

The Unexpected Alignment of Progressive Ideals and the Commercialization of Education in Entrepreneurial Learning

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Since the mid-1900s, two radically different ideological currents have permeated discussions on the societal role of education in politics, research, and the public debate. On the one hand, there is the perspective of what John Darling and Sven Erik Nordenbo label “progressivism” in a trivial sense.¹ Progressivism, in this sense, denotes a set of commonly accepted educational tenets, not necessarily derived from (or loyal to) any particular progressivist thinker, that have proven very influential in modern educational policy and practice. According to Darling and Nordenbo, these tenets include an ambition “to consider the child’s nature, to care for learner-centeredness, to adapt the lessons to the child’s ‘natural’ motivation, to promote children’s personal growth and creativity.” Arguably, “[t]hese educational approaches form part of a common knowledge in education embraced by nearly all.”²

On the other hand, and seemingly in tension with the above listed progressive ideals, educational discourses have, since the 1960s, been increasingly influenced by economic concepts and ideals.³ In this context, education is primarily conceived as a means for realizing economic values such as effectiveness, competition, measurability, accountability, and maximization of human capital. Despite the apparent tension between progressive ideals and the economization of education, the economic logic has, not least in the context of educational policy, become more or less taken for granted insofar as schools are generally understood to be important actors within the knowledge economy. Consequently, it appears that the language of education has adopted an economic logic where the teacher is frequently cast as a provider of services and the student as a customer in an educational market.

Even if these two dominant trends have very different ideological

foundations – insofar as progressivism furthers a collectivist understanding of education and human well-being, and the economic logic presupposes a more individualistic understanding of the same – there is, surprisingly perhaps, ways in which they converge. For example, the ideal of student-centeredness within progressive education lends itself well to the economic idea of the student as a consumer. Sweden, in many ways an international role model of modern progressive education, is interesting to consider, as both traditional progressive ideals and the economic value of entrepreneurship are central aspects of contemporary educational policy. As such, the Swedish example of the state-sponsored program of entrepreneurial learning serves to illustrate the convergence of these two logics.

THE RISE OF ENTREPRENEURIAL LEARNING IN SWEDEN

In 2009, the Swedish government adopted a policy called *Entrepreneurship in the Educational System*, serving to encourage school boards to intensify the work on entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial learning. According to a survey conducted by the Swedish National Agency for Education, this work entails focusing on “the development of pupils’ curiosity, creativity and initiative as well as supporting special abilities required for starting up and running businesses.”²⁴ Entrepreneurial learning is understood to be based on the pupil’s “internal driving forces and motivation.” The policy applies to the entire educational system – from preschool to adult education – and a central aspect concerns stimulating the cooperation between schools and external actors in order to make school work more firmly grounded in so-called real world issues and practices.

The focus on entrepreneurship in education was prompted by a political discussion on the importance of adapting to the demands of an increasingly mobile labor market. Entrepreneurship in education also constitutes one of the European Union’s eight key competences intended to support “economic and social well-being.”²⁵ In the context of Swedish education, this focus has served a double aim. On the one hand it was intended to stimulate an increased knowledge in business-mindedness, and on the other hand it was conceived

as a progressive pedagogical approach geared to the encouragement of pupils' "innate curiosity, initiative and confidence from an early age."⁶ The double aim of entrepreneurship in education hints at a certain conceptual fuzziness. The preface to a systematic review published by the Swedish National Agency for Education states that: "The concept of entrepreneurship is ambiguous as it originates in the field of economics, and over the years it has been broadened so that it can be applied in many different areas varying from cultural to social and pedagogical."⁷

From an economic point of view, the rise of entrepreneurship in education coincides with the increasing influence of a market logic that has proven pervasive in all social spheres, from welfare provision to cultural work.⁸ From a pedagogical point of view, entrepreneurial learning appears to reactivate certain key words central to Swedish progressivism in its focus on student-centeredness, on promoting learning rather than teaching, as well as on leveling out social hierarchies (such as that between teacher and student).⁹

In spite of this conceptual fuzziness, it is clear that the implementation of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial learning has been appointed a key role on the educational agenda. For example, entrepreneurship is highlighted in Swedish national curricula at all levels and has been made into a cross-disciplinary and project-based school subject in secondary school and adult education. In addition, the state offers special grants for school boards to assist with the implementation of this perspective throughout the educational system.

