



---

## ‘PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION’? NO!

Mortimer J. Adler

There are many varieties of doctrine and practice under the label of “progressive education.” Nevertheless, it seems to me that all who call themselves “progressives” share two tendencies in common. On the one hand, they tend to bring more and more of the child’s life within the orbit of the school, thus developing the school-centered child. On the other hand, they tend to defer more and more to the interest of the individual child, thus developing the child-centered school. Both these tendencies began as healthy reactions to the narrowness and aridity of the traditional school. But, as the pendulum swings, both have gone to the opposite extreme, entailing errors and dangers I shall briefly discuss.

**1. The School-Centered Child.** The progressives tell us that the notion of school as a place where children are taught reading, writing, arithmetic, history, geography, and other “academic” subjects is hopelessly old-fashioned. Rather the school should concern itself with the development of the whole man. Provision for the physical and emotional health of the child is an essential of

the school program. The school doctor and nurse, the vocational counselor and psychiatrist, are indispensable members of the staff, not educational luxuries to be eliminated in a budget emergency.

Some progressives expand the work of the school far beyond this concern with good health and personality development. They envisage a grandiose “Institute for Individual and Community Development,” a glorified school which would be all things to all men, regulating everything from the prenatal care of the child to his vocational preparation, and solving the social problems of the community on the side. The school thus becomes a sort of totalitarian colossus, benevolent, it is true, but nonetheless totalitarian, presiding over every moment in the life of the individual, from cradle to grave, and professing to be the ultimate source of wisdom in the community.

This “whole man” theory of the aim of the schools fails to distinguish (a) between the total educational process and institutional education, and (b) between the functions of educational institutions in a good society and in a bad society. Let me briefly show the confusions which result.

First (a), the aim of the total educational process is, of course, the development of the whole man, the perfection of all the capacities of the individual, physical, moral, and intellectual—or, to use the traditional phrase, “the moral and intellectual virtues.” This means no more than that the well-educated man should be able to use his body skillfully both in sports and in making things with his hands (for he would have the intellectual virtues of art, both useful and fine); that he should be self-disciplined, courageous, honest, considerate, fair in his dealings with his fellows, a mature, well-integrated person (for he would have the moral virtues); that he should be able to read intelligently, and speak and think clearly (for he would be a liberal artist); and that he should have a good general grasp of the major fields of human knowledge (for he would have the intellectual virtues of understanding, science, and wisdom). This, in a general way, expresses what most of us would like education to accomplish. Moreover, if we had to choose between the moral and the intellectual aspects of education, if we had to rank them in importance and, perhaps, sacrifice one to the other, most of us would choose to develop the moral virtues rather than the intellectual. For it is the possession of the moral virtues that makes a man good simply as a man, not as a scholar or an artist or an engineer. And it is clear that the greatest talents and skills, the most expert scientific knowledge, are useless or, worse than useless, dangerous in the hands of knaves.

But, granted that the total educational process should aim at the development of the whole man, does it follow that the school should aim equally at every facet of an individual's development? This might be the case were the schools responsible for the total educational accomplishment. But the school is only one among many educational agencies in the community. The burden of educating the individual also falls on the home, the church, the press, the radio, the library, and the community itself, which, through schools and laws, seeks to develop good citizens.

Which parts of the total burden belong primarily to the school? This question must be answered, I think, in terms of the functions which the school is best adapted to perform, rather than in terms of the intrinsic importance of the several tasks. Thus, even though moral virtue or, to use the progressive equivalent, integrated personality is in itself more important than the mastery of any formal subject matter, this does not mean that we should turn the schools into mental-hygiene clinics. The primary task of the school is, in the nature of the case, an intellectual rather than a moral one. The aim of the school is to teach, and teaching, most properly, is a process by which one who already possesses some truth or some skill helps the learner to acquire that truth or skill. In the strict sense of "teaching," the moral virtues are the most unteachable, especially in schools, for they depend so much on practice and repetition, on individual advice and guidance. The primary aim of the school—the one it is best adapted to achieve, the one which belongs to it alone among all the educational agencies in the community—is intellectual training. In the sphere of moral virtue, the primary responsibility belongs to the home, the church, and the State. The school should give only a subsidiary attention to moral habits; and its responsibility in this sphere steadily decreases as the students grow older and their moral habits become more definitely formed.

Second (b), in a healthy society (one in which the various agencies responsible for the total educational achievement are each performing their proper functions) the school would devote itself primarily to intellectual training, and only secondarily to problems of character. But our society is not an entirely healthy one. In particular, the agencies which should develop the moral virtues (the home and the church) are rapidly decaying. This is a truism among educators, and from it they draw the conclusion that the school must take over more and more of the responsibilities which were formerly discharged by the home and the church. In fact, the trend at present is to shift to the schools the functions which other agen-

cies in the community are failing to perform.

Thus, in districts where the children are strangers to the routines of personal cleanliness and health, the schools introduce toothbrush drills and brush-and comb exercises. The accident rate increases alarmingly and a course in traffic safety is added. The divorce rate rises, the birth rate falls, and we add courses on how to make a success of marriage. No matter what the social problem may be, we try to solve it by putting another course into the curriculum.

