

John Dewey's participatory philosophy of education. Education, experience and curriculum.

A Summary

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Below you will find an informative English summary of my Dutch study of Dewey's participatory philosophy of education. My Ph.D. thesis for the *Vrije Universiteit* in Amsterdam was published (in Dutch) as:

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De participatiepedagogiek van John Dewey. Opvoeding, ervaring en curriculum.

Leiden: DSWO Press, 1999.

ISBN 9066951516

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SUMMARY

The purpose of this study is threefold. In the first place it aims to contribute to the contemporary debate on schooling and education. It does so by reconstructing the genealogy of John Dewey's educational philosophy. Lastly, its aim is to present arguments for steps towards a participatory outlook on education and schooling as an alternative to a dominant transmission view.

Chapter 1

In chapter 1 arguments are presented for the study of Dewey's work today. It appears to be necessary to reread Dewey, and to do away with certain misconceptions. In the Netherlands the reception of Dewey's work has been hampered by certain dominant religious conceptions of philosophy, ethics and education. Although in recent years there has been a renewed interest in Dewey, he still remains a marginal figure in educational thought in the Netherlands. It is argued, however, that his outlook on education might be of importance for the topical debate on the relation between schooling and education. It is suggested that Dewey offers a way out of the unfruitful dualism between child-centered and subject-centered education that dominates the debate. It is contended that Dewey's curriculum theory is of special relevance here, since this theory differs substantially from the allegedly 'paradigmatic' Tyler Rationale. Dewey's curriculum theory is occupied with three broader, crucial aspects of educational theory, namely: the anthropological, psychological and societal aspects of education. In this study the genealogy of this theory is described by means of a reconstruction of three major educational debates that took place in the USA in the period 1894 to 1916. The participants in these debates were all heavily influenced by European philosophical and educational thought. This study presents the arguments with which Dewey confronted his fellow-debaters.

Chapter 2

The first debate about anthropology with the Froebelians and the adherents of the Child Study Movement is reconstructed in *chapter 2*. This chapter begins with a short introduction to Dewey's motivation to move into the field of education and child life. Four major factors are discerned that constitute both Dewey's interest in educational content and his orientation toward societal problems, both in a practical and more theoretical/ philosophical sense. Next,

the study focuses on two major movements in the education of the young child in the second half of the nineteenth century. First, it is shown how the American followers of Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) deal with his educational and philosophical legacy. Within a few years, hundreds of kindergartens are set up across the country. There are a number of competing 'schools', both conservative and progressive that battle over the right interpretation of Froebel. The second movement is the Child Study Movement, that grows out of a psychological survey conducted by G. Stanley Hall in Boston. This movement exercises massive influence on early childhood education, having the questionnaire as its primary methodological instrument and a form of recapitulation theory as its theoretical core. Dewey's critique of both Froebelianism and Child Study is presented. Although Dewey praises Froebel for his positive outlook on the activity of the child, and the many suggestions he gave for child's play and work, he nevertheless rejects wholeheartedly his idealistic and romantic view on development and symbolism.

The logic behind these criticisms is traced back to Dewey's naturalistic and interactional theory of culturally mediated human experience, in which symbols play a major role. It is argued that the only way in which children can acquire the meaning of symbols is through participation in joint activities with adults. For Dewey symbolic meaning is social meaning. Dewey's criticism of Child Study focuses on its one-sided conception of mind as a natural 'gift'. In Dewey's view mind is achieved by participation in social situations. According to Dewey the continuation and renewal of culture depend on participation. Participation constitutes the difference between natural or individual experience and cultural or social-symbolic experience. In the debate with the Froebelians and the adherents of Child Study, Dewey develops a positive educational anthropology, in which growth and habit are core concepts. Growth is Dewey's general concept for continuity of experience. Dewey uses growth instead of the more usual concept of 'development'. Dewey rejects any idea of passivity or receptivity on the part of the child: the child is a participant, not a spectator. The child is already active and need not be made so by the educator. In a general sense, education has only one goal: to make more education possible. In Dewey's view goals (or aims) are fully part of human experience. Aims are cultural instruments or means that can support humans to put other means more effectively to their ends. In Dewey's view ends and means are inseparable. All this puts Dewey apart from major developments in curriculum theory during this century, not only in a broad educational-philosophical sense, but also in a more practical sense. The thesis by Tanner and Tanner (1980) that the 'standard conception' of curriculum (the Tyler Rationale in which educational goals are primary and all other parameters are derived from them) was 'founded' by Dewey, is refuted. Then Dewey's theory of habit is described. Habits, predispositions to act, can be distinguished in individual and social habits. The latter are acquired in transaction and coordination with other human organisms. Thus a social environment 'emerges from' human activity. Finally, Dewey's view on child growth and education is illustrated by a description of his thoughts on children's play, and by an excursion to the kindergarten or 'sub-primary' department of his laboratory school. It is concluded that Dewey emerges from this debate with a 'precurricular' view of the education of the young child and with powerful arguments for continuity between informal and formal education. In this precurricular view, the educational starting point is formed by the everyday concrete life experiences, as the 'crude beginnings' that will gradually grow into 'accomplished results': the more formal subjects and disciplines or studies.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 makes the move toward Dewey's debate with the Herbartians about the two-sided issue of the contents of the curriculum and the most suitable methods of learning and instruction. This debate is a crucial one, for at stake is the relation between psychological and

