

# Natural Development and Social Efficiency as Aims

## 1. Nature as Supplying the Aim

We have just pointed out the futility of trying to establish the aim of education - some one final aim which subordinates all others to itself. We have indicated that since general aims are but prospective points of view from which to survey the existing conditions and estimate their possibilities, we might have any number of them, all consistent with one another. As matter of fact, a large number have been stated at different times, all having great local value. For the statement of aim is a matter of emphasis at a given time. And we do not emphasize things which do not require emphasis - that is, such things as are taking care of themselves fairly well. We tend rather to frame our statement on the basis of the defects and needs of the contemporary situation; we take for granted, without explicit statement which would be of no use, whatever is right or approximately so. We frame our explicit aims in terms of some alteration to be brought about. It is, then, DO paradox requiring explanation that a given epoch or generation tends to emphasize in its conscious projections just the things which it has least of in actual fact. A time of domination by authority will call out as response the desirability of great individual freedom;

## Democracy and Education

one of disorganized individual activities the need of social control as an educational aim.

The actual and implicit practice and the conscious or stated aim thus balance each other. At different times such aims as complete living, better methods of language study, substitution of things for words, social efficiency, personal culture, social service, complete development of personality, encyclopedic knowledge, discipline, an esthetic contemplation, utility, etc., have served. The following discussion takes up three statements of recent influence; certain others have been incidentally discussed in the previous chapters, and others will be considered later in a discussion of knowledge and of the values of studies. We begin with a consideration that education is a process of development in accordance with nature, taking Rousseau's statement, which opposed natural to social (See ante, p. 91); and then pass over to the antithetical conception of social efficiency, which often opposes social to natural.

(1) Educational reformers disgusted with the conventionality and artificiality of the scholastic methods they find about them are prone to resort to nature as a standard. Nature is supposed to furnish the law and the end of development; ours it is to follow and conform to her ways. The positive value of this conception lies in the forcible way in which it calls attention to the wrongness of aims which do not have regard to the natural endowment of those educated. Its weakness is the ease with which natural in the sense of normal is confused with the physical. The constructive use of intelligence in foresight, and contriving, is then discounted; we are just to get out of the way and allow nature to do the work. Since no one has stated in the doctrine both its truth and falsity better than Rousseau, we

## Democracy and Education

shall turn to him.

"Education," he says, "we receive from three sources - Nature, men, and things. The spontaneous development of our organs and capacities constitutes the education of Nature. The use to which we are taught to put this development constitutes that education given us by Men. The acquirement of personal experience from surrounding objects constitutes that of things. Only when these three kinds of education are consonant and make for the same end, does a man tend towards his true goal. If we are asked what is this end, the answer is that of Nature. For since the concurrence of the three kinds of education is necessary to their completeness, the kind which is entirely independent of our control must necessarily regulate us in determining the other two." Then he defines Nature to mean the capacities and dispositions which are inborn, "as they exist prior to the modification due to constraining habits and the influence of the opinion of others."

The wording of Rousseau will repay careful study. It contains as fundamental truths as have been uttered about education in conjunction with a curious twist. It would be impossible to say better what is said in the first sentences. The three factors of educative development are (a) the native structure of our bodily organs and their functional activities; (b) the uses to which the activities of these organs are put under the influence of other persons; (c) their direct interaction with the environment. This statement certainly covers the ground. His other two propositions are equally sound; namely, (a) that only when the three factors of education are consonant and cooperative does adequate development of the individual occur, and (b) that the native activities of the organs, being original, are basic in

## Democracy and Education

conceiving consonance. But it requires but little reading between the lines, supplemented by other statements of Rousseau, to perceive that instead of regarding these three things as factors which must work together to some extent in order that any one of them may proceed educatively, he regards them as separate and independent operations. Especially does he believe that there is an independent and, as he says, "spontaneous" development of the native organs and faculties. He thinks that this development can go on irrespective of the use to which they are put. And it is to this separate development that education coming from social contact is to be subordinated. Now there is an immense difference between a use of native activities in accord with those activities themselves - as distinct from forcing them and perverting them - and supposing that they have a normal development apart from any use, which development furnishes the standard and norm of all learning by use. To recur to our previous illustration, the process of acquiring language is a practically perfect model of proper educative growth. The start is from native activities of the vocal apparatus, organs of hearing, etc. But it is absurd to suppose that these have an independent growth of their own, which left to itself would evolve a perfect speech. Taken literally, Rousseau's principle would mean that adults should accept and repeat the babblings and noises of children not merely as the beginnings of the development of articulate speech - which they are - but as furnishing language itself - the standard for all teaching of language.

