

CONFLICTING PHILOSOPHIES OF EDUCATION

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It may be interesting to note at the outset that organized education constitutes one of the largest of our so-called "big business" enterprises. Recent statistics show that the aggregate enrollment in schools of various kinds and levels is in excess of thirty million pupils. To teach these thirty million children and youth requires the services of approximately one million teachers. To these must be added a very considerable number of administrative, executive, and supervisory officers, secretaries, janitors, nurses and other persons who are employed in the operation of our schools. It is worthy of note, too, that the annual payroll for operating our schools amounts to about two and one-half billion dollars and that we have a capital investment of more than six billions in plant facilities. Thus it appears that when measured by the criteria usually employed to determine the magnitude of a business concern organized education is in fact a "big business."

It will be very generally admitted, I think, that the success of any enterprise is conditioned very largely by the extent to which it is operated in accordance with a basic underlying philosophy. It must have well-defined aims and objectives. It must know what it is intended to achieve. It must have clear-cut ideas as to the best means and materials to use in attaining its goals. These conditions are just as essential in the operation of a school or school system as they are in the operation of an industrial, commercial, or other type of business concern. Translated into educational parlance this means that an institution of learning, whether it be elementary, secondary, collegiate, or professional, must have a working philosophy which postulates what it conceives to be the aims or outcomes toward which its activities are di-

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rected, the curriculum materials best suited to achieve these outcomes, and the best methods of teaching these materials in the light of the results desired.

Now it is at this point that the theme of this paper arises. If we set out to discover just what is held to be the nature of the educative process, just what takes place in the child or learner when he is being educated, we should find, not a generally accepted formula, but a diversity of opinion. If our inquiry should concern the aims and functions of the school as an agency for educating our children and youth, we would find a similar lack of agreement. Again, if we made an honest inquiry to determine just what we should teach in our schools and by what techniques or methods the teaching can be made most effective, we would probably discover wide differences both in theory and in actual practice.

The present situation may be described then as one in which there are rather wide differences of opinion concerning basic aspects of the school's work. This statement is not intended to imply that a particular school or school system may not have a working theory or philosophy setting forth what it conceives to be the best answers to these fundamental questions. What is implied, however, is that different schools or school systems may hold to different educational philosophies. Furthermore, the members of the teaching staff of a particular school may hold to divergent theories. The faculty of almost any large school or school system could be used, I think, as an illustration of this fact.

It is now my purpose to examine some of these philosophies with a view to indicating as clearly as I can just wherein they differ and what claims or arguments are offered by their proponents in support of each. The examination will be limited to those issues which have grown up around, or are concerned with, the two fundamentally important areas of the school's responsibility. These areas are (1) the school's relation or responsibility to the individual pupils who attend it, and (2) its relation or obligation to the society that supports it. The first of

these may be thought of as the formal instructional function of the school and the second as its social function. These two areas are, of course, not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they are very closely related as will appear as we proceed. Yet they constitute the two focal points around which educational theories have developed. This fact is the basis for arranging the philosophies to be considered into two groups, namely, (1) those which deal with the problem of what the school should do for the individual child or learner, and (2) those that deal with the question of what the school should do for society at large.

Theories concerning the instructional function of the school are variously designated. Current educational literature and discussions make frequent use of such terms as the "old" and the "new" education, the conventional and the progressive school. Such terms are merely different ways of referring to two contrasting philosophies of the educative process. In order to avoid any unfair implications that may inhere in these terms, I shall use the terms the subject-philosophy and the growth or development philosophy of education to designate the theories under consideration.

The subject theory is the one under which we ourselves were nurtured and with which we are therefore fairly well acquainted even though we may not be able to give a systematic statement of its basic principles. Stated in the simplest possible terms, this philosophy holds that formal or school education consists primarily in the learning of certain subjects or portions of subject-matter set out in advance to be learned. The procedure usually followed is familiar to all of us. The teacher of the subject in question selects and assigns certain portions or phases of it which his pupils are expected to learn and in the learning of this material, so it is held, they are being educated.

