

The legacy of John Dewey: Educational change and teacher commitment¹

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Hope for change poses, I argue, a severe limit to, rather than becoming a force for, change in education. By exploring instead the notion of ‘commitment’ to change as an inherently educational and central function of teaching, the analysis and argument places the teacher at the centre of such commitment. As theoretical/methodological resources I mainly draw on the works of John Dewey and Jacques Rancière, in order to intervene into discourses on educational change as they are framed by liberal politics and philosophy. This article thereby contributes to a largely Nordic/European discussion on the role and function of educational change in neo-liberalism.

Keywords: Change, hope, commitment, distributive paradigm, liberalism, education.

Introduction

This article celebrates the writings of John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* by dwelling on some of the themes that seem to be central to his pragmatism. What is of particular interest for me is the possibility of change, or rather the ways in which change is understood by Dewey as a driving force for education and as necessity of life itself. These ideas thereby turn education into the very guarantee of a possible life together with others in a democratic society.

I find Dewey’s writings in *Democracy and Education* political in a very specific way, balancing as they do on an almost scientific understanding of the basis for democracy while simultaneously arguing for an ethics that avoids being trapped in scientism. Saying that, one needs of course also to acknowledge that Dewey’s scientism

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is anti-foundational, his ideas that growth leads to further growth, and that education leads to further education, is built on a logic of continuous movement and change, without a definitive beginning or end (Dewey 1916/2005, p. 32-33).

In other words, to challenge those forces that try to limit or abolish growth, movement and change is central to Dewey's writings on democratic politics, ethics, aesthetics as well as education and research. To challenge foundational tendencies across these spheres is important for Dewey because the challenge itself opens the possibility of an education that embraces life, and a school in which life itself is the driving force: "The inclination to learn from life itself and to make the conditions of life such that all will learn in the process of living is the finest product of schooling" (p. 33). In honour of this legacy, I seek to challenge those forces, which through the rise of neo-liberalism have strengthened a distributive paradigm of education with a base in liberalism, hindering education as a place of change and emancipation. I do this by revisiting a debate that followed as a consequence of Richard Rorty's uptake and reading of Dewey and of Michel Foucault and by challenging the idea of hope as central for education and political formation.

The background to this paper is an intense debate about the role of Foucault in educational theory, which I was involved in about 15 years ago with some colleagues and critical friends. The dividing lines at the time were about either reading Foucault or Dewey. This somewhat unfortunate division was drawn based on an idea from Richard Rorty (1983), which to paraphrase, claimed that Dewey and not Foucault gave reasons for ungrounded hope. And hope, it was argued by Rorty, is the very driving force needed in order to form a public who is held together and defined by solidarity. My own position in this debate, even though I did appreciate Rorty's anti-foundationalism, was to side with those who pointed out the necessity of understanding the role of power differently than currently was the case, in order to avoid ending up in a naïve version of pragmatism, or simply just as Rorty did himself, to endorse liberalism as a fulfilment of that hope, a liberalism which was to be expanded by Rorty's "we-intentions" (Rorty 1983, Ljunggren 1996). In this paper I explore where my discontent with the concept of hope lies, not in order to revisit the turns and twists of that somewhat dated debate, but rather in order to try to trace the role and function hope has in liberalism generally, and in particular its role and function in the educational counterpart to neo-liberalism: what I call the distributive paradigm in education (see also Säfström 2015a, 2015b). Instead of hope I lift commitment as that driving force that not only moves us out of distributive education (and the political

project of neo-liberalism), but also establishes an educational discourse that is truly educational as a social membrane. I conclude the paper with an exploration of teaching as commitment, since commitment rather than hope, I argue, is that which makes change possible at all. And change, Dewey has taught us, is that which education is all about.

Change, hope and commitment

Jacques Rancière (1991, 1999) warns us that a pedagogized society is a repressive society that stultifies individuals through explicatory acts of teaching. It is a society whose institutions inform its citizens, teaches them from a position of superiority, explains the necessary conditions for living, working and being in the world, and finally regulates possible social relations and positions through the *distribution* of rights and duties, wealth and prosperity. Such a distributive idea of the political and social order (Rancière 1999) is often accompanied by a distributive idea of education. In this idea educational systems are essentially in place in order to differentiate between (more or less valuable) epistemologies as well as (more or less valuable) individual abilities and to distribute those into different functions in the social sphere of work and leisure. Education, within this way of thinking, is all about sorting out and connecting individual abilities, needs and desires with the circulation of value in political economy (Baudrillard 1975), or what is more fashionable to say today: the market.

