cortés Jr., and L. Delpit (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010). Although it was the Americans who were most vocal in demanding for quality education in public schools, there was literally the same demand in many places around the world: from China to Tanzania, from the Philippines to India, and from some African to some South American countries. Thus in this paper, the term "state" does not refer to any particular state but to the state in general.

[10] UNICEF, "Defining Quality Education," A paper presented at the meeting of The International Working Group on Education, Florence, Italy, June 2000, p. 4, https://www.unicef.org/education/files/QualityEducation.PDF, (accessed March 21, 2018).

The further significance of UNICEF's presentation is that it categorically pronounces that quality education always entails conforming to certain predetermined standards[11]. And this only points to one thing: that quality education *is* standardized education. But does standardization really ensure quality in education? Many would say yes[12], and many would also say no[13].

Using Richard Rorty's concept of contingency, this paper aims to show that standardized education is problematic; it cannot truly ensure or even accurately measure quality in education. Why Richard Rorty? Why his ideas?

Rorty (1931-2007) was an American contemporary philosopher who was heavily influenced by pragmatism – a philosophical approach that is more concerned about the practical consequences of ideas rather than their theoretical elaboration[14]. What I find interesting in Rorty is the fact that his pragmatism – or neo-pragmatism to be precise – holds the key to his philosophy of education[15]. Rorty's educational philosophy, built upon Dewey's pragmatic philosophy of education, presents a postmodern vision of education, meaning to say, it does not readily accept and even challenges the status quo; as such, it questions the finality of established standards[16].

Thus, on account of the characteristics that are peculiar to Rorty's philosophy of education, he has become my logical choice: that is, I hope to attain the aim of this paper by using his neo-pragmatic and postmodern approach to education. Specifically, I will examine the problem of standardized education in the light of Rorty's concept of contingency. To reach this end, I will first present his concept of contingency. I will next go into his philosophy of education. Then, I will give a general overview of standardized education. Finally, I will expose where the problem of standardized education lies with the

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[11] Ibid., pp. 11, 16, 30, 42.

[12] See for example *Standard Setting in Education: The Nordic Countries in an International Perspective,* ed. by S. Blömeke and J.E. Gustafsson (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017); see also *Understanding Standards-Based Education: A Practical Guide for Teachers and Administrators,* ed. by R. Zagranski, W.T. Whigham, and P.L. Dardenne (Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press, 2007).

[13] See for example S. Ohanion, *One Size Fits Few: The Folly of Educational Standards* (New York: Heinemann, 1999); see also L.M. McNeil, *Contradictions of School Reform: Educational Costs of Standardized Testing* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[14] See K. Nielsen, "Richard Rorty," in *A Companion to Pragmatism,* ed. by J.R. Shook and J.M. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 127-138; A. Malachowski, "Imagination Over Truth," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pragmatism,* ed. by *idem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 36-54. Actually, Rorty identifies himself more as a neo-pragmatist than as a purebred pragmatist. This is because of his emphasis on language and culture, a departure from the emphasis on experience, method, and science of the Classic American pragmatism pioneered by Charles Sanders Pierce (1839-1914), William James (1842-1910), and John Dewey (1859-1952).

[15] Cf. W.M. Curtis, *Defending Rorty: Pragmatism and Liberal Virtue* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 25.

[16] Cf. C. Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 29, 116, 118-199.

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aid of Rorty's concept of contingency and, needless to say, offer Rortyan recommendations, if not outright solutions, to this problem.

Rorty's Concept of Contingency

The best way to understand Rorty's concept of contingency is by going back to his main stance as a philosopher: i.e. as an anti-essentialist, anti-foundationalist, or anti-representationalist thinker[17]. It means that for him, there is no such thing as "essence"[18], "intrinsic nature", "substance", or "foundation" in all things[19]. These concepts are mere linguistic conventions. But language does not and cannot represent "reality"[20]. That's how Rorty came up with his concept of contingency. Let's now examine it in-depth.

The Contingency of Language

Rorty opens his book *Truth and Progress* by making this claim: "There is no truth"[21]. However, he right away explains that he is not denying the fact that there could be truth. And he offers a more elaborate explanation in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* where he says:

> Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – cannot[22].

Rorty supports the claim above by adding, "The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only other human beings can do that"[23].