It is obvious that such a simple statement as this does not do justice to a philosophy that has been and still is so widely held, and that has had, and still has, such

tremendous influence on education. By way of amplification, then, it may be said that this theory is committed to the idea that education consists in transmitting to the young of each generation as much of our racial heritage or culture as is possible in the time available. By racial heritage is meant man's achievements in his progress from primitive conditions to his present state of civilization. In primitive societies, the transmission of this heritage is a very direct process. The young members of the group acquire it through imitation of their elders, through actual participation in the activities and affairs of everyday life, and through the ritualistic ceremonies of being initiated into full membership in the tribe. They learn by actually doing and sharing in the culture in which they live. But among civilized peoples the situation is different. Here racial culture exists, in large measure, in the form of fields of knowledge, such for instance, as science, mathematics, language and literature, music, art, and the like. Furthermore, these large fields of learning have been further logically organized into smaller divisions which we call subjects. For example, mathematics comprises such logical subdivisions as arithmetic, algebra, geometry, and many others. Likewise in the field of science we recognize such subdivisions as biology, chemistry, geology, physics, etc. and even these are split up into still smaller divisions. Now what all of this amounts to is that since education is the transmission of the social heritage to the young the subjects into which this inheritance has been organized should constitute the curriculum of the school. Hence the term "subject theory of education."

If these logically organized subjects are to constitute the school's curriculum, it is pertinent now to ask what does the subject-philosophy hold to be the aims or objectives of the educative process? Toward what ends should the school's instructional program be directed? Just what values or benefits are the pupils expected to derive from their school experience? One answer to these queries is to say that the acquisition of knowledge by the

pupils should be the school's chief end and aim. Formerly this answer was justified on the ground that knowledge is power. Under this conception children's minds were regarded as reservoirs which it was the business of the school to fill as speedily as possible with all sorts and varieties of information. This storehouse of knowledge, it was claimed, constituted a potential intellectual power house. While the doctrine, as here stated, is no longer widely accepted in theory there is ample evidence that it still exercises a dominating influence on school practice. Witness, for example, the extent to which the instruction in many schools of all levels consists mainly in imparting knowledge or requiring the pupils to learn facts in minute detail without reference to any use the learner may make of the knowledge acquired.

Closely related to the knowledge-getting theory but by no means identical with it is the claim that the primary aim of school instruction is the training of the mind of the learner. Probably no educational theory has been as widespread and so influential in determining school practice for so long a time as has the doctrine of formal mental discipline. This doctrine is closely connected with what is called the faculty concept of the mind and rests on three assumptions, namely, (1) that the mind is made up of many separate and unitary faculties or mental powers, such, for instance, as perception, memory, attention, judgment, imagination, reason, concentration, and discrimination; (2) that these faculties, like the muscles of the body, can be strengthened through exercise, and (3) that this power when once acquired can be used in, or transferred to, any situation of life where and when it is needed. Thus it appears that the thing of chief concern in learning is not what the student learns but the mental exercise, the discipline that results from the effort put forth in study. It is not important, so it is held, that the knowledge the pupil gets shall be of practical use to him nor that it shall be long remembered. Pupils may, and in many cases do, forget most of the things they learn in school; but the intellectual power or acumen ac-

quired through study remains as a life asset. In its extreme form, this point of view holds that the more difficult and distasteful the subject may be to the student, the greater is its disciplinary value.

How thoroughly this doctrine permeated the educational thinking of a generation or two ago may be illustrated by a few quotations from the literature of that period:

1. "Since the mind is a unit and the faculties are simply different phases or manifestations of its activity, whatever strengthens one faculty indirectly strengthens all the others." (Roark: *Methods in Education*).

2. "It is as a means of training the faculties of perception and generalization that the study of such a language as Latin, in comparison with English, is so valuable." (C. L. Morgan: *Psychology for Teachers*).

3. "Arithmetic, if judiciously taught, forms in the pupil habits of mental attention, argumentative sequence, absolute accuracy, and satisfaction in truth as a result, that do not seem to spring equally from the study of any other subject suitable to this elementary stage of instruction." (Payne: *Lectures on Education*).

4. "We speak of the disciplinary studies, . . . having in mind the mathematics of arithmetic, elementary algebra and geometry, the Greek-Latin texts and grammars, the elements of English and of French or German. The mind takes fiber, facility, strength, adaptability, certainty of touch from handling them." (Woodrow Wilson).

