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"PROGRESSIVISM" AND THE PRIMARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM

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INTRODUCTION

More than occasionally, it happens that a thinker who has long been sceptical or troubled about beliefs and practices which are widespread in the world or fellowship in which he lives summons together his intellectual and moral resources and offers forth a critique or alternative conception of almost breathtaking audacity. Consider for instance Copernicus' theory on the revolution of heavenly bodies, or Darwin's theory of evolution, or Kierkegaard's attack upon Christendom, or Einstein's theory of relativity, or indeed Dewey's theories on education. A brief reflection on this small sample of original thinkers is in itself enough to remind us that fundamental reappraisals of established routines in thought and action generally create "quite a stir". Such a polite euphemism discreetly masks the fact that the "stir" normally signifies nothing as much as a partisan call-to-arms, not only among those who sense something ominous in the new offerings, but also among the premature devotees of something which was properly offered for cricital consideration.

The thinker who understands the nature of the partisan spirit and, its lust for ideological bloodletting must often remain resigned to the fact, however, that the published products of years of disciplined study will be variously construed and reconstrued in the rhetorical forays and realignments which mark virtually all "major debates". The unfortunate event signified by the phrase "the debate got politicised" illustrates here the almost orgiastic character of partisanship in full flight. The intensity of orgiastic events is rarely matched by their endurance, however, intemperate energies generally having a relative short lifespan when compared with the more sustaining power of a compelling insight thus it repeatedly

occurs that, when the dust settles after the stormy reception of the fruits of an original mind, what was widely regarded as a heresy on its first appearance becomes gradually, or quickly, incorporated into new routines and practices.

It is clear that the dust has not yet finally settled on the controversies raised by Dewey's educational writings, though it is earnestly to be hoped that the fruitless divisiveness which marked the "debate" on these writings in the United States throughout many decades of this century is finally a thing of the past. It was thus with some surprise that I read an essay by Dr. Daniel Murphy which seemed to single out Dewey as a particularly baleful influence on the new curriculum introduced into Irish primary schools in 1971. The essay, entitled "The Dilemmas of Primary Curriculum Reform," is a hard-hitting critique and in places — especially where it assembles galleries of "anti-progressive theorists" in support of arguments — it takes on the character of an onslaught.

On first reading the essay, the thought occurred to me that Dr. Murphy may have lent a deliberately polemical note to his argument or, in other words, that he may in some measure have been employing the writer's equivalent of tongue-in-cheek. This impression was gained from a number of curiously strange tendencies which revealed themselves in the essay; for instance, the tendency to identify Dewey with "progressivism" and to regard the resulting hybrid as a chief culprit; the fact that the rhetoric and assumptions of *A Nation at Risk* type studies were left unchallenged; the tendency to bunch such unlikely fellows as Maritain, Hirst, Buber, Peters, Bantock and Phenix into one "anti-progressive" bed and, not least, an absence of any considered rationale for an alternative to the position under attack. If an artful polemic was indeed intended, or partially intended, by Dr. Murphy then perhaps much of my own argument which follows below must surely represent a fool's undertaking. If, on the other hand, Dr. Murphy's efforts are devoid of irony, then the substance of his charges and of my own reflections on these charges take on a much more serious character.

Before presenting my own reflections I should like to make two brief points. The first is that if the following essay looks itself like a hard-hitting critique then I must stress that the purpose of a critique is to share with others one's own critical appraisal of some policy or argument or practice and, equally important, to invite further critical appraisal of one's own standpoint. This seems to me to be the best safeguard against dogmatism. The second point concerns the layout of my own observations. The paper will have four sections. The second will examine "progressivism" as an educational ideology. The third will consider the question of "progressivism" in the primary

curriculum, and the final section will review some issues which a formal reappraisal of the curriculum, which is currently under way, might address with some profit.

