

Democratic Education, Sans Student Enfranchisement?

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First, I would like to thank the authors for an interesting and thought-provoking piece. To recap some of the major points:

Wasson and Boyles examine Montessori's writings, and Montessorian practices, with the object of clarifying the nature of an appropriate "democratic education." Their main point is that, to be "democratic," a school should provide for an equal sharing of power among all of the participants, particularly, among all teachers and all students. In support of this claim, the authors posit a "principle of mutual interaction," claimed to be identifiable in Montessori's writings, which principle is said to state a dynamic relationship existing between two "positions," namely, the "political position" and the "educational position." It is not clear exactly in what sense "positions" are able to interact, nor yet to "compete for priority," so I am interpreting these as, simply, two sets of questions that, in various educational situations, are given varying degrees of attention. These two sets of questions are: a) political questions relating to the control of the educational institution, its aims and its practices; and, b) questions of educational practice, relating more specifically to the evaluation of practices to be employed in constructing an educational environment that fosters unrestricted development. (The political questions are at times called the "partisan element," while the questions of educational practice are, somewhat confusingly, referred to as the "universal element.")

The authors call for a balance with respect to these sets of questions, and this seems on the whole to be a worthy quest. To neglect either critical element in education, its "external" political context, or its "internal" questions of practice, would surely be to court disaster. It remains somewhat unclear, though, and I would invite further explanation, exactly how this principle is derived by the authors from the writings of Montessori.

The authors raise three important sets of questions that I have found particularly thought-provoking, and on which I will focus my comments. These are: questions of *inclusion and exclusion*, questions of *the meaning of "democratic education,"* and questions of *the relation of educational theory to political ideology.*

QUESTIONS OF INCLUSION, AND EXCLUSION

Wasson and Boyles attribute to unspecified "theories" of democratic education a common ethical assumption — that "democracy's virtue lies in its inclusiveness," its ability to enfranchise the previously disenfranchised. The greater the enfranchisement, the greater, then, the virtue of that democracy. And, when we speak of "democratic education," it would seem that the education that politically enfranchises the greatest number, including students along with teachers, administrators, and others, would be the most virtuous. This seems an excellent, albeit perhaps not complete, characterization by the authors.

What, however, of the companion assertion, that "exclusiveness is equally fundamental to the democratic ideal?" We are assured, in a footnote, that the history

of development of democracy will bear this out. Yet, the sort of empirical evidence that history can give, even were it to be forthcoming, would not be adequate to support the authors' fundamentally *conceptual* claim. What we need to be given here are compelling reasons to believe that exclusionary practices are, and/or should be, some part of the *meaning* of the term "democracy." A historical association of such exclusionary practices with putatively "democratic" systems will not do; it is simply the wrong sort of evidence. So, the initial claim, that "schools should be seen as democratic *precisely because* they exclude students from the school's political process" is not adequately supported. And, it does not seem likely, given my understanding of the use of the term "democratic," that this claim can actually be supported.

A second point. If, by "genuine inclusiveness," we *mean* "the incorporat[ion of] previously disenfranchised groups into [the] political decisionmaking process," as the authors do seem to mean, then the extension of political power to additional groups would, and in fact, must necessarily, result in an increase in that genuine inclusiveness. So, though the authors chide various democratic theorists for accepting it, this seems to be a legitimate assumption, given that it is necessarily true.

THE MEANING OF DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION (GUTMANN V. WASSON AND BOYLES)

In which of several possible senses ought we to understand the term "democratic education?" On the one hand, we might interpret this as a set of educational practices, of any character, that is effective, and instrumental in maintaining a larger democratic society. On the other, we might interpret "democratic education" as indicating a set of educational practices that themselves have the character of being "democratic," being, in the authors' sense, "inclusive," without having regard to the ultimate results of those democratic practices in the larger society. We might, of course, come to identify these two "hands," holding that only democratic practices can lead to democratic results, and that only democratic societies can result from democratic practice. We might, however, on the third hand, simply mean by "democratic education" any educational institution the practices of which are determined, controlled by, a democratic set of processes. Wasson and Boyles appear to hold that an equal power distribution among students, teachers, and administrators (not to mention parents, communities, or philosophers?), is necessary if a school is to be considered "democratic" in the most important sense. But, the assumption that this *is* the most important sense of "democratic education" could do with a bit more support.

EDUCATIONAL THEORY, IN RELATION TO POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

The distinction Montessori draws between educational theory and political ideology is of particular interest. As the authors very clearly establish, Montessori takes the development of educational theory to be, fundamentally, the development of a *science*, which can be expected to produce increasingly detailed documentation of experience until, in time, a set of "exact and discernible" natural laws of education will come to be known. The development of that science, Montessori appears to hold, ought not to be constrained by anyone's currently existing beliefs about what is politically ideal, any more than the development of a science of genetics, or of evolution, should be so constrained. Whether Montessori's interpretation is correct

remains a matter open to question. At first glance, education would seem to have an inextinguishable normative element to it that is lacking in the more ordinary sciences. Yet the identification of the “facts of the matter” with respect to the conditions and consequences of educational events, should there be any, would certainly be of great importance, just as much as is the identification of the facts of the matter with respect to events in, say, neurophysiology. In neither case should our conclusions as to what those facts *are* be determined by any of our pre-existing decisions as to what those facts ought to be, particularly when those prior decisions (prejudices) are the result of our accepting as “given” the truths of some political doctrine. And, in *both* cases, the scientific conclusions that are reached should ultimately be *used*, to guide us in drawing the normative conclusions of politics, that is, to help us decide what should, or should not, be done, in an ethical/political context. So, it would seem that Montessori’s “science” of education, like the other sciences, could and should have a role in determining our political beliefs, *rather than* vice-versa. Understood in this fashion, I believe the authors are correct in objecting, along with Montessori, that “ideological limits” ought not be permitted to constrain educational inquiry. But, it does not at all follow, as the authors seem to suggest, that in Montessori’s view “the democratic ideal was inconsistent with education.” And, indeed, the authors note that there was in fact a certain affinity between Montessori’s educational practice and the democratic political ideal. It is fascinating indeed that that affinity, evidently, became so abundantly apparent to those who would use her methods to establish a fascist society that the schools were actually shut down.

What is it, though, to “have an affinity” for something? More specifically, what is it for a set of educational principles, scientifically verified, to “have an affinity for” a particular political ideal? The authors assert that that affinity of Montessori educational beliefs to the democratic ideal is “the very strength of her theories and practice *from the democratic perspective*” (emphasis added). Yet, in making this claim, the authors seem to be making precisely the “cart-before-the-horse” error that Montessori had advised against, namely, the error of judging the adequacy of beliefs about education *from the perspective* of any particular political ideological viewpoint.

CONCLUSION

So, to return to the central issue — the authors’ call for “the real redistribution of power” in the educational setting: Does education in, and in support of, a democracy require the full equalization of power, the “enfranchisement” of the students? I do not think that this claim has been established on secure grounds here. The question, however, is without doubt an important one. I would suggest that the solution lies in establishing an educational relationship that *leads to* the full enfranchisement of the individual in the larger society, and that we abdicate our responsibility as not only as educators but also as adults, if we fail to provide a “direction” of the experiences of the young suited to achieving this democratic aim. That ethical obligation of the educator toward the student introduces an important asymmetry into their relationship, and the fact of that asymmetry constitutes a justification for a less-than-equal distribution of power in the educational setting.