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[17] M. Eldridge and S. Pihlström offer a succinct explanation of Rorty's philosophical stance, saying: "Anti-representationalism is the name Richard Rorty gave for his special version of neo-pragmatism, especially in his writings in the 1990s. The anti-representationalist denies that there are any representational (semantic) relations between language and the world, or between mental states and the world. Anti-representationalism can be seen as a generalization of Rorty's leading idea… that neither language nor the mind 'mirrors' a language- and mind-independent reality. As such, it is a continuation of William James's and other pragmatists' criticisms of the view that truth is just a matter of 'copying' – accurately representing – reality as such." For details, see M. Eldridge and S. Pihlström, "Glossary" in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Pragmatism,* ed. by Sami Pihlström (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 265-266.

[18] Rorty would even say that "our essence is to have no essence." For details, see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 378.

[19] R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 2, 189, 248.

[20] Ibid., p. 4.

[21] R. Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 1.

[22] R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,* p. 5.

[23] Ibid., p. 6.

"Since truth is a property of sentences", Rorty continues, "since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths"[24]. Therefore, what is true or false is determined by language, and not by any intrinsic property or essence of the world that is being described. There are no essences or substances, only our descriptions of the world: linguistic categories made by us humans. This leads Rorty to conclude that "*languages* are made rather than found and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences"[25].

For Rorty, then, truth and falsity do not belong to the world; they purely belong to the human realm of description and language. Now if languages are made, then all language is contingent. Here are three interconnected reasons: First, we often change our ideas of what is true or false, right or wrong, good or bad – mostly as a result of our experiences of successes and/or failures in the past. Second, since we often change our ideas, we also keep on creating new vocabularies. Third, since we keep on creating new vocabularies, we can never have final vocabularies.

On these grounds, Rorty issues the challenge for us to abandon any search for truth. For whether we like it or not, there can never be "a narrative that has a privileged viewpoint and/or has the final determination on 'What there is'"[26].

The Contingency of the World and the Self
Having established the contingency of language, Rorty goes on to prove that the world and the self are contingent[27]. Let's tackle first the contingency of the world. For Rorty, the world we live in is as contingent as our language because we humans keep on defining and redefining it, constantly modifying our social and material environments through language-games[28]. By language-game, we are referring to the tool through which "specific marks and sounds come to designate commonly accepted meanings"[29].

Since language-games differ from one linguistic community to another, we have a potential infinity of vocabularies. As Rorty affirms, "There is no way to step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary" that can contain all possible vocabularies[30].

There can never be a final vocabulary that can capture what the world really is. Hence, it is also contingent. We cannot define it; we can only describe it. And our description of it is

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[24] Ibid., p. 21.
[25] Ibid., p. 7. Italicization by Rorty.
[26] E. Grippe, "Richard Rorty (1931-2007)," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* in <http://www.iep.utm.edu/rorty/>, (accessed 30 May 2017).
[27] Cf. R. Rorty, *Objectivism, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 81.
[28] Cf. Grippe, Op. Cit.*,* in <http://www.iep.utm.edu/rorty/>, (accessed 30 May 2017).
[29] Ibid.
[30] R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,* p. xvi.

always subject to change from time to time. Now if the world is contingent, it only follows that the self is likewise contingent. Why is that so?

For Rorty, when we say "chair", "table", "house", or "self" – all these are linguistic conceptions. "They do not refer to Platonic Forms or Aristotelian essences, but to linguistically constructed, intentional objects"[31], Edward Grippe commented. In Rorty's opinion, it could be the fear of associating the self to "a dying animal" that led philosophers since Plato to craft and believe in the notion of essence[32].

But again, there is no self. Even if it were there, we will never know it. Just like the world, we can only describe it. There are only our descriptions of it.

The Contingency of a Liberal Community
Rorty's concept of contingency reaches its culmination with his discussion of what characterizes a liberal community. To understand what he means by "liberal community", we have to go back to Rorty's definition of "liberal ironists". We will do this by deciphering first the meanings of: 1) liberal; and 2) ironist.

Borrowing from Judith Shklar's definition, Rorty defines "liberal" as those people who think that "cruelty is the worst thing" we can do[33]. Meanwhile, "ironists" are those who recognize and embrace the contingency of their most central beliefs and desires, including the existence of essence or intrinsic nature[34]. Combining the two terms – liberal and ironist – we now have a new term: liberal ironists. For Rorty, they are those who continue to doubt about final vocabularies but "hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease"[35].