From the point of view of philosophy of education, the inherent fuzziness of the concepts of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial learning is highly interesting because of the way it highlights the conflicting values of contemporary education. In particular, it offers an example of how the seemingly incommensurable perspectives of educational marketization and progressive ideals merge and even transform one another through the redefinition of key educational concepts.

In this article we aim to use the Swedish example of entrepreneurship in education as a springboard to discuss the unexpected alliance between stu-

dent-centered progressive education and the commercialization of schools. In doing so we wish to highlight the effects of this alliance on the relationship between teaching and learning and, consequently, on the teacher-student relation. In order to do this, we will first examine the conditions for the commercialization of contemporary education, and its impact on the teacher-student relation. We will then turn to progressive education, and examine the curious link between the ideal of student-centeredness and the economization of the role of the student. The article will conclude with a discussion on some inherent tensions visible in entrepreneurial learning, being at once an effect of the commercialization of schools and a pedagogical project firmly rooted in progressive ideals.

THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF EDUCATION

The overarching rationale motivating the commercialization of education is the value of economic progress. The notion of economic progress has acquired an almost universal status as a model of explanation within a variety of social institutions, all striving to gain legitimacy as reliable evidence-based practices within the discourse of what John Clarke and Janet Newman label “the managerial state.”¹⁰ As such, “economic methods and theories seem to be perfectly suited to the current public and political demand to make educational policymaking evidence-based – namely, guided, or at least informed, by sound, and preferably quantitative, research.”¹¹ Economic progress in the educational context is inevitably linked with human capital theory.¹² Human capital theory argues that the acquisition and use of skills and knowledge “are a form of capital, that this capital is in substantial part a product of deliberate investment, that it has grown in Western societies at a much faster rate than conventional (nonhuman) capital, and that its growth may well be the most distinctive feature of the economic system.”¹³ Following from this, human capital theory provides education with a clear cut role within the economic system, where education is expected to maximize the potential of each individual on a competitive market.

The accumulation of human capital, in turn, serves a vital function for the maintenance of the well-being of society at large. It is important to note

that this is a particular kind of well-being, however. From the point of view of human capital theory, well-being is conceived in economic terms. Rather than understanding well-being in the *eudaimonistic* sense of a flourishing life, economic well-being is grounded in “an individualistic preference-satisfying notion of well-being”¹⁴ The notion of well-being as corresponding with the satisfaction of immediate wants is problematic from an educational perspective as it presupposes already defined preferences. Contrary to this, one might argue that the very purpose of education is to arrive at an educated understanding of one’s preferences. Such an educated understanding must be preceded by education, lest well-being is reduced to the mere satisfaction of immediate wants.

A consequence of utilizing an individualistic, preference-satisfying notion of well-being in education is that it casts the student in the role of the consumer and, correspondingly, the teacher as a provider of services. David Bridges and Ruth Jonathan characterize the marketization of education in terms of a supplier-consumer model:

The main conditions that seem to be required for the “marketization” of education are, on the supply side of the educational economy, the creation of diversity and choice and, on the demand side, the placing of information and purchasing power in the hands of “consumers.”¹⁵