Education as a market in neo-liberalism promises the individual that he or she has a fair chance to change one's initial conditions, that through education not only individual life circumstances can change for the better, but also society as a whole can change for the better by the choices being made. This is a promise central to liberalism but it is also a promise that is absolutely necessary to the distributive paradigm itself since it releases tensions within its own reality by signalling a limited possibility of change (Rancière 1999). It is a limited possibility since the very order or logic of distribution does not change, only minor adjustments within it do. Instead of fundamental change the limitation produces the *hope* for such change.

Interestingly enough, the central characteristic of education within the distributive paradigm – its driving energy – is hope. To be clear it is *hope* for change, not an actual and fundamental change that is driving the paradigm. The impact and function of the idea of hope in general is hard to fully comprehend, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore all its nuances. Hope tends to be essential for the individual life as well as societies, cultures, histories, not the

least religions; the hope for liberation of the oppressed, for the truth, for enlightenment in whatever form, for a possible future. Hope that things will be better in the end regardless of how hard life seems at the moment. Nevertheless, and despite the importance of *hope* of a better life as an essential motivation for the oppressed to mobilize, and as a driving force of politics (as theorized by Paolo Freire 1972 among others), I do think Rorty (1983) was wrong in defending both liberalism and pragmatism on the grounds of the promotion of *hope* as a defining characteristic, and to criticise Foucault on the basis that he did not give reasons for hope. While criticising Foucault for not giving reason for hope, Rorty praised Dewey for supposedly giving such hope for things to change for the better:

Although Foucault and Dewey are trying to do the same thing, Dewey seems to me to have done it better, simply because his vocabulary allows room for unjustifiable hope, and an ungrounded but vital sense of human solidarity (p. 208).

However, it is not all that clear that Foucault did not give reason for hope, merely because he focused on the dark side of human endeavours, that he committed himself to trace the mechanisms of oppression and largely did choose the side of those that has been excluded over the course of history. He did, as Zygmunt Bauman (2004) has claimed, side with the suffering classes. So my question for Rorty would be: hope for whom? And for what? And also, I wonder, what would hope be good for at all if we didn't start from the imperfections of life and its inherent violence, which was what Foucault did. Acknowledging what Sharon Todd (2009) calls the imperfections of humans means understanding humanness as already containing the capacity for violence and oppression as well as love and hope. In my view, hope without acknowledging the dark sides of humanity, its inherently violent character, and its history of oppressions and power leads nowhere, and introduces a severe limitation of education changing anything or anyone. What we need, I suggest, is not hope per se but a profound commitment to emancipation and change. For without such a commitment there can be no education at all (see also Säfström 2011, 2015).

Moving beyond hope

Educational theories promoting hope for change rather than a commitment to change (in order to liberate the individual from oppression and ignorance) tend to make two related mistakes. Even

though they do claim, indirectly or directly, that education can be used to liberate the individual, or collectives of misfortune (the poor and powerless) and “to reduce inequality indefinitely” (Rancière 1991, p. 133), their only starting point is inequality. This means that it is inequality that is the thing that remains stable as a fixed starting point. So the first mistake, following Rancière, is to endlessly re-install inequality as foundational in repeated calls for equality through education. For Rancière, “whoever takes this position has only one way of carrying it through to the end, and that is the integral pedagogisation of society – the general infantilisation of the individuals that make it up” (p. 133). So the second mistake is to promote a society reproducing itself through the successive infantilization of its members.

In order to counteract such infantilization, one needs to separate the real life of persons from the role and place they are given within the societal order of distribution; this is what makes change and education possible, according to Rancière. Such a distinction also subsequently allows for the reality of persons to break through the abstractions and categorisations of the distributive paradigm and subsequently shift the current order of society; it opens up the possibility of change. If there is no separation between living life and the political and social ordering of that life, educational change is reduced to adjustments within that order. However, education also implies alteration of orders, alterations of the way in which the world is perceived as orderly. And this I believe is the very insight of Dewey’s educational universe in *Democracy and Education*.