With this definition, we can now proceed to Rorty's definition of a "liberal community". A liberal community is a society where there is freedom from pain and humiliation and where open-mindedness is practiced[36]. In other words, it is a society of ironists. Its members do not accept any vocabulary as final – be it theirs or others' vocabulary. A liberal community is thus characterized by pluralism and tolerance. But for it to be possible there should be constant dialogue among its locals[37]. Still, even if dialogue is a habit there, everyone is conscious that all consensuses are contingent. There will never be final vocabularies. Thus, a liberal community is a kind of utopia for Rorty. It is one where ironism is universal.

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[31] E. Grippe, Op. Cit., in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* in <http://www.iep.utm.edu/rorty/>, (accessed 30 May 2017).
[32] Cf. *Ibid.* See also R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,* p. 26.
[33] R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,* p. 74.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid., p. xv.
[36] Ibid., pp. 51-52.
[37] Cf. R. Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 172.

Rorty's Philosophy of Education

Rorty's philosophy of education is more like an extension of his neo-pragmatism, of his philosophy of contingency, because in his view, the ultimate aim of educating is to become a liberal ironist, or better yet, to create a liberal community[38].

In his celebrated essay titled "Education as Socialization and as Individuation", Rorty holds that there are two entirely distinct but equally necessary processes/phases in education, namely: acculturation and edification[39]. Acculturation refers to the first phase – and hence forms the building block – of education. It is also called "the socialization phase" and lasts for many years, ending only at the moment when the child/student enters college[40]. Edification, meanwhile, refers to the second phase – and hence forms the climax – of educational endeavor. It is likewise called "the individuation phase" and takes place at the college level[41].

Let's now go deeper into these two.

Acculturation

Rorty maintains that acculturation should be the first phase of education. His reasons are: first, it is what paves the way for solidarity; and second, it is also what makes conversation possible. For neo-pragmatists like Rorty, solidarity and conversation are the fundamental principles in social life[42]. That's because both solidarity and conversation can effectively compel anyone, particularly children/students, to use language[43].

And what does language do?

Through language, children/students get to engage in socialization and consequently "acquire cultural values"[44]. How they acquire these values is not difficult to explain: in socialization, children/students have to communicate with one another; naturally, they will only succeed in this if they will learn how to speak with respect, listen with attention, and dialogue with care.

Acquiring the knack in successful communication, however, requires time; it necessarily takes a long period. Rorty himself believes that it would need a "long socialization process" before our children can successfully acculturate our ideal "ways of talking, judging, and

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[38] D.J. Kwak relates that Rorty's liberal ironist is "the postmodern picture of the educated man in the liberal utopia." D.J. Kwak, "Reconsideration of Rorty's View of the Liberal Ironist and its Implications for Postmodern Civic Education," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 36, no. 4 (2004): p. 348.

[39] See R. Rorty, "Education as Socialization and as Individuation," in *Philosophy and Social Hope,* pp. 115-126.

[40] K.B. Noaparast, "Richard Rorty's Conception of Philosophy of Education Revisited," *Educational Theory* 64, no. 1 (2014): p. 81.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid., p. 82.

hoping"[45]. This explains why for Rorty, in the acculturation phase, the emphasis should be on "cultural literacy"[46]. For what's more important in this phase is content – that is to say, the acquisition of core knowledge – and *not* the method of learning and/or educating[47]. Cultural literacy, too, is a *sine qua non* precondition for later "critical engagement with one's own tradition" or culture[48].

Edification

After a long acculturation, Rorty contends that edification should follow.

Why? What is the aim/objective of education for Rorty?

Rorty's educational aim is ultimately this: To let each one to reach a utopic existence in a utopic society. Utopic existence is none other than living as a liberal ironist and utopic society is also none other than a liberal community[49].

The question is: how does edification lead towards this end?

Noaparast avers that when "students reach college level, their individuation requires that they edify their cultural traditions through exploring aims that differ from, and perhaps even calls into question, their past aspirations"[50]. This necessitates that "college students get ironic" and, if need be, "undermine all the necessary conventions" that they had previously learned[51]. To effectively do this, Rorty suggests that every student should have an individualized education program; every student anyway is exceptional and unique[52].

