

We have seen one major foundation for this curriculum topic in Spencer's developmental beliefs about children's manner of gradually building knowledge from what is most familiar to material that is less familiar.

The principle had two distinct resonances for Spencer and for those who formed the social studies curriculum. First, the knowledge with which young children arrive at school is assumed to be that efficient, reliable, "natural" learning we want to see replicated in schools, and second, the content of that knowledge is the simple, concrete, and empirical material gained from fundamentally meaningful interactions with the child's local environment.

The educational reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries encouraged teachers to rethink their ways of presenting new material to students in accordance with this principle—so elementary mathematics would begin from the experience children will have had with fruit or marbles, and language studies will begin with the forms of expression with which children would already be familiar, rather than with abstract grammar. But those subjects were still not fully articulated with the meaningful daily interactions of children in their local environments. What was proposed was a new, central curriculum area—the social studies—which would begin with the material of children's everyday experience, with themselves and their families, their neighborhoods and communities, and gradually expand learning from this meaningful core of students' experience to less familiar knowledge, until, in the end, the whole universe of knowledge could be understood as an expansion from what was most vivid and meaningful to the child. Social studies was designed to tie all the knowledge being learned in other curriculum areas to the child's experience.

So we must start with what is most profoundly known by the student, and build new knowledge on that basis. In North America, Spencer's ideas are best known through John Dewey's formulations

of them, and I shall briefly sketch Dewey's echoes of Spencer's mistaken ideas that have supported the social studies.

Let us begin with the fundamental similarities William James noted: "Like Spencer's philosophy, Dewey's is an evolutionism. . . . Like Spencer, again, Dewey makes biology and psychology continuous. 'Life,' or 'experience,' is the fundamental conception" (James 1988, 1136–1137). So it "is a cardinal precept of the newer school of education that the beginning of instruction shall be made with the experiences learners already have" (Dewey 1963, 74), and it is "essential that the new objects and events be related intellectually to those earlier experiences, and this means that there be some advance made in conscious articulation of facts and ideas" (75).

Spencer's insistence that one begins with the empirical is echoed in Dewey's claim: "What is here insisted upon is the necessity of an empirical situation as the initiating phase of thought" (1966, 153); consequently the "true starting point of history is always some present situation with its problems," and "local or home geography is the natural starting point" (214, 212).

They also share a belief that young children can deal only with simple, practical, local, and what Piaget called sensori-motor knowledge: "The knowledge which comes first to persons, and that remains most deeply ingrained, is knowledge of *how to do*; how to walk, talk, read, write, skate, ride a bicycle, and so on indefinitely" (Dewey 1966, 184). This conclusion of the principle seems so patently false that it is bewildering to see it constantly repeated—four-legged flies again. Before, and after, we can walk or skate, we know love and hate, power and powerlessness, the rhythms of expectation and satisfaction of hope and disappointment. The knowledge that comes first and remains most deeply ingrained is not knowledge of "how to do." The knowledge that comes first and remains most deeply ingrained is the fundamental categories upon which we learn to make sense of the world. If our concern is educa-

tion, the focus on "how to do" is a poor foundation for a process that concerns the development of conscious understanding.

We find Spencer's, and Rousseau's and Piaget's, distinct kinds of learning echoed in Dewey's binary opposition between that which is spontaneous and occurs from interactions with the everyday environment, which "is natural and important," and that artificial instruction that goes on in schools, which "easily becomes remote and dead" (1966, 6, 8). Yes, of course, we can all recognize the difference between learning something profoundly important in our everyday environment and the drone of a dull pedagogy. We can also recognize the difference between a dreary day in our too-familiar local environment and a teacher who opens our eyes to exciting new worlds simply by talking. The point is that the dogmatic way of making this distinction by Spencer and Co. was the product of a cosmology and theories that are false. We do not have to make *this* the decisive way of distinguishing kinds of learning. Indeed, if we want to be sensible, we have to *not* make this the decisive way of distinguishing kinds of learning.

Dewey and Spencer, with their evolutionary conceptions of mental development, have to begin with the simple, the concrete, and the empirical. And they have to work by gradual degrees following a "progressive order, using the factors first acquired as a means of gaining insight into what is more complicated" (Dewey 1966, 20). "Recognition of the natural course of development" (114) is, of course, crucial, and its beginnings are in action, in "learning by doing," and so the young child is conceived to be pretty mindless. These principles have given us the elementary schools we have, in which children are commonly sentimentalized but basically treated as though they can't really think; they can only *do*—so we have all those "hands-on" activities while their huge intellectual energy is hardly engaged with anything significant in the wider cultural world.

The process that Spencer and Piaget characterize as moving from the empirical or sensori-motor to adult rationality, Dewey breaks into three stages. First children learn the "power to do"; second, "this material gradually is surcharged and deepened through communicated knowledge and information"; and, last, "it is enlarged and worked over into rationally or logically organized material" (1966, 184).