The problem with understanding education as an economic transaction is that it overturns a traditional educational logic according to which the role of the teacher is to offer perspectives on the world and on what it can be to live a flourishing life by examining different traditions of thought, and the role of the student is, through the process of education, to arrive at a sustainable understanding of personal and interpersonal well-being. Inherent in the supplier-consumer model is the assumption that the customer already knows what they want and the supplier should deliver accordingly. As Gert Biesta points out: “It forgets that a major reason for engaging in education is precisely to find out what it is that one actually needs – a process in which educational professionals play a crucial role because a major part of their expertise lies precisely there.”¹⁶ Consequently, the supplier-consumer model fundamentally undermines the authority of the

teacher by depriving the teacher of his or her professionalism.¹⁷ Professionalism, in this sense, builds on a foundation of public trust on which the teacher is entrusted to use their judgement to represent different authoritative ideas about human flourishing. As John White argues, “[t]he individual on his or her own is not the final authority on what counts as his or her flourishing. There is a centuries-long continuous tradition of thought about this topic to guide us.”¹⁸

In a sense, the supplier-consumer model appears to empower the student in so far as it bases education on the personal choices and desires of the student-consumer. These are limited choices, however, as they are circumscribed by the natural limitations of the student’s personal horizons. In addition, these choices are always subordinated to the transient demands of the labor market-making the goals of education both elusive and ever-changing. From this perspective, the influential idea of life-long learning – being a central part of the economization of education – illustrates the double nature of the kind of empowerment furthered by the commercialization of education. On the one hand, in terms of qualification, the model offers a seemingly endless range of choices with respect to employability. On the other hand, the idea of perpetual change transforms education into a means for transmitting narrowly defined skills, disregarding broader aims of education, such as establishing a sustainable notion of human flourishing grounded in tradition.

Having discussed some of the consequences of understanding education within an economic framework, we will now turn to progressive education in order to outline the unexpected alignment of progressive ideals, such as student-centered education, and educational marketization. In order to do that we will first briefly examine some of the key principles of the progressive movement.

PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION AND THE IDEAL OF STUDENT-CENTEREDNESS

According to Avi Mintz, “[t]he early principles of the progressive movement in education included broadening the curriculum, aligning it to the needs of diverse students, and using schooling to democratize society.”¹⁹

While the economic discourse on education rests on economic progress as its fundamental value, the progressive movement²⁰ emphasizes social progress. In the economic model, schools and education become means for accumulating human capital, whereas in progressive thought, schools and education become means for engineering a radically new social order based on democracy and equality. In order to reach these goals, educational institutions must be designed accordingly. Rather than teaching students *about* the conditions of democracy and social equality, schools should embody these values. That is, schools should be made into miniature democracies, where traditional hierarchies are dismantled. While ideologically very different from one another, the economic logic of neoliberalism (within which the economization of education is staged) and the progressive movement coincide in the ambition to utilize education as an instrument for enacting (rather than simply envisioning) a desirable social order. In the economic discourse on education, schools are typically conceived as businesses of sorts (in structure as well as content), while in the progressive discourse, schools are ideally set up as dynamic political bodies. The guiding principles and methods of the democratization of education in progressive thought may be summarized as follows:

[S]chools must educate the whole child (not just the mind), learning must be student-centered (rather than subject-centered or teacher-centered) because the child's interests and developmental maturity are to limit and guide all instruction, students must be physically active and intellectually engaged (rather than inert and passive), students' motivation must be intrinsic (while external coercion must be avoided), learning must involve discovery and experimentation (not drilling and learning by rote), and genuine learning is exciting and pleasurable (not joyless or painful).²¹

The focus on the intrinsic motivation of the student, as well as the importance placed on pleasurable experimentation, point to a notion of well-being that, while geared to collective flourishing, still appears to be founded on the satisfaction of the uneducated preferences of the individual. As Darling argues: “[t]

he idea of education which caters for each child's interests suggests designing a curriculum which allows choice between different activities according to the child's actual preferences."²² Even if the goal of progressive education is to emancipate children collectively, this process of emancipation is thought to follow from individual actions that, in turn, are taken to be manifestations of each child's supposedly natural inclinations. In a sense, then, this may turn out to be another, differently motivated, version of what White calls an individualistic preference-satisfying notion of well-being.²³