Rorty further thinks that edification allows students "to find new and better ways of talking/speaking" since it involves "incorporating the strengths of other cultures and disciplines"[53]. Edification, in effect, is a "hermeneutic activity of making connections between our own culture and some exotic cultures, or between our own discipline and other

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[45] Ibid., p. 83.

[46] Ibid. Rorty actually borrows the idea of cultural literacy from American educator and literary critic Eric Donald Hirsch, Jr. For details on Hirsch's discussion of cultural literacy, see E. D. Hirsch Jr., ''Education Reform and Content: The Long View,'' in *Brookings Papers on Education Policy: 2005,* ed. Diane Ravitch (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), p. 184.

[47] R. Rorty, "Education as Socialization and as Individuation," in *Philosophy and Social Hope,* p. 122.

[48] K.B. Noaparast, Op. Cit.*,* p. 83.

[49] See footnote 38.

[50] K.B. Noaparast, Op. Cit.*,* p. 85.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Kwak sheds light on this suggestion by Rorty by saying that a "liberal ironist is primarily interested in his/her personal project to create a new self-image against the continual self-doubt about who he/she is. Yet, this liberal ironist has a separate interest in his/her society, hoping better to accommodate or at least not interfere with others' pursuit of their personal projects." Kwak, "Reconsideration of Rorty's View of the Liberal Ironist and its Implications for Postmodern Civic Education," *Educational Philosophy and Theory,* pp. 350-351.

[53] K.B. Noaparast, Op. Cit.*,* pp. 80, 88.

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disciplines"[54]. It is essentially an enterprise of openness in that "it invites individuals to go beyond their culture's horizons and imagine new possibilities"[55].

But then, how can someone "who has no lived experience of a different culture get outside of the predominant horizon of his or her own culture?"[56] Rorty responds by saying that in the edification phase, students should be provided with intercultural consciousness. Such consciousness is very helpful in laying "the groundwork for a rich imagination of alternatives" because intercultural consciousness requires that we take other cultures seriously without giving them secondary status[57]. It's a difficult job, Rorty admits, but one can always try to get inside the inhabitants of other culture to look whether they have any ideas that may be useful to him/her[58].

In Rorty's view, when edification will successfully be completed, the students will have become liberal ironists: individuals who are never closed and confined within the sphere of fixed vocabularies, but always open to what life has to offer.

A General Overview of Standardized Education

In many countries around the world today, standardized education has become the norm in the pursuit of quality education[59]. According to Rupam Saran, standardization in education "implies centralized control of teaching and learning"[60] so that there will be "a measurable set of uniform criteria by which to compare students and schools, with the ultimate goal of minimizing differences in achievement"[61].

True to its name, standardized education involves putting in place specific standards for everyone within a particular educational system to religiously follow and observe. These standards dictate "what should be taught in schools, how it should be taught, and what the outcome of learning should be"[62]. Standardization, so to say, is the yardstick of quality education; it is what clearly defines "expected learning outcomes"[63]. Hence, a school that has not yet been certified as standardized cannot, in principle, claim to have quality education. But how does an educational institution obtain a certification that it is already standardized?

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[54] Ibid., p. 88.

[55] It should be noted, however, that this "endeavor cannot be advanced unless the individual acquires a comparative cultural consciousness" since cultural literacy must first be had in the long acculturation phase. See ibid.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid., p. 89.

[58] Ibid.

[59] J.L. Kincheloe, *Knowledge and Critical Pedagogy: An Introduction* (Montreal: Springer, 2008), p. 7.

[60] R. Saran, "The Testing Movement and Urban Education," in *The Praeger Handbook of Urban Education,* ed. by J.L. Kincheloe, , K. Hayes, K. Rose, and P.M. Anderson (London: Greenwood Press, 2006), p. 227.

[61] D. Baronov, "Global Capitalism and Urban Education," in ivi*,* p. 345.

[62] R. Saran, Op. Cit., in ivi*,* p. 228.

[63] S. Karychkovska, "Standardization of Education in Higher Education Institutions of Ukraine and Poland," *Debata Edukacyjna* 7 (2015), p. 64.