The point may be summarized by saying that Rousseau was right, introducing a much-needed reform into education, in holding that the structure and activities of the organs furnish the conditions of all teaching of the use of the organs; but

## Democracy and Education

profoundly wrong in intimating that they supply not only the conditions but also the ends of their development. As matter of fact, the native activities develop, in contrast with random and capricious exercise, through the uses to which they are put. And the office of the social medium is, as we have seen, to direct growth through putting powers to the best possible use. The instinctive activities may be called, metaphorically, spontaneous, in the sense that the organs give a strong bias for a certain sort of operation, - a bias so strong that we cannot go contrary to it, though by trying to go contrary we may pervert, stunt, and corrupt them. But the notion of a spontaneous normal development of these activities is pure mythology. The natural, or native, powers furnish the initiating and limiting forces in all education; they do not furnish its ends or aims. There is no learning except from a beginning in unlearned powers, but learning is not a matter of the spontaneous overflow of the unlearned powers. Rousseau's contrary opinion is doubtless due to the fact that he identified God with Nature; to him the original powers are wholly good, coming directly from a wise and good creator. To paraphrase the old saying about the country and the town, God made the original human organs and faculties, man makes the uses to which they are put. Consequently the development of the former furnishes the standard to which the latter must be subordinated. When men attempt to determine the uses to which the original activities shall be put, they interfere with a divine plan. The interference by social arrangements with Nature, God's work, is the primary source of corruption in individuals.

Rousseau's passionate assertion of the intrinsic goodness of all natural tendencies was a reaction against the prevalent notion of the total depravity of innate human nature, and has had a

## Democracy and Education

powerful influence in modifying the attitude towards children's interests. But it is hardly necessary to say that primitive impulses are of themselves neither good nor evil, but become one or the other according to the objects for which they are employed. That neglect, suppression, and premature forcing of some instincts at the expense of others, are responsible for many avoidable ills, there can be no doubt. But the moral is not to leave them alone to follow their own "spontaneous development," but to provide an environment which shall organize them.

Returning to the elements of truth contained in Rousseau's statements, we find that natural development, as an aim, enables him to point the means of correcting many evils in current practices, and to indicate a number of desirable specific aims. (1) Natural development as an aim fixes attention upon the bodily organs and the need of health and vigor. The aim of natural development says to parents and teachers: Make health an aim; normal development cannot be had without regard to the vigor of the body - an obvious enough fact and yet one whose due recognition in practice would almost automatically revolutionize many of our educational practices. "Nature" is indeed a vague and metaphorical term, but one thing that "Nature" may be said to utter is that there are conditions of educational efficiency, and that till we have learned what these conditions are and have learned to make our practices accord with them, the noblest and most ideal of our aims are doomed to suffer - are verbal and sentimental rather than efficacious.

(2) The aim of natural development translates into the aim of respect for physical mobility. In Rousseau's words: "Children are always in motion; a sedentary life is injurious." When he

## Democracy and Education

says that "Nature's intention is to strengthen the body before exercising the mind" he hardly states the fact fairly. But if he had said that nature's "intention" (to adopt his poetical form of speech) is to develop the mind especially by exercise of the muscles of the body he would have stated a positive fact. In other words, the aim of following nature means, in the concrete, regard for the actual part played by use of the bodily organs in explorations, in handling of materials, in plays and games. (3) The general aim translates into the aim of regard for individual differences among children. Nobody can take the principle of consideration of native powers into account without being struck by the fact that these powers differ in different individuals. The difference applies not merely to their intensity, but even more to their quality and arrangement. As Rousseau said: "Each individual is born with a distinctive temperament. We indiscriminately employ children of different bents on the same exercises; their education destroys the special bent and leaves a dull uniformity. Therefore after we have wasted our efforts in stunting the true gifts of nature we see the short-lived and illusory brilliance we have substituted die away, while the natural abilities we have crushed do not revive."