I. THE QUESTION OF "THE DEWEYAN PHILOSOPHY"

It appears to be the case that Dewey is still widely regarded among educational circles as the prophet of "progressivism" in education. That this view is a mistaken one I shall attempt to point out directly here. Dewey's book *Experience and Education* was first published in 1938, towards the end of his active life. The book is a reformulation of his main arguments on education in the light of criticisms of his earlier formulations. These earlier arguments were principally advanced in his books *The School and Society* (1900), *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902) and *Democracy and Education* (1916).[2] If one, therefore, is to identify an enduring philosophy of education which can be linked definitively to the mature philosopher Dewey, it is principally to *Experience and Education* that one should look. This is not to dismiss his earlier educational writings but rather to suggest that their importance might more properly be regarded as historical and contextual rather than philosophical in a definitive sense. By way of brief analogy, Einstein's earlier formulations of his theory of relativity are informative, but not definitive.

In the opening chapter of *Experience and Education* entitled "Traditional Versus Progressive Education", Dewey criticises what he views as a widespread tendency of mankind to adopt partisan standpoints, or in other words, to formulate its beliefs "in terms of Either-Ors, between which it recognises no intermediate possibilities".[3] He takes pains in this opening chapter, as he does in his preface and throughout the book, to distance himself from two extremes identified by the terms "traditional" and "progressive". Arising from his sustained criticism of both extremes and, in particular, from his criticisms of progressive practice, Dewey argues forcefully for a concept of education "with no qualifying objectives", which would require teachers to have an enlightened understanding of the complexities of human experience. Thus they might develop a disciplined insight into how impediments to fruitful learning might be identified and tackled.

Three extracts from the book, to answer the three objectives raised below, should illustrate that Dewey's most considered statement on education cannot be regarded as an endorsement of the more controversial of "progressive" influences, influences which have understandably been selected for particular criticism by Dr. Murphy in his essay. These influences are:

1. The downgrading of the teacher's importance by a "child-centred" approach
2. The threat to traditional disciplines of study arising from the concept of an "integrated curriculum"
3. The neglect of the authority of tradition

What is questionable, however, is Dr. Murphy's identification of these influences with what he describes as "the Deweyan philosophy". In relation to the first issue Dewey envisages anything but a displacement of the teacher.

> *On the contrary, basing education upon personal experience may mean more multiplied and more intimate contacts between the mature and the immature than ever existed in the traditional school, and consequently more, rather than less, guidance by others.*[4]

The importance of the teacher is further emphasised at many points throughout the book,[5] where Dewey makes concise but explicit arguments for a more sophisticated and more professional conception of the business of the educator.

Proceeding now to the second issue, namely, the threat to traditional disciplines, it must be acknowledged that Dewey persistently argued that the backgrounds and interests of pupils, as embodied in the quality and range of their present experiences, were of first importance in deciding how to organise and present material for study. It should not be concluded from this, however, that Dewey was thereby attempting to dismantle the accepted division of human knowledge into various disciplines of thought. When describing "anything which can be called a study" he used terms which have a distinctly old-fashioned ring: for instance, "arithmetic", "history", "geography", "spelling lesson", "natural sciences".[6] That his purpose in tailoring a syllabus to the environment of pupils was one of pedagogical ingenuity rather than epistemological revolution is evident from our second extract, which runs as follows:

> *But finding material for learning within experience is only the first step. The next step is the progressive development of what is already experienced into a fuller and richer and more organised form, a form that gradually approximates that in which subject matter is presented to the skilled, mature person.*[7].