Obviously, there are standardization organizations or bodies whose main job is to determine and certify whether a particular educational institution has indeed passed the specific criteria that would make it become standardized. The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is one such body, as well the numerous accrediting associations that act as standardization reference points for various educational fields and institutions.

Standardized Education in the Light of Rorty's Concept of Contingency

Rorty was crystal clear that all language is contingent. Due to this, we can never claim to have a final vocabulary. We cannot therefore impose our vocabularies to others. Instead, we must, when necessity so demands, be open to change what we have been so used to including our language-games, their rules, procedures, meanings, and connotations. Vis-à-vis this Rortyan framework, let's now examine standardized education.

Standardized education, as its name signifies, indicates having a rigid system in place. No one is supposed to go against or fail to meet the standards. These are "absolute norms for evaluating the quality" of education and students[64]. It is therefore not surprising that in actual standardized schools, we can almost always find administrators and quality assurance personnel who are bossy, demanding, and autocratic. After all, it is their job to ensure that the standards are followed to the letter. But while standardized education carries several positive elements, the rigidity that always comes with it has been drawing flaks from various sectors, especially because inflexible standards are a perennial "threat to the academic freedom of teachers"[65]. This was why renowned philosophers of education like "Bertrand Russell, as well as Dewey, advocated strongly for education to be democratic and liberal"[66].

I imagine that Rorty, too, would have these liberal thoughts to offer: "To standardized educational institutions: change your language-games. Do not impose. If you should communicate certain standards to be observed, see to it that the preferred language-games of the teachers and students alike are not suppressed, because there are many ways to express a 'truth'. You don't have to bend your standards, but you can rephrase their definitions, reword them and make them relevant and suitable for all".

If standardized educational institutions would take this Rortyan advice into consideration, I think that they would significantly lessen their chances of demoralizing both their teachers and students who have to conform, by hook or by crook, to *all* the implemented standards[67].

Moreover, Rorty makes it clear as well that the world and the self are contingent inasmuch as they all result from language, from how we construe them through our

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[64] R. Saran, Op. Cit.*,* p. 227.
[65] Cf. J.L. Kincheloe, Op. Cit.*,* p. 7.
[66] M.E. Sweet, *Standardized Testing – Unmasking a Threat to Democracy* (Norderstedt: GRIN Verlag, 2006), p. 2.
[67] Cf. R. Saran, Op. Cit.*,* p. 227.

language-games. Hence, we cannot give it a final definition; we can only give it a convenient description.

Apparently, the problem with standardized schools is that for them, standardized education is the only way to have a "quality" self and a "quality" world. They further insist "that standardization is the only means to improve education"[68]. The collective discomfort of their teachers and students is therefore not given any importance and subsequently dismissed. Standardized schools likewise accentuate that if teachers and students do not conform to the set standards, then they will all lag behind in the competitive global market[69]. As it were, standardized education always spells marketability; as such, it is their philosophy to always give the best and be the best by, of course, boasting to the world their standards. And yet, instead of providing real quality education, the fixed definitions of quality enshrined in predetermined standards result instead into a one-sided, limited, and myopic quality of education. Joe L. Kincheloe would even call it "irrational" because in standardized education, "all teachers and students no matter who they are or where they come from teach/learn the same knowledges (*sic*) in the same way"[70]. So how can standardized schools broaden their constricted outlook of educational quality?

Rorty does not run out of good ideas. He will most likely say, "Standardized schools, hear me, rethink and redefine your definitions of quality in education. Remember, many great men in the past have inked their mark in history even if they did not enjoy standardized education. Realize this: a genuine quality self and a genuine quality world are not the result of absolute standards. They are a by-product of incessant learning and relearning from the twists and turns of life, and not from certain stiff standards that are not always applicable in reality. It's not that standards should be entirely done away with; it's rather that by re-shifting the focus from the oftentimes inhumane standards to the human persons, a new vocabulary will be in place – and that is, education is for man and not man for education".

I believe that should standardized schools listen to Rorty, perhaps they would recover the more essential meaning of quality education. They would not appear as a military academy, but as an open-ended laboratory where the greatest dreams are bred and nurtured.

Furthermore, Rorty stresses that an ideal society – which is a liberal community – is one where dialogue is a constant practice. It welcomes pluralism, conscious of the fact that its people do not hold a final vocabulary.