social factors in education. After a short description of the reception in the USA of the legacy of Georg Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841), an outline is given of the educational program practised by his American followers. This program is founded on the culture epoch theory, which says that education has to connect to the child's 'recapitulation' of the evolution of the human species. On the Herbartian view history and literature are the core of the curriculum. These subjects are 'correlated' or coordinated with other branches and studies to provide a form of unity. The pupil masters the subjects by means of the five formal steps. Finally, Herbartians are adherents of the so-called theory of apperception which says that learning occurs because in the pupil's head new experiences 'carve' impressions that are linked to older ones. Dewey rejects the unnecessary intellectualistic and teacher-centered educational psychology of the Herbartians. He contends that human experience comprises more than just the intellect. Knowing is a very important mode of experience. In a certain sense it is the ultimate mode, in which that which defines the human is revealed: the ability to deal with symbols. But Dewey arrives at this point only after taking a road via natural instincts and impulses (human's natural 'bagage'). Humans are in the first instance 'natural' beings, not beings that act symbolically. Only through participation in social activities in which these symbols play an important role, does the natural become human. Dewey criticises the culture epoch theory for taking parallelism much too literally and rigidly. The texts -- the 'cultural products' -- have to be hammered into the pupils, because pupils are occupied with completely different things. Dewey acknowledges a certain kind of parallelism, but only at the level of the type of social processes that led to the cultural products. At this point Dewey introduces the so-called 'occupations' or 'centres of active interest' as a means by which the (false) dualism between interest and effort can be overcome. Children are motivated from within to do things; the art of education is to have them not unlearn this, but to direct and to canalize these acts in the direction of socially desirable ends. With regard to method, Dewey presents a cyclical model of learning by problem solving as an alternative to the Herbartian formal steps. The symbolic operation of thinking occupies a specific place in this cycle. Dewey localizes the motivation to thinking in a 'felt' problem, which implies a world of difference from the Herbartians. Dewey draws from the debate with the Herbartians the conclusion that education should guide the pupils in tracking and tackling real-life problems. Dewey leaves the ideal of the curriculum of 'great texts' of (western) cultural history behind. Curriculum stands primarily for the living, actual experience of the child (in its interactional sense) and only in the second place as the study of the experiences of others. It is concluded that although Dewey cannot be called a Herbartian, Herbartian educational psychology, its practical application in the curriculum field and in the formal steps of instruction, did contribute in a significant way to the further development of his own theories.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 is devoted to the societal aspects of education and schooling, and reconstructs Dewey's complicated relation to progressive education by presenting his participatory outlook on child, school and society. It is shown how his fellow countryman Francis W. Parker (1837-1902) paved the way for Dewey by putting the theme of democratic education on the agenda. Parker can be regarded as the exponent par exemple of 'early' progressivism, a 'movement' that arose as a reaction to the rapid social and economic developments in the second half of the nineteenth century (industrialisation, immigration, urbanization) and that strove to do away with 'old' education. In the 'new' education stress had to be on 'learning by doing'. Progressives created coalitions between schools and social settlements. Generally speaking they backed laissez-faire capitalism. It is shown that Dewey differs in crucial ways from the progressives on all these points. The equation 'Dewey = progressive education' is, therefore, untenable. After a short sketch of Parker's life, his work as a Froebelian and Herbartian is

presented. Parker combines a child-centered view of education with a religiously inspired view of democracy. He exercised a lot of influence on practitioners; his contribution to educational philosophy is, however, small. In the remainder of the chapter, it is shown how Dewey picks up the theme of democratic education and, unlike Parker, locates it in a naturalistic theory of human experience, in which the wholeness of the 'organism' society is a central issue. In Dewey's view democracy is more than a form of government; it is in the first place a way in which people live together and exchange experiences. The democratic level of a given society can be measured by two criteria; firstly the amount of shared interests and secondly the amount and intensity of discussion about them. Dewey's conception of participatory democracy differs from more common views that stress formal political representation. In relation to his conception of democracy the school has specific functions: it is a motor of society's progress, and must present to children the best that is available. For Dewey, the scientific 'community of inquirers' provides the ideal model of the school as an embryonic democratic society. Here also the stress is on the search for shared interests and goals, communal activities and communication. Participation and inquiry are the traits most representative of Dewey's ideal school. Dewey presents this ideal as an alternative for the 'old school' in which transmission and passivity are central traits. Dewey arrives at a concept of curriculum that has more to do with the educational process in its entirety and comprehensiveness than with curriculum as an isolated factor in that process. That process should be conceived of as a commonly undertaken research project. This characterizes the democratic school and schooling in a democratic society more than the taking in and reproducing of ready-made knowledge. The concept of the democratic school relates to all who participate in that school: pupils, parents, teachers and, perhaps in the background, supervisors and board.

Chapter 5

In chapter 5 findings are summarized and a concise picture is presented of Dewey's views on experience, participation and curriculum. The main entrance to this view is Dewey's concept of 'the ultimate problem of education', i.e. to coordinate the psychological and the social factors. In this view education is not concerned exclusively with the child: to educate is to create the cultural environment in such a way that the child may grow. In order to perform this task educators must observe the growth of children very carefully, and estimate what 'nutriment' is needed. According to Dewey there is a broad philosophical and societal project at hand here. Participation is the concept by which Dewey clarifies how humans proceed from individual to social meanings. Participation is the connecting element between the psychological and the social factors in education. An important conclusion is that Dewey's view is against both objectivist approaches of knowledge and meaning and child-centered approaches to education. Against both approaches Dewey presents the concept of participation. With regard to curriculum it is concluded that for Dewey, curriculum is in the first place a social process in which child and potentially meaningful content are coordinated and are reconstructed continuously in relation to each other.

This study is concluded by describing some implications of Dewey's views for the topical debate on the so-called educational assignment of schools. Finally, it is concluded that Dewey provides powerful arguments for taking a step from a transmission view of education towards a participatory view.