Lastly, the aim of following nature means to note the origin, the waxing, and waning, of preferences and interests. Capacities bud and bloom irregularly; there is no even four-abreast development. We must strike while the iron is hot. Especially precious are the first dawns of power. More than we imagine, the ways in which the tendencies of early childhood are treated fix fundamental dispositions and condition the turn taken by powers that show themselves later. Educational concern with the early years of life - as distinct from inculcation of useful arts - dates almost entirely from the time of the

## Democracy and Education

emphasis by Pestalozzi and Froebel, following Rousseau, of natural principles of growth. The irregularity of growth and its significance is indicated in the following passage of a student of the growth of the nervous system. "While growth continues, things bodily and mental are lopsided, for growth is never general, but is accentuated now at one spot, now at another. The methods which shall recognize in the presence of these enormous differences of endowment the dynamic values of natural inequalities of growth, and utilize them, preferring irregularity to the rounding out gained by pruning will most closely follow that which takes place in the body and thus prove most effective." 1 Observation of natural tendencies is difficult under conditions of restraint. They show themselves most readily in a child's spontaneous sayings and doings, - that is, in those he engages in when not put at set tasks and when not aware of being under observation. It does not follow that these tendencies are all desirable because they are natural; but it does follow that since they are there, they are operative and must be taken account of. We must see to it that the desirable ones have an environment which keeps them active, and that their activity shall control the direction the others take and thereby induce the disuse of the latter because they lead to nothing. Many tendencies that trouble parents when they appear are likely to be transitory, and sometimes too much direct attention to them only fixes a child's attention upon them. At all events, adults too easily assume their own habits and wishes as standards, and regard all deviations of children's impulses as evils to be eliminated. That artificiality against which the conception of following nature is so largely a protest, is the outcome of attempts to force children directly into the mold of grown-up standards.



## Democracy and Education

In conclusion, we note that the early history of the idea of following nature combined two factors which had no inherent connection with one another. Before the time of Rousseau educational reformers had been inclined to urge the importance of education by ascribing practically unlimited power to it. All the differences between peoples and between classes and persons among the same people were said to be due to differences of training, of exercise, and practice. Originally, mind, reason, understanding is, for all practical purposes, the same in all. This essential identity of mind means the essential equality of all and the possibility of bringing them all to the same level. As a protest against this view, the doctrine of accord with nature meant a much less formal and abstract view of mind and its powers. It substituted specific instincts and impulses and physiological capacities, differing from individual to individual (just as they differ, as Rousseau pointed out, even in dogs of the same litter), for abstract faculties of discernment, memory, and generalization. Upon this side, the doctrine of educative accord with nature has been reinforced by the development of modern biology, physiology, and psychology. It means, in effect, that great as is the significance of nurture, of modification, and transformation through direct educational effort, nature, or unlearned capacities, affords the foundation and ultimate resources for such nurture. On the other hand, the doctrine of following nature was a political dogma. It meant a rebellion against existing social institutions, customs, and ideals (See ante, p. 91). Rousseau's statement that everything is good as it comes from the hands of the Creator has its signification only in its contrast with the concluding part of the same sentence: "Everything degenerates in the hands of man." And again he says: "Natural man has an absolute value; he is a numerical unit, a complete integer and has no relation save to

## **Democracy and Education**

himself and to his fellow man. Civilized man is only a relative unit, the numerator of a fraction whose value depends upon its dominator, its relation to the integral body of society. Good political institutions are those which make a man unnatural." It is upon this conception of the artificial and harmful character of organized social life as it now exists that he rested the notion that nature not merely furnishes prime forces which initiate growth but also its plan and goal. That evil institutions and customs work almost automatically to give a wrong education which the most careful schooling cannot offset is true enough; but the conclusion is not to education apart from the environment, but to provide an environment in which native powers will be put to better uses.

## **2. Social Efficiency as Aim**

A conception which made nature supply the end of a true education and society the end of an evil one, could hardly fail to call out a protest. The opposing emphasis took the form of a doctrine that the business of education is to supply precisely what nature fails to secure; namely, habituation of an individual to social control; subordination of natural powers to social rules. It is not surprising to find that the value in the idea of social efficiency resides largely in its protest against the points at which the doctrine of natural development went astray; while its misuse comes when it is employed to slur over the truth in that conception. It is a fact that we must look to the activities and achievements of associated life to find what the development of power - that is to say, efficiency - means. The error is in implying that we must adopt measures of subordination rather than of utilization to secure efficiency. The

## Democracy and Education

doctrine is rendered adequate when we recognize that social efficiency is attained not by negative constraint but by positive use of native individual capacities in occupations having a social meaning. (1) Translated into specific aims, social efficiency indicates the importance of industrial competency. Persons cannot live without means of subsistence; the ways in which these means are employed and consumed have a profound influence upon all the relationships of persons to one another. If an individual is not able to earn his own living and that of the children dependent upon him, he is a drag or parasite upon the activities of others. He misses for himself one of the most educative experiences of life. If he is not trained in the right use of the products of industry, there is grave danger that he may deprave himself and injure others in his possession of wealth. No scheme of education can afford to neglect such basic considerations. Yet in the name of higher and more spiritual ideals, the arrangements for higher education have often not only neglected them, but looked at them with scorn as beneath the level of educative concern. With the change from an oligarchical to a democratic society, it is natural that the significance of an education which should have as a result ability to make one's way economically in the world, and to manage economic resources usefully instead of for mere display and luxury, should receive emphasis.