So, deploying this set of ideas we get the elementary social studies curriculum that has been largely unchanged since the early decades of the twentieth century: In kindergarten the child begins with herself or himself—(When did you get to know yourself? "At the end of all our exploring," as T. S. Eliot put it)—then they look at families, then neighborhoods, larger communities, interactions among communities, and, so on, expanding gradually outward by steps of "material nearly allied." Why, you might wonder, does this expansive line of associations seem to have a quirky intrusion at about grade four, when children typically study "Indians" or an aboriginal culture in social studies? In Dewey's terms:

Recourse to the primitive may furnish the fundamental elements of the present situation in immensely simplified form. It is like unraveling a cloth so complex and close to the eyes that its scheme cannot be seen, until the larger courser features of the pattern appear . . . and by seeing how these were solved in the earlier day of the human race, form some conception of the long road which has had to be traveled, and of the successive inventions by which the race has been brought forward in culture. [1966, 215]

Most educators in North America and Australia still seem to believe in the efficacy of the elementary social studies curriculum, as a result of their belief in the ideas on which it is founded. It is, after all, the curriculum that most directly embodies the most basic

principles that Spencer, and Dewey, enunciated. What should we expect from a curriculum area designed to conform most precisely with how children's minds develop? There seem to be no grounds for believing that things have changed since Ralph Tyler's 1965 judgment that the social studies are the least effective educationally of any of the basic areas taught in the American public schools. The kinds of tests of students' knowledge of the subject matter of social studies on which that judgment was based continue to show the same discouraging results. Social studies also continues in survey after survey to rank as least popular with students. How can the subject that most directly embodies Spencer's and Dewey's principles be such a mess in practice? Easy—the principles are wrong.

A while ago I mentioned to a colleague whose area of interest is education in the arts that I was trying to get some handle on "development." He said that the subject also interested him and that he had recently read a number of books on moral development, including Piaget's and Lawrence Kohlberg's work. But, he said, they hadn't helped explain the phenomenon that had got him wondering about the subject. "When I teach pottery-making, the five-year-olds work enthusiastically, and give me their work when they finish. With the fifteen-year-olds, I have to do all the work and then they steal it." And Chuang Tzu's observation about how we increasingly "forget the way home" as we grow older isn't enlightened by focusing on the components of "formal operations." Rousseau's stages from cakes at ten to avarice at fifty is more dyspeptically reflected in Kazuko Okakura's "developmental theory": "Man at 10 is an animal; at 20 a lunatic; at 30 a failure; at 40 a fraud; at 50 a criminal" (1989, 117)—well, it works for me.

Of course, these impressionistic reflections have no impact on a self-consciously scientific psychology's theories of development. We moved away from these kinds of observations in the direction

of rigorous inquiries when we recognized the mind as like the body. By building in the nineteenth century, and elaborating through the twentieth, a biologized psychology, researchers escaped from the excesses of Cartesian dualism and brought a new methodological rigor to the study of the mind. It managed this, unfortunately—and the point of the previous paragraph's whimsies—by displacing from its subject matter much of what we most want to know about our odd minds. Much of what is most distinctively human in learning and development has been suppressed by the search for the biologized nature of the mind. That search has avoided the cultural stuff that seems to constitute the mind and is not particularly amenable to study by research methods devised to deal with the natural world. We seem to have been saved from the errors of Cartesian dualism at the cost of inadequately recognizing that mind-stuff does have features that are somewhat distinct from body-stuff; that in some degree, the mind is not an Aristotelian organism naturally reaching some maturity inherent in its nature. The dominant position that psychology has held in educational thinking consequently seems to me to have been, and continues to be, a bit of a disaster.

If, instead, we take a "cognitive tools" approach to development, we cease to look for some underlying spontaneous process within physical and cultural environments whose role it is to support some unfolding ontogenesis. Rather, we will see development in the micro scale as "it reveals itself in the restructuring of the child's thinking and behavior under the influence of a new psychological tool"; in the macro scale, development "manifests itself as the life-long process of the formation of a system of psychological functions corresponding to the entire system of symbolic means available in a given culture" (Kozulin 1998, 16). From a Vygotskian perspective, our intellectual abilities are not "natural" but are socio-cultural constructs. They are not forms of intellectual life that we

are programmed in some sense to bring to realization; there is no naturally preferred form of human intellectual maturity. We are not designed, for example, to move in the direction of "formal operations" or abstract thinking or whatever. These forms of intellectual life are products of our learning, "inmindating," particular cultural tools invented in our cultural history.

chapter 4

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THE USEFUL

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CURRICULUM
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The tough voices that command attention when educational policy is debated discuss education in terms of economic competitiveness, of endangered citizenship, of the social problems of inner cities, of gun-lack-of-control and reproductive-lack-of-control, of preparation for a digital age, of national cohesion and identity, and so on. The curriculum is represented as an agent of the economy, of civic virtue, of political responsibility, of technological progress, and of much else. That these seem obvious and sensible ways to think about education is an index of the triumph of another set of ideas that Herbert Spencer, among others, promoted.

The process of setting up the new schools for all children in democratic states focused attention on what those children should be taught. The old "ornamental" curriculum, based on classical languages, literature, and history, supposedly designed to enable aristocrats to use their leisure enjoyably, came in for much derision. Spencer broached the topic early and compellingly, and provided his own less than compelling answer in his essay "What Knowledge Is of Most Worth?" (1859).

With his usual brio, Spencer argued that we must sweep away the dominant curriculum: "Men dress their children's minds as they do their bodies, in the prevailing fashion" (1928, 2). Instead of