In other words, in order to move outside the distributive paradigm which produces a vague hope for things to get better, it is necessary also to distance oneself from educational theories that do not make a real commitment to change and emancipation, and which do not base themselves on a distinction of person and categorical functions of individuals in society. And here I especially think of the discourse of life long learning (Säfström 2004), which seemed to suggest that no one can or should escape formal education, since every kind of experience of life can and should be transferred into a system of translation of those experiences into points and credits, and become therefore also controlled by the paradigm of distribution. But it is also necessary, I argue, to move beyond progressive educational theories that more often than not are caught up in an arrogant attitude of educating the people from an unquestionable centre of authority, as for example from a position of a fixed identity, who explains who is excluded and in need of being saved, and therefore in special need of hope, thereby establishing inequality as the natural starting point. Hope itself tends to get in the way of seeing clearly the inequality

inscribed in the ordering of people into different social positions from which what to hope for becomes very different things. The result is a profound infantilization of all since for one thing it blocks the possibility that an excluded individual person knows his or her own predicament very well and also has perfectly reasonable responses to it outside and beyond a passive hope for a better life (see also Strandbrink & Åkerström 2010, Säfström 2010).

The distributive paradigm, in education, is not about staging authentic publics, which is the very aim of education for Dewey, but about differentiating between those who have already power, wealth, status and real influence on how the world moves forward, on the one hand, and those who have no such thing, on the other hand. The function of hope without making such differentiation merely becomes an abstracted hope for something better that will never come for the poor and powerless, hope for that which is already in possession of the rich. When hope has attained its object, it ceases to be hope and becomes possession², that is, the distributive paradigm as well as those educational theories that contribute to the infantilization of the individual make individuals passive in hoping for a distant future that might never arrive while guaranteeing the possessions of those who already have them. Hope, then, rather than being a prime motivational factor for change and emancipation tends to feed the drive of successive incorporation of oneself into the norms and principles of the distribute paradigm in which what to hope for is already giving meaning and function. The function of hope within distributive education is to attach the circulation of value in political economy to individual bodies, and to translate their desires and wants into goods and privileges provided by and circulating in capitalist society. The school system in such a society, in the last analysis, is a system for differentiation of talent by the distribution of grades (and other measures) but also makes it possible to prioritise between those talents by the value they have for the market so as to meet shifting requirements in capitalist society. Such a school system needs no commitment but is fed by the hope of individual success rather than by the collective commitment to emancipation and change.

Teaching as commitment

To teach in distributive education is to add or do *nothing* to that which is already circulating in the current distribution of wealth and power, the circulation and differentiations of abilities and epistemologies, of connecting desires and wants with political economy in hyper

capitalist neo-liberal democratic societies. To teach from within the distributive paradigm is to apply techniques of individualisation, to master processes of learning, comparisons, grading, evaluations; it is to distribute talent over the typography of value making up the neo-liberal society. I have elsewhere argued (Säfström 2014) how the name teacher becomes a *nothing* in such public discourses on education: the name is not owned by the teacher but by a certain public/political fixation, depriving the actual teacher of his or her name *as* teacher. The result tends to be that the actual teacher, the person, wears the name teacher as a negation of what he or she does when she operates outside the distributive paradigm, when he or she truly engages with an other, when he or she verifies the student as an equal intelligence, that is, when the teacher stages the real conditions for emancipation: operating from the insight of the equality of intelligence. Such insight promotes commitment as the driving force of educational change.

While hope is transformed into possession as soon as its object is achieved (and therefore also produces the possessor), commitment points in a completely other direction. Commitment is about constancy, dedication, devotedness, an enduring promise to do or give something to someone; it is a gift without claims of return, a promise to be loyal and to embody an attitude of someone who works very hard to support something or someone. When it comes to education, commitment is simply an appeal to steadfastness in the face of the power inscribed in the distributive paradigm, and an appeal to support all students regardless of their distributed talent. In short, it is an allegiance to the gift inscribed in the figure of teaching. Such a gift is not only about the wellbeing of and promotion of knowledge for the student, which Dewey convincingly argues in *Democracy and Education*, but also, and maybe primarily, I will say, about a commitment to emancipation and change. To teach, then, is to *do* something. It is to be committed to change and emancipation in order to move beyond the surface of possessions distributed through the idea of hope as it is inscribed within the distributive paradigm by the possessor who already *has* the desired societal qualities of insight, money, things, intelligence, power. Without hope, everything can change.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at INPE, august 16-20, 2016, in Warsaw, as part of the symposium; Reinventing the Public School: Making Claims to Publicity (with Sharon Todd, Elisabet Langmann and Lovisa Bergdahl) and was written within the frame of the project: Lived Values: a pedagogical-philosophical groundworking of the value basis of Swedish schools, financed by VR 2015-2018.
2. The point with this formulation is that it speaks directly to the meaning and function of hope in Christian theological tradition. See further for example Encyclopedia Britannica.

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