There is, however, grave danger that in insisting upon this end, existing economic conditions and standards will be accepted as final. A democratic criterion requires us to develop capacity to the point of competency to choose and make its own career. This principle is violated when the attempt is made to fit individuals in advance for definite industrial callings, selected not on the basis of trained original capacities, but on that of the

## Democracy and Education

wealth or social status of parents. As a matter of fact, industry at the present time undergoes rapid and abrupt changes through the evolution of new inventions. New industries spring up, and old ones are revolutionized. Consequently an attempt to train for too specific a mode of efficiency defeats its own purpose. When the occupation changes its methods, such individuals are left behind with even less ability to readjust themselves than if they had a less definite training. But, most of all, the present industrial constitution of society is, like every society which has ever existed, full of inequities. It is the aim of progressive education to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them. Wherever social control means subordination of individual activities to class authority, there is danger that industrial education will be dominated by acceptance of the status quo. Differences of economic opportunity then dictate what the future callings of individuals are to be. We have an unconscious revival of the defects of the Platonic scheme (ante, p. 89) without its enlightened method of selection.

(2) Civic efficiency, or good citizenship. It is, of course, arbitrary to separate industrial competency from capacity in good citizenship. But the latter term may be used to indicate a number of qualifications which are vaguer than vocational ability. These traits run from whatever make an individual a more agreeable companion to citizenship in the political sense: it denotes ability to judge men and measures wisely and to take a determining part in making as well as obeying laws. The aim of civic efficiency has at least the merit of protecting us from the notion of a training of mental power at large. It calls attention to the fact that power must be relative to doing something, and to the fact that the things which most need to

## Democracy and Education

be done are things which involve one's relationships with others.

Here again we have to be on guard against understanding the aim too narrowly. An over-definite interpretation would at certain periods have excluded scientific discoveries, in spite of the fact that in the last analysis security of social progress depends upon them. For scientific men would have been thought to be mere theoretical dreamers, totally lacking in social efficiency. It must be borne in mind that ultimately social efficiency means neither more nor less than capacity to share in a give and take of experience. It covers all that makes one's own experience more worth while to others, and all that enables one to participate more richly in the worthwhile experiences of others. Ability to produce and to enjoy art, capacity for recreation, the significant utilization of leisure, are more important elements in it than elements conventionally associated oftentimes with citizenship. In the broadest sense, social efficiency is nothing less than that socialization of mind which is actively concerned in making experiences more communicable; in breaking down the barriers of social stratification which make individuals impervious to the interests of others. When social efficiency is confined to the service rendered by overt acts, its chief constituent (because its only guarantee) is omitted, - intelligent sympathy or good will. For sympathy as a desirable quality is something more than mere feeling; it is a cultivated imagination for what men have in common and a rebellion at whatever unnecessarily divides them. What is sometimes called a benevolent interest in others may be but an unwitting mask for an attempt to dictate to them what their good shall be, instead of an endeavor to free them so that they may seek and find the good of their own choice. Social

## **Democracy and Education**

efficiency, even social service, are hard and metallic things when severed from an active acknowledgment of the diversity of goods which life may afford to different persons, and from faith in the social utility of encouraging every individual to make his own choice intelligent.

### **3. Culture as Aim**

Whether or not social efficiency is an aim which is consistent with culture turns upon these considerations. Culture means at least something cultivated, something ripened; it is opposed to the raw and crude. When the "natural" is identified with this rawness, culture is opposed to what is called natural development. Culture is also something personal; it is cultivation with respect to appreciation of ideas and art and broad human interests. When efficiency is identified with a narrow range of acts, instead of with the spirit and meaning of activity, culture is opposed to efficiency. Whether called culture or complete development of personality, the outcome is identical with the true meaning of social efficiency whenever attention is given to what is unique in an individual - and he would not be an individual if there were not something incommensurable about him. Its opposite is the mediocre, the average. Whenever distinctive quality is developed, distinction of personality results, and with it greater promise for a social service which goes beyond the supply in quantity of material commodities. For how can there be a society really worth serving unless it is constituted of individuals of significant personal qualities?