In order to substantiate this claim, we may look at some consequences of the progressive ideal of student-centeredness for the student-teacher relation. One consequence concerns the role of pain and discomfort in education. Mintz²⁴ and Mark Jonas,²⁵ have both argued (in different ways) that the progressive ideal declaring that learning must be pleasurable is problematic because it risks denying students meaningful challenges necessary for overcoming and broadening their actual preferences. While it is certainly important to distinguish between painful experiences that are educationally detrimental and those that are in fact beneficial for the students' development, "in trying to protect students from the former, educators often deny students the latter."²⁶ This fits well with the supplier-consumer model discussed above, since the goal of pleasurable learning assumes that it is the internal motivation (or preference) of the individual student that should guide the educational process. The work of the teacher, in this context, is inhibited by the demand to keep students happy. As Darling argues, "[o]ne symptom of this kind of belief is the great reluctance of the thoroughgoing child-centred teacher to intervene, to direct or to criticise when dealing with children."²⁷

Another related consequence concerns the question of teacher authority and the role of the teacher in progressive education. According to William Kitchen, in the progressivist view of education "with the child supposedly at the centre, the child creates his or her own meaning of the world, based on his or her own experiences and interactions with the environment." The problem with this view is that it leaves no room "for any form of authority and no belief in what authority represents,"²⁸ and that, as a result, the teacher ends up a mere

facilitator of learning (and supplier of services). When the teacher is denied the authority to offer a variety of perspectives on the world (of which some may be challenging and uncomfortable), education ends up promoting a limited – and limiting – understanding of human flourishing and well-being. When teachers are no longer held responsible for introducing students to traditions of thought that can help widen their understanding of themselves and the world, all that remains seems to be the questionable task of facilitating students' choices on an educational marketplace.

In this context, it is interesting to note a striking similarity between the educational language of the economic, and the progressive discourses on education, where both perspectives downplay (for different reasons) the importance of teaching in favor of the primacy of learning. The progressivist ideal of student-centeredness paves the way for focusing almost exclusively on learning, as “traditional” teaching evokes images of coercion and mindless drilling. This one-sided focus on learning opens up for a consumer-oriented understanding of education. As Biesta argues, “[t]his way of thinking introduces a logic which focuses on the users or consumers of the educational provision and a very suitable name for the consumer of education is, of course, ‘the learner.’”²⁹ Biesta concludes that, “[o]ne of the main problems with the new language of learning is that it allows for a re-description of the process of education in terms of an economic transaction”³⁰

In the remainder of this article, we return to the example of entrepreneurial learning as a contemporary outcome of the unexpected alignment of progressive ideals and the commercialization of education in a traditionally progressive educational setting. This will allow us to raise some concerns about central educational dimensions missing from progressive education (conceived in a trivial sense) and the currently dominant economic understanding of education.

THE CONCEPT OF EDUCATION IN ENTREPRENEURIAL LEARNING

As we have seen, the progressive ideal of student-centeredness fits

well with the idea of the student as a consumer in an educational market. This convergence between two ideologically very different traditions is obvious in the example of the rise of entrepreneurial learning in Sweden. On the one hand, the influential notion of student-centered education is visible throughout the policy documents prescribing the use of entrepreneurial learning in schools. In the curriculum for upper secondary education it is stated that the purpose of the subject of entrepreneurship is to “contribute to students developing confidence in their personal resources, and stimulate their creativity and desire to accept challenges and take responsibility for putting ideas into practice.” Furthermore, the subject of entrepreneurship “should help students develop both theoretical and practical knowledge, on the basis of their ideas and work processes. In connection to work processes, teaching should help students develop the ability to work purposefully, solve problems, take personal responsibility and co-operate with others.”³¹ This way of describing the process of education corresponds well with a Scandinavian educational tradition, firmly grounded in progressive ideals. According to Alfred Oftedal Telhaug, Odd Mediås and Petter Aasen:

the Scandinavian countries were particularly oriented towards international reform/pedagogic theory, its appreciation of the child’s personal potential and the desire to place the pupil at the centre. The ideal was the pupil-centred, contented school which provided space for the pupils to be spontaneous and creative, and which tried to engage them in a productive activity that gave them the opportunity to be involved in the choice of problems and methods of problem-solving through investigative and creative initiative. The pupils would be encouraged to seek relevant sources and to gain knowledge through their own efforts.³²