Under the influence of such writings as these and the multitude of others that could be quoted if time permitted, it is not surprising that the teaching of subjects primarily for their disciplinary values became the dom-

inant practice in our schools of all levels ranging from the elementary grades through the liberal arts college.

The case for the subject-philosophy of Education may now be very briefly summarized as follows:

1. This philosophy holds that education consists primarily of transmitting to the young of each generation portions of our racial culture through the medium of logically organized, segmented, compartmentalized school subjects.

2. The ends to be achieved through the study of these subjects include, among others, (1) a storehouse of knowledge as a means of dispelling ignorance in general and of generating intellectual power; (2) general mental training gained through a vigorous application of the mind in the study of difficult subjects.

The philosophy now to be discussed stands in rather sharp contrast at almost every point with the one just described. I have chosen to call it the growth philosophy for the reason that it regards education as synonymous with the growth or development of the individual. But the term growth is used in a much broader sense than that in which it is usually employed. Ordinarily when we speak of growth or development we mean physical growth, that is, increase in height, weight, etc. This is, of course, an important aspect of growth; the most obvious one; the one which we can measure from time to time with a high degree of accuracy. But at the same time this physical growth is taking place other aspects of the child's personality are developing. Assuming that the growth process is normal, the intellectual, emotional, and social aspects of his nature are expanding. We think of him as growing more and more in knowledge and wisdom. He gradually acquires greater emotional control and stability. Through his social contacts he gains new insights, develops social attitudes and makes new and better adjustments. This gradual expansion of the whole child

constitutes life itself. It also constitutes education. Hence education is not merely a preparation for later life, it is life, living here and now. Consequently, living, growing, learning are all bound up together, are inseparable, are in fact synonymous terms.

The main factors in promoting this growth, according to the proponents of this philosophy, are the child's own activities and experiences. All conscious activities or behavior, they maintain, are purposive in the sense that they are directed toward the attainment of an end or goal. Now if this end or goal is one which the child has set for himself, that is, one which he himself seeks, it has the effect of enlisting and unifying all of the inner resources of his nature. His neuro-muscular system, his glandular system, his intellectual powers, and his emotional desires and impulses—all of these are bound together and act as a unit in the effort to achieve the end in view. Such a state of affairs is called an integrating activity and has the effect of promoting a wholesome development of all aspects of the child's personality. On the other hand, if the end or goal is one which has been imposed on the child from without, that is, if it is in fact some other person's goal, these resources are not unified, may, in fact, work at cross purposes; and the effect may be in the direction of disunity or disintegration of the personality. Now since integrating experiences are those that result from attempts to achieve one's own purposes or goals it follows that the children in the school must formulate, under the guidance of the teacher, the lines of work they will engage in at any given time and, because of this fact, the work to be undertaken can not be planned for long periods in advance.

It must not be assumed that the pupils in a school conducted on the growth philosophy have no need for or do not make use of racial experience in the form of subject matter. Quite the contrary is true. The school must be supplied with an abundance of reference and other instructional materials to which the pupils have access for such information as they may need in carrying on

their activities. The method of using it is to turn to it and select from it such portions as have a functional relation to the problem under investigation. Studying under these conditions becomes a search for information or knowledge that is needed to carry to a successful conclusion the line of activity that has been undertaken.

Briefly summarized, then, the cardinal principles of the growth philosophy are:

1. The major purpose of the school is to promote the wholesome growth or development of the personalities of its pupils. But the term growth is used to mean the gradual unfolding of all aspects of the child's nature—physical, intellectual, emotional, social.

2. Since growth is the continuous process by virtue of which the child of one day becomes what he is the next day and the next and so on, growing is regarded as one with living. It is this on-going process which the growth theorists call education.

3. The means through which this growth is effected are the child's own activities and experiences. Activities are educative, however, in the degree that they represent a unification of all of the child's resources and powers and this condition is best provided when the activities are called forth by some aim or end which the individual feels to be worthwhile.