The fact is that the opposition of high worth of personality to social efficiency is a product of a feudally organized society

## Democracy and Education

with its rigid division of inferior and superior. The latter are supposed to have time and opportunity to develop themselves as human beings; the former are confined to providing external products. When social efficiency as measured by product or output is urged as an ideal in a would-be democratic society, it means that the depreciatory estimate of the masses characteristic of an aristocratic community is accepted and carried over. But if democracy has a moral and ideal meaning, it is that a social return be demanded from all and that opportunity for development of distinctive capacities be afforded all. The separation of the two aims in education is fatal to democracy; the adoption of the narrower meaning of efficiency deprives it of its essential justification.

The aim of efficiency (like any educational aim) must be included within the process of experience. When it is measured by tangible external products, and not by the achieving of a distinctively valuable experience, it becomes materialistic. Results in the way of commodities which may be the outgrowth of an efficient personality are, in the strictest sense, by-products of education: by-products which are inevitable and important, but nevertheless by-products. To set up an external aim strengthens by reaction the false conception of culture which identifies it with something purely "inner." And the idea of perfecting an "inner" personality is a sure sign of social divisions. What is called inner is simply that which does not connect with others - which is not capable of free and full communication. What is termed spiritual culture has usually been futile, with something rotten about it, just because it has been conceived as a thing which a man might have internally - and therefore exclusively. What one is as a person is what one is as associated with others, in a free give and take of

## **Democracy and Education**

intercourse. This transcends both the efficiency which consists in supplying products to others and the culture which is an exclusive refinement and polish.

Any individual has missed his calling, farmer, physician, teacher, student, who does not find that the accomplishments of results of value to others is an accompaniment of a process of experience inherently worth while. Why then should it be thought that one must take his choice between sacrificing himself to doing useful things for others, or sacrificing them to pursuit of his own exclusive ends, whether the saving of his own soul or the building of an inner spiritual life and personality? What happens is that since neither of these things is persistently possible, we get a compromise and an alternation. One tries each course by turns. There is no greater tragedy than that so much of the professedly spiritual and religious thought of the world has emphasized the two ideals of self-sacrifice and spiritual self-perfecting instead of throwing its weight against this dualism of life. The dualism is too deeply established to be easily overthrown; for that reason, it is the particular task of education at the present time to struggle in behalf of an aim in which social efficiency and personal culture are synonyms instead of antagonists.

## **Summary**

General or comprehensive aims are points of view for surveying the specific problems of education. Consequently it is a test of the value of the manner in which any large end is stated to see if it will translate readily and consistently into the procedures which are suggested by another. We have applied this test to three general aims: Development according to nature, social

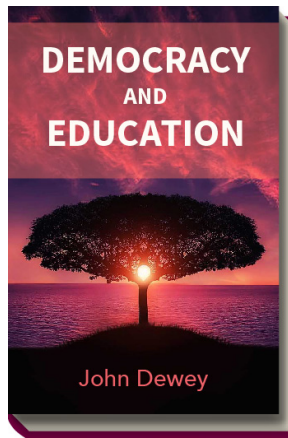


## Democracy and Education

efficiency, and culture or personal mental enrichment. In each case we have seen that the aims when partially stated come into conflict with each other. The partial statement of natural development takes the primitive powers in an alleged spontaneous development as the end-all. From this point of view training which renders them useful to others is an abnormal constraint; one which profoundly modifies them through deliberate nurture is corrupting. But when we recognize that natural activities mean native activities which develop only through the uses in which they are nurtured, the conflict disappears. Similarly a social efficiency which is defined in terms of rendering external service to others is of necessity opposed to the aim of enriching the meaning of experience, while a culture which is taken to consist in an internal refinement of a mind is opposed to a socialized disposition. But social efficiency as an educational purpose should mean cultivation of power to join freely and fully in shared or common activities. This is impossible without culture, while it brings a reward in culture, because one cannot share in intercourse with others without learning - without getting a broader point of view and perceiving things of which one would otherwise be ignorant. And there is perhaps no better definition of culture than that it is the capacity for constantly expanding the range and accuracy of one's perception of meanings.

1 Donaldson, *Growth of Brain*, p. 356.

2 We must not forget that Rousseau had the idea of a radically different sort of society, a fraternal society whose end should be identical with the good of all its members, which he thought to be as much better than existing states as these are worse than the state of nature.



Dewey, J. (2018). *Democracy and Education*.  
EdTech Books. Retrieved from  
<http://edtechbooks.org/democracyandeducation>



**CC0:** This book is in the public domain, which means that you may print, share, or remix its contents as you please without concern for copyright and without seeking permission.