At the same time, the purpose of student-centeredness within the framework of entrepreneurial learning is explicitly geared towards creating business-minded individuals, resulting in the appropriation of progressive ideals by an overarching economic logic. Accordingly, the subject of entrepreneurship “should give students the opportunity to develop knowledge of project finances and of

starting and running a business and by doing this develop knowledge of business economics.”³³ In this way, the progressive ideal of student-centeredness (and other progressive values such as creativity, experience, and intrinsic motivation) lends itself well as a tool for constructing entrepreneurial citizens.

As we saw earlier, this kind of educational discourse promotes an individual preference-satisfying notion of well-being. It is questionable whether this kind of well-being is enough to sustain a robust concept of education, one capable of transcending the narrow scope of the immediate wants of the student. Such an education, it seems, needs to look beyond the limitations of students’ own ideas in order to construe a common understanding of well-being, informed by a “centuries-long continuous tradition of thought”³⁴ It appears, then, that progressive education and the economic discourse on education find an unexpected common ground in their opposition to traditional education. Where traditional education is founded on conservative ideals such as the undisputed authority of the teacher, subject-centeredness, and the hierarchical order of the teacher-student relation, both progressivism and the economic discourse on education (in different ways, and for different reasons) rely on the reversal of these ideals. What becomes apparent in the case of entrepreneurial learning in Sweden is that this unexpected fusion of progressive values with an economic logic reinforces a supplier-consumer model of education.

To conclude, the concept of education in entrepreneurial learning utilizes the positive aura of progressive ideals, such as student-centeredness, creativity, and internal motivation, in order to create business-minded and entrepreneurial citizens who can contribute to the economic progress of society at large, in line with the rationale of human capital theory. Because entrepreneurial learning has proved very influential in the context of Swedish educational policy, the individual preference-satisfying notion of well-being (inherent in human capital theory) has been allowed to define the overall aim of education. This is highly problematic for two main reasons. One, it underestimates the richness of educational thought, and the understanding of human well-being informed by a *eudaimonistic* tradition, so foreign to the instrumentalism of the economization

of the concept of well-being. Two, it threatens the necessary imbalance in the teacher-student relation. Contrary to the supplier-consumer model of education, a more traditional understanding of education hinges on the preservation of the teacher's right and responsibility to offer students glimpses of traditions of thought not previously known to them. It is this responsibility that is undermined when the teacher must approach students as customers whose uneducated preferences are to guide the educational process.

1 John Darling and Sven Erik Nordenbo, "Progressivism," in *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Education*, eds., Nigel Blake, Paul Smeyers, Richard Smith and Paul Standish (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 288-308.

2 Darling and Nordenbo, "Progressivism," 305.

3 Tal Gilead, "Rousseau, Happiness, and the Economic Approach to Education," *Educational Theory* 62, no. 5 (2012): 267-285.

4 Skolverket [National Agency for Education], *Entreprenörskap i skolan – en kartläggning* [Entrepreneurship in Schools – A Survey] (2010) Translation by authors. http://www.skolverket.se/polopoly_fs/1.111238!/Menu/article/attachment/Entrepren%25F6rskap%2520i%2520skolan%2520en%2520kartl%25E4ggning.pdf

5 European Commission http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/entrepreneurship_en

6 <http://www.skolverket.se/skolutveckling/larande/entreprenorskap>

7 Skolverket [National Agency of Education], *Skapa och våga – om entreprenörskap i skolan* [Creating and Daring – On Entrepreneurship in Schools] (2015) Translation by authors. http://www.skolverket.se/om-skolverket/publikationer/visa-enskild-publikation?_xurl_=http%3A%2F%2Fwww5.skolverket.se%2Fwtpub%2Fws%2Fskolbok%2Fwpubext%2Ftrycksak%2F-Blob%2Fpdf3394.pdf%3Fk%3D3394

8 John Clarke, Janet Newman, Nick Smith, Elizabeth Vidler, and Louise Westmarland, *Creating Citizen-Consumers: Changing Publics and Changing Public Services* (London: Sage Publications, 2007).

