John Dewey and Progressive Education

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1. Introduction

As a twentieth century philosophy of education, progressivism has won the support of more outstanding theorists than any competing philosophy. It has influenced foreign educators both of East and West. And it has affected practice on every level, from nursery school to adult forum. Although less directly influential as a theory than it was earlier in the century, and although modified if not at times overshadowed by partially congenial theories, progressivism has been and still remains a vastly important point of view.

John Dewey, philosopher of growth, change, and experimentation, may long remain one of the world's most frequently misunderstood and misinterpreted scholars. He brought about a profound revolution in education, not only in America, but in much of the rest of the world. Therefore, it is of most interest to me to find out the characteristics, thought, backgrounds of progressive education, and his theory of education and schooling.

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2. Progressivism Theory in Focus

Progressivism, the term, is here used more strictly to denote a cluster of systematic beliefs about education, which rests upon another cluster of harmonious and systematic beliefs about philosophy—the American philosophy denoted by such terms as pragmatism, instrumentalism, and experimentalism. Progressivist beliefs, formulated in philosophic terms, are characteristically of two classes: in some matters they are negative and diagnostic; in others they are positive and remedial. The former are expressive of opposition to authoritarianism and absolutism in all its forms, modern as well as ancient; religious, political, ethical, epistemological. The latter are expressive of man’s confidence in his own natural powers, particularly his self-regenerative power to face continuously and to overcome satisfactorily the fears, superstitions, and bewilderments of an ever-threatening environment.

The philosophic term popularly used to characterize this outlook is pragmatism—a term made famous by a book of this title by William James. Today, although labeled by other terms, such as “instrumentalism” or “experimentalism”, pragmatism is still widely held to be the single most original and most typically American of all the philosophies that have been formulated in our history.

Strictly speaking, pragmatism is a theory of logic. As Dewey says, the term “means only the rule of referring all thinking . . . to consequences for final meaning and test.” Pragmatism as formulated by Pierce, enriched by James, and matured by Dewey, has how permeated directly or indirectly as fair proportion of all public school in America. It has affected the characters of generations of young people.

3. Backgrounds of Progressive Education

A. European Influences

Just as strands of direct or indirect on philosophic thought can be traced through intellectual history from ancient Greek speculation to American pragmatism, so strands of influence can be traced through the history of educational thought. To mention one, note Plato’s insistence that his leaders experience, as part of their long educational training years of “learning by doing” in the rough-and-tumble environment of politics and war. But it was from the Renaissance world with its revolts against medieval authoritarianism that “the new education” obtains more of its germinal ideas. Johann Comenius, for example, discovered a