Education, not Democracy? The Apolitical Dewey

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Abstract. In German-speaking countries, John Dewey came to be considered a school reformer, an advocate of the project method and as the propagator of a cognitivistic psychology of learning. His ideas on socio-political reform, on the other hand, were ignored, partly intentionally, partly due to a lack of familiarity with them in detail. His major pedagogical work, *Democracy and Education* received little attention. In what follows, this selective view of Dewey is discussed mainly on the basis of internal pedagogical theoretical positions.

In the present contribution, three aspects of Dewey as he primarily tended to be seen will be presented. First of all, the historic picture of Dewey as a pragmatist, the international representative of reformed pedagogical methods and school reform; then a more restricted version of Dewey as the advocate of the project as a method of teaching, and finally his emergence as a psychologist of learning. John Dewey first became known as the exponent of a child-centred reformed method of education. Even more recent presentations see his student-centredness at the teaching level as an essential feature of Dewey’s contribution to education as is demonstrated by the following analysis of articles in the “Enzyklopädie Erziehungswissenschaften” (Encyclopaedia of Educational Sciences) published in the eighties.

The historical view at the beginning of the century already largely glosses over the political aspects of Dewey’s thoughts on education. Consequently, it is not his main pedagogical work, “Democracy and Education” which is in the foreground but “The School and Society”, “The Child and the Curriculum” and “How we think”. These works represent only a limited and rather early part of Dewey’s thought on education and tend to focus strongly on school reform. The fact that in his work Dewey formulated a supra-individual theory of learning, transcending the school horizon comprising both science and social life, remained “unnoticed”. Of minor importance for the way he was seen by educators in German-speaking countries was – and still is – how he put matters into a political context – a typical feature throughout his entire work. “Democracy and Education” became simply “Education” in school teaching.
Dewey as School Reformer – Kerschensteiner’s View

When on January 12th 1908 in the Peterskirche, Georg Kerschensteiner sang the praises to the “Arbeitschule” (“Work School”) as the school of the future, he cited Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi as a crown witness of his efforts. And a rightly understood Pestalozzi, not the Herbartians’ Pestalozzi who is claimed by them as the representative of the “Selbsttätigkeit” (autonomy) school and who sought to combine this principle with the “Erziehungsschule” (“Education School”). Beyond the so-called “book” school, Kerschensteiner emphasised the “active” Pestalozzi who advocated productivity rather than passive reception in school teaching. A school that teaches “not through words and books, but rather through practical experience” (Kerschensteiner, 1910, p. 98) is the type of school that is suited to the mentality as well as to the social drives of the child. This very reorganisation of the school, as is added in the next breath, is also the intention of the best educators in the New World, including John Dewey. In “School and Society”, he rightly complains that the school, “with its rows of ugly desks” and all its furnishings is outfitted solely “for listening”.

A fiery plea follows for the “new Work School” (ibid., p. 104), which is characterised by manual work as Kerschensteiner explains in greater detail in connection with the Munich school reform. Pestalozzi, the school as the establishment for active work and, in a thundering conclusion, again John Dewey, form the soundbites of Kerschensteiner’s plea for school reform when he prophesises the “Work School” as the most drastic reorganisation of education in the future. John Dewey is again referred to and cited in German translation in order to introduce this “Copernican revolution” – as Kerschensteiner reflects Dewey empathically in the words he uses.

In this case the child becomes the sun about which the appliances of education revolve, he is the center about which they are organized. (Dewey, 1907, p. 51)

It is not by accident that Pestalozzi and Dewey were linked together in Kerschensteiner’s speech. It happens again in later writings. Also in Georg Kerschensteiner’s last work, the theory of educational organisation, appreciation is expressed for the way John Dewey in the past thirty years repeatedly insisted on the need to make schools more orientated to life and to change them from “mere teaching institutions to educational institutions” (Kerschensteiner, 1933, p. 230). Dewey’s contribution to education is appreciated from this school-reform perspective.

Besides a theoretical agreement seen thus by Kerschensteiner, a reading of the US pedagogue also apparently serves, over and above this, to encourage him personally at a time of hectic school reforms in Munich, as Georg Kerschensteiner writes in his presentation of himself. He saw Dewey – whom he met personally during a tour of America in 1910 – as confirming him in his school-reform activities. The purity and clarity of Dewey’s pedagogical thought strengthened his energy to take action. This reference to the school reformer Dewey is supplemented by highlighting his psychological contributions to teaching, as presented in his