There are, of course, many cases in which genuine social emergencies require the schools to take over the functions of other agencies. For instance, in the depths of the depression many schools became social-service depots, providing food and clothing for the children. Such action may be necessary in an emergency, because other social agencies have temporarily broken down, but it should be recognized for what it is—an emergency measure, fundamentally undesirable, albeit unavoidable. Such emergency measures, even when done on a long-term basis, do not really solve the social problem and often aggravate it. Letting the schools do it is ultimately injurious both to the community and to the schools. It corrupts the community by encouraging it to avoid responsibility, to evade its problems, to provide a feeble palliative while leaving the causes of disorder untouched. And it weakens the schools by diverting their energies from the primary task of basic intellectual discipline.

**2. The Child-Centered School.** Teach a child, not a subject matter. And if the child does not like the subject matter, do not force it on him, but try to find something he does like. This emphasis on the unique interests of each individual, on self-expression, on “the development of the individual in accordance with his characteristic design of growth,” is the core of progressive education. But here again there are many groups within the progressive camp. One group of extremists interprets expression in such a way that it would abolish all authority on the part of the teacher, and all prescribed curriculums as violations of the sacred freedom of the individual. Far from regarding the teacher as one who knows what is good for the child and has knowledge to impart, these extremists dogmatically suppose that no one knows what is good for another, no one has the right to impose his preconceived pattern on the child. There is, however, a more moderate group who holds to some fixed course of study, but tries to adapt the methods of teaching to the activity and interests of the students.

Here we can distinguish two versions of progressive education. On the one hand, there are the extremists, who use the child's interests to determine *what should be taught*. On the other hand, there are the moderates, who apply the principle of interest to the *method, but not to the curriculum* of education. The central problem of education for them is to make what should be learned interesting and attractive. Progressives of this sort represent a sound reaction to the cramping formalism and the meaningless verbalizing which characterized the decadent classical education of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Insisting that learning must be voluntary, that the student should be interested, that he should be as active as possible, they have returned to fundamentals of educational method first stated by Plato and Aristotle.

But the other sort of progressives (the extremists, who abandoned the curriculum in the name of freedom and self-expression) obviously hold a theory which cannot be put into practice without introducing complete anarchy. The real issue here concerns the basis for prescribing studies. By what criteria should we decide what subjects are to be taught?


One answer to this question is: we should teach children those basic skills, concepts, facts, conventions, ideals, which are required for successful adjustment to our culture. Another answer heard with increasing frequency as the world situation grows more and more menacing is that the chief aim of the schools is to preserve democracy, to propagandize for the democratic way of life. To this end it is urged that we increase the dosage of social studies, making them the heart of the program from the nursery school through college, and that we give students practice in democratic living by turning the schools into miniature democracies.

Both of these answers contain serious and dangerous errors. The first answer requires the educator to determine what to teach by statistical studies and public-opinion polls. But to base a curriculum on a statistical determination of the prevailing ideas in our culture opens the way for a vitiating relativism. One has only to ask what would result from the application of this criterion in Nazi Germany to see the fundamental fallacy of such a relativistic view. The fundamental ideals and concepts on which education should be based are not merely the mores and beliefs which happen to be current in 20th-Century America. They are universal truths about what constitutes a good education for all men at all times and places just because they are men. If there are no universal truths to determine educational principles, then

neither are there principles in terms of which we can say that totalitarianism is wrong. If there are no moral principles, we cannot denounce Hitlerism as unjust; we can merely protest weakly that we do not like it.

The second answer—that the aim of the schools is to preserve democracy—has a comforting ring. Nevertheless it, too, contains an error which has grave practical consequences. To set, as the end of education, the maintenance of any particular social order is to debase education to an instrument of propaganda, just as the totalitarian States have debased it. Democracy—by which I mean a government for the common good, by laws rather than by men, in which all men, regardless of race, creed, or wealth, are enfranchised and hence politically equal—is the best form of government. Precisely because it is good government, it serves its citizens; it respects their integrity and dignity as human beings; it seeks to help them achieve good human lives; and, above all, it does not attempt to subordinate them as political puppets to serve its own ends. Because the good State is dedicated to the good life, education in the good State must also be dedicated to the good life, the life which is good for all men everywhere because they are men. Hence, to make the educational system a special pleader in politics even though the cause be good, misuses the schools, and ultimately defeats the aims both of education and of democracy.

Education can serve democracy only by fulfilling its fundamental task, to make men good as men. The schools cannot serve democracy by inoculations of democratic procedure in the classroom, mistreating teacher and pupils as equals. They will serve democracy only by being good as schools, as communities of teachers and students, in which the authority of reason prevails.

The schools cannot serve democracy by asking immature minds to wrestle with the most difficult social and economic problems before they have sufficient intellectual discipline to face them. They will serve democracy only by making the one contribution which they are uniquely fitted to make—that basic intellectual training without which there can be neither free minds nor freemen. 

*Published in The Rotarian, September, 1941*

---

EDITOR'S NOTE

If you are further interested in Dr. Adler's views on progressive education, see these journals:

TGIO205-206 and 289.

---

---

## Welcome New Members

**William Gillette**

**John Martin**

**Steven Wickes**

*We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.*

---

---

## THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

published weekly for its members by the

## CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.