9 Johan Dahlbeck & Peter Lilja, "The Concept of Authority and the Swedish Educational Crisis," *Philosophy of Education* 2016, ed., Natasha Levinson

(Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2018).

10 John Clarke and Janet Newman, *The Managerial State* (London: Sage Publications, 1997).

11 Tal Gilead, "Educational Policymaking and the Methodology of Positive Economics: A Theoretical Critique," *Educational Theory* 64, no. 4. (2014): 349-368, 351.

12 Tal Gilead, "Education and the Logic of Economic Progress," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 46, no. 1 (2012): 113-131.

13 Theodore W. Schultz, "Investment in Human Capital," *The American Economic Review* 51, no. 1 (1961): 1-17, 1.

14 John White, "Education, the Market and the Nature of Personal Well-Being," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 50, no. 4. (2002): 442-456, 442.

15 David Bridges and Ruth Jonathan, "Education and the Market," in *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Education*, eds., Nigel Blake, Paul Smeyers, Richard Smith, and Paul Standish (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003): 126-145, 127.

16 Gert Biesta, "Against Learning: Reclaiming a Language for Education in an Age of Learning," *Nordisk pedagogik* 25 (2005): 54-66, 59.

17 Feinberg explains that "[i]n market models consumers are supposed [to] know what they need, and producers bid in price and quality to satisfy them. In professional models the producer not only services a need, but also defines it and the professional body is supposed to maintain quality." See Walter Feinberg, "Choice, Autonomy, Need-Definition and Educational Reform," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 20, no. 5. (2001): 402-409, 403.

18 White, "Education, the Market and the Nature of Personal Well-Being," 452.

19 Avi I. Mintz, "The Happy and Suffering Student? Rousseau's *Emile* and the Path not Taken in Progressive Educational Thought," *Educational Theory* 62, no. 3 (2012): 249-265, 249.

20 In this context, the term "progressive movement" is intended to describe the loosely held together cluster of ideas and practices reacting against "traditional" educational ideals of a subject- and teacher-oriented kind of education accused of promoting the instrumental drilling of inert students.

21 Mintz, "The Happy and Suffering Student?," 249.

22 John Darling, "Child-Centred, Gender-Centred: A Criticism of Progress-

sive Curriculum Theory from Rousseau to Plowden,” *Oxford Review of Education* 12, no. 1 (1986): 31-40, 37.

23 White, “Education, the Market and the Nature of Personal Well-Being.”

24 Mintz, “The Happy and Suffering Student?”

25 Mark E. Jonas, “When Teachers Must Let Education Hurt: Rousseau and Nietzsche on Compassion and the Educational Value of Suffering,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 44, no. 1 (2010): 45-60.

26 Jonas, “When Teachers Must Let Education Hurt,” 46.

27 Darling, “Child-Centred, Gender-Centred,” 39.

28 William H. Kitchen, *Authority and the Teacher* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 42.

29 Biesta, “Against Learning,” 57.

30 Ibid., 58.

31 Skolverket [National Agency for Education] *Entrepreneurship*. http://www.skolverket.se/polopoly_fs/1.194801!/Menu/article/attachment/Entrepreneurship.pdf

32 Alfred Oftedal Telhaug, Odd Asbjørn Mediås, and Petter Aasen, “The Nordic Model in Education: Education as Part of the Political System in the Last 50 Years,” *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 50, no. 3 (2006): 245-283, 254-255.

33 Skolverket [National Agency for Education] *Entrepreneurship*.

34 White, “Education, the Market and the Nature of Personal Well-Being,” 452.