4. In addition to this internal integration, it is essential that the child shall become increasingly and progressively integrated with or adjusted to his environment. To this end the school should be a replica of life itself, a miniature world in which the child has opportunities to face realities and to make adjustments to them.

5. Since the children's own purposes are the means or instruments through which their integra-

tion is effected, it follows that the lines of work to be taken up in the school should be determined by the pupils under the guidance of the teacher and not solely by the teacher or school authorities.

6. Finally, the instructional material which the pupils require to carry forward their activities or school projects should be selected on the basis of its pertinency to the problem or project in hand, and should be drawn from any field or fields of knowledge regardless of traditional subject-matter boundary lines.

I have purposely stated these opposing philosophies in the form in which they are held by those whose views are most extreme in both cases. The present situation would not be adequately described, however, without calling attention to the fact that there is a large group of thoughtful people, including both educators and well-informed laymen, who find it impossible to accept either of these theories in all of its aspects and implications. These are the open-minded people who are seeking all of the light they can get that will help them to reach sound conclusions concerning the education of our children and young people. They recognize clearly and accept the fact that we are living in a changed and changing world, that scientific research and the applications of its findings have literally transformed for the better practically all of the material aspects of life. They know, for instance, that we can now ride in a stream-lined train, a high-powered motor car, or an airplane instead of in the covered wagon or horse-drawn buggy of pioneer days; that we can send our communications by means of the telephone, telegraph, wireless or radio instead of by the stagecoach or slow-moving sailing vessel of a century or so ago; that the machine has given the common laborer more comforts than Queen Marie and her royal cohorts had at Versailles. Furthermore, they understand that in this age of scientific investigation our psychological laboratories and bureaus of educational research have not

been idle. Just as some groups have been engaged in an attempt to discover "better things for better living through chemistry" or physics or medicine, other groups have striven with equal vigor to discover better ways for better living through psychology, through a better understanding of human personality and the conditions of its wholesome development. Such considerations as these have led this middle group to the conviction that education should not, in fact can not, be expected to remain static in a dynamic civilization.

Out of these relatively recent researches and investigations have come disclosures that have tended to disturb their complacency and cause them to question very seriously the soundness of traditional educational practices. Psychologists, for instance, have contributed to a better understanding of the human mind, the nature of the learning process, and the conditions necessary to promote personality development and mental health.

Still other research findings have been no less disquieting. If the learning of logically organized subjects is the chief purpose of the school, then the extent to which these subjects are mastered and retained must be the measure of the school's efficiency. No revelation in recent times has so startled and disturbed educational circles, I think, as have the facts that have been brought to light on this particular point. Perhaps some concrete illustrations will be enlightening. In the examinations held by the College Entrance Examination Board some twenty years ago, it was found that 76.6% of the candidates failed to make even a mark of 60% in Cicero; that 75% failed to make a mark of 60% in Virgil; that 69.7% failed to make as much as 60% in Algebra from quadratics on; and that 42.4% fell below 60% in Plane Geometry. These candidates were undoubtedly a somewhat select group of students and in some instances had been coached for the examinations. Some more recent illustrations are even more disconcerting. In one investigation, it was found that 10% of a group of college students were unable, in a 20 problem test in long division,

to get a single problem right; that 18% failed to solve a simple problem correctly in multiplication of fractions; that 20% were unable to do a single one of 20 problems in the division of decimals.

In so far as these revelations have broken them loose from their earlier educational moorings, this middle group, of whom I am speaking, have been forced to cast about for new hypotheses, new theories on which to base our educational practice. Because of the wide range of opinion held, no one, I think, can lay claim to being the spokesman for the entire group. As I sense the situation, however, there are certain basic concepts or generalizations on which there seems to be a fair measure of agreement. If one were to try to write the educational creed to which they subscribe, it would probably read about as follows:

1. They believe that the ultimate purpose of education, either in the school or outside of it, is so to develop the individual that he will have the knowledge, the skills, the habits, the powers, ideals and attitudes that will enable him to find his place in the world and use that place to improve both himself and his fellow-beings.

2. They believe that the instructional program of the school should be directed toward the fullest possible attainment of the specific objectives involved in such concepts as self-realization, better human relations, civic responsibility, and economic efficiency.