Standardized schools in contrast, despite "the complexity of the profound diversity of school conditions and student backgrounds", are ever conscientious in mandating

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[68] Ibid.

[69] K. Hytten, "Globalization and Education," in *Encyclopedia of the Social and Cultural Foundations of Education,* ed. by E.F. Provenzo, Jr., J.P. Renaud, and A.B. Provenzo (London: SAGE Publications, 2009), 375.

[70] J.L. Kincheloe, Op. Cit.*,* p. 101.

"standardized content and teaching practices for all teachers"[71]. As these schools are more concerned with implementing and following predetermined standards, "there's not that much freedom" and there's not that much room for dialogue either[72]. And as you might expect, this present state of affairs in many standardized schools around the world has yielded a considerably negative outcome: "Educators have been asked to narrowly prepare students to participate in the economic market, [so that] students have developed an even more instrumental rationality in the face of schooling, and corporate influences have permeated every sphere of academic life"[73].

Rorty, fortunately, would never lack substantive and helpful advice that could likely address, if not fully remedy, this situation. We can imagine him saying, "Standardized schools, why can't you endeavor to be agents of dialogue? Keep in mind that in life, the best way forward is not by being closed, but by being open. Therefore, welcome pluralism and do not be afraid of different ideas and opinions. You do not have the monopoly of truth. No one has. Therefore, stretch out your hand and engage in a heart-to-heart dialogue with your teachers and students. If you'll do this, the tense climate in your school environment brought about by the strict imposition of your standards will be replaced by a dialogic climate where everyone can freely communicate his or her thoughts and feelings".

I suppose that should standardized schools have the humility to accept this Rortyan advice, they would probably contribute more and more to forming men and women for others, that is, people who not only think of themselves and the value of their own culture and vocabularies, but also of other people whose culture and vocabularies may be totally different from their own.

Conclusion
Based on the exposition in the last section of this paper, there's no doubt that standardized education is indeed problematic in the light of Richard Rorty's concept of contingency. In fact, due to limitation of space and time, I cannot anymore enumerate all of the problems inherent in standardized education and also elaborate the ones that I have included. All the same, Rorty's postmodern ideas make it clear that certain issues related to the standardization of education are profoundly questionable. Rorty's concept of contingency is a strong reminder that in an educational setup where diversity is a perpetual reality, rigid uniformity is untenable.

No matter how we criticize standardized schools, though, we have to admit that there will always be people who will be looking for them. Standardization has its advantage too: it makes it easy to assess and evaluate desired educational results based on established criteria. But as Rorty would like us to realize, genuine quality in education is not always

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[71] Ibid.
[72] Cf. *The Insiders Guide to the Colleges, 2015: Students on Campus Tell You What You Really Want to Know,* complied and ed. by the staff of the *Yale Daily News* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2014), 103.
[73] K. Hytten, Op. Cit*.,* p. 381.

determined by fixed standards. From a pure Rortyan perspective, quality is just like anything else: it too is contingent.

But although for Rorty everything is contingent, there's this one thing that will always remain constant: the intellectual freedom of the liberal ironists. Since liberal ironists do not stop questioning what is before them, they are never tied to any chain that would curtail their freedom. They are always free, and hence, always open to any possibility. This is the Rortyan utopic vision of those who have truly and thoroughly been given quality education.

Realistically, however, no one may ever become a liberal ironist in the truest sense, as Rorty himself would have wanted. Nevertheless, in this transitory arena called life, Rorty would like to open our eyes to the fact that it pays so much more to have the disposition of a liberal ironist. And it cannot be had if we uncritically allow ourselves to be constrained and bound by certain standards. To have the mentality of a liberal ironist, we need to learn how to be constantly open and never close our doors, especially to those who are different from us.

Whatever the case, Rorty's message of openness and his encouragement of getting into dialogue with everyone more than remind us that in this world, there's no way for us to always escape from other people. We have to face them and, if we can, we have to give them our love. And if we do this, we will soon realize that when applied, Rorty's concept of contingency has actually the potential to bring about "positive social consequences"[74].

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[74] M. Bacon, "Rorty, Irony and the Consequences of Contingency for a Liberal Society," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 43, no. 9 (2017): 954.

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