3. They believe that in the attainment of these objectives certain areas of human experience must be drawn upon for instructional materials; consequently, they hold that the curriculum of the school should consist of certain broad fields of learning, such, for instance, as the language arts, the social studies, science and mathematics, and the creative and the recreative arts.

4. They believe that in selecting material from these fields for instructional purposes first consideration should be given to its functional relation to the needs of the child in terms of the school's objectives.

5. Finally, they believe that in teaching these materials the learning will be effective in the degree that it takes place under the impetus of a strong interest on the part of the learner, and that the best guarantee of his interest is a feeling of need for, of the worthwhileness of, the material being learned. The motive of the learner determines the effectiveness of the learning.

So much for our consideration of those philosophies which seek to explain the nature of the school's instructional program. There remains to be considered, very briefly, those philosophies which deal with the role of education in society in general; its relation to the social order. In separating educational philosophies into these two categories, there has been no intention of implying that education consists of two distinct parts and that there is a philosophy of each part independent of the other. The distinction is merely one of point of emphasis. In the one case what happens to the learner in school has been singled out for examination. In the other case, what happens, or ought to happen, to the social order in which we live is the matter of chief concern. In both cases, however, the school's instructional and activities program is the means for attaining whatever goals may be sought, whether they are individual or social in character.

With reference to the school's social responsibilities, there are two theories which seem to stand in rather sharp contrast with each other. For the purposes of this discussion, these will be called the philosophies of social traditionalism and social reconstructionism. The social traditionalists are those who hold that the major function of education is to safeguard and perpetuate the existing

social order. This theory is well stated in a recent educational publication* in the language of its proponents:

“Educational systems have been created by society for the purpose of passing on the social inheritance. Educators should be well-informed as to the history of the race and should teach their pupils respect and reverence for racial achievements. Teachers should learn the dangers of tinkering with social processes which have evolved through centuries of racial experience. The teacher’s place is in the classroom and not in the political arena. When a teacher enters actively into the determination of social change, he is forced to take sides; and he is no longer suited to educate the young.”

This, it appears is the philosophy of complacency. It believes in maintaining the status quo and holds that this can best be done by indoctrinating the pupils in our schools in the social and economic doctrines that are at present very generally accepted. In its most extreme form, it objects to any reference being made in our schools to any type of social order other than that under which we now live.

Contrasted with this philosophy, social reconstructionism maintains that the tremendous changes in science, industry, and business that have taken place in recent years have rendered obsolete a social philosophy that was adequate for pioneer conditions. Consequently, it advocates a thorough-going revision or abandonment of our present economic and social system, and the setting up of an order better adapted to meet the needs of contemporary collective life. To quote again from the publication just referred to:

“Educational systems exist primarily as agencies for the improvement of society. Educators should be social philosophers who are seeking better

* Thirteenth Yearbook, Department of Superintendents of the National Education Association.

civilizations. They should view all present practices critically and should not hesitate to indoctrinate their pupils with their own social theories. Teachers should participate, individually, and through their own pressure groups, in social and economic activities. Only through such active effort can they test our social theories.

According to this philosophy, our teachers would become propagandists and our schools agencies for indoctrinating their pupils in whatever social theory the teacher might espouse.

It is within the truth, I think, to say that neither of these philosophies represents the majority views of leading educators. Here again we find a middle ground between the two extremes. Those who take this position recognize and accept the fact of social change in the past and the inevitableness of future change, probably at an accelerated rate. They believe that, as a result of these changes, society has been improved and is capable of still further improvement. But improvement can best be achieved, they maintain, through the basic framework of our present social policy which we call democracy. The social responsibility of the school therefore is to develop in its pupils an understanding of, and a sympathetic attitude toward, the democratic way of life. The concept of democracy, as its proponents interpret it, includes, among other things, the promotion of the general welfare, the exercise of individual rights together with a wholesome respect for the rights of others, the pursuit of human happiness, the consent of the governed, and the settlement of controversial issues through an appeal to reason rather than through the use of force or resort to violence. In so far, then, as the school can bring to fruition in the lives of its pupils such ideals and attitudes as these it will be an instrument for the improvement of the social order and yield to society an adequate return on its investment in education.