With regard to the third issue, the authority of tradition, or, in Dr. Murphy's words, "the wisdom and values inherited from the past", Dewey recognises this as a fundamental issue, but in doing so his

prose is singularly devoid of the invocation of imposing sentiments.[8] Notwithstanding the possible loss of impact which his style might here occasion among his readership, his continual references to the "continuity of experience" and to the enduring influence of past experience upon present experience[9] nevertheless reveal the presence of a thinker with a sober and practical eye for the *actual effects* of historical influences. Consider, for example, the almost matter-of-fact, yet emphatic, style and absence of eulogising tone in the third extract from *Experience and Education,* quoted at some length below:

> *But the achievements of the past provide the only means at command for understanding the present. Just as the individual has to draw in memory upon his own past to understand the conditions in which he individually finds himself, so the issues and problems of the present* ***social*** *life are in such intimate and direct connection with the past that students cannot be prepared to understand either these problems or the best way of dealing with them without delving into their roots in the past. In other words the sound principle that the objectives of learning are in the future and its immediate materials are in present experience can be carried into effect only in the degree that present experience is stretched, as it were, backward. It can expand into the future only as it is also enlarged to take in the past.*[10]

Admittedly, there is no nostalgia here for any civilisation dismissed to bygone days by an uncouth cult of contemporaneity, and those with a profound appreciation for classical authors might sense some irreverence in Dewey's tone. Nevertheless, Dewey's insistence here that present experience must itself be stretched backward, that it must "take in the past" into its understanding of itself, throws up quite a powerful challenge to teachers. This challenge is to acknowledge the consequences for themselves and for their pupils from their own (and their pupils') standing within history. The implications of this challenge can be explored in more detail later but it is important to note at this point that the charge of a radical breach with the past, which is often levelled at "pragmatist" philosophy, is unwarranted in the case of Dewey's more enduring educational arguments.

Before leaving Dewey there is a further, well considered aspect of Dr. Murphy's critique of "the Deweyan philosophy" which calls for some comment. This is the surprising neglect of artistic sensibility in Dewey's writings on education experience. In his book *Art as Experience* (published in 1934) Dewey advances a major theory which gives to art a privileged status in communicating emotional exper-

iences which have a liberating and unifying force. Whatever about the ultimate merits of this theory as an adequate account of the nature of art, it has considerable practical merits as far as pedagogy is concerned. Not the least of these is its illustration of the potential of art to supply a medium of "unhindered communication between man and man" in a world which Dewey himself describes as "a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience".[11] The educational implications of this theory are not made explicit by Dewey, however, and accordingly the criticism that the arts in education, and in particular literature, are neglected by him is one which betokens an important inadequacy in his educational philosophy. Inadequacies such as, however, this should not cause us to overlook the many seminal insights that Dewey's thinking on education has made available to us.

II. ON THE IDEOLOGY OF "PROGRESSIVISM"

"What the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author meant." Thus wrote the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur in a recent work.[12] To many, perhaps, this will sound like a classic piece of sophistry on the "riddle-me-this" variety, in which philosophers are notoriously thought to indulge. The fact remains, however, that whenever we read a text containing an argument — for instance a legal judgement, a policy statement, a newspaper editorial, or, in a particular way, a philosophical work — our own preferences and prejudices invariably come into play. That is to say, they are invariable — indeed unavoidably — brought to bear on what the text addresses to us and in this sense they act as a filter, not merely influencing what our judgement decides to accept or reject, but also *colouring* what is thus accepted or rejected. Hence, what a text signifies for its more unscrupulous readers can be *quite at odds* with the original purposes of the author. The text, so to speak, becomes decontextualised from the circumstances which led to its production and becomes recontexualised for the reader in circumstances which are quite different.

At its worst, unscrupulousness in interpretation — an event which is far more serious than the popular phrase "quoted out of context" suggests — manifests itself as an undisciplined or eclectic assembly of erudite quotations to add "philosophical weight" to the particular ideological cause one wishes to advance. Ideological movements which have little to recommend them by way of philosophical integrity thus often succeed in taking on respectable philosophical clothing, but only at the cost of doing violence to the intellectual sources which they have, in effect, looted. This partisan endeavour has already been briefly alluded to in the introduction but I have

returned to it here in some detail to shed light on the nature of the connection between Dewey's philosophy and the ideology called "progressivism".

It is indeed difficult to find any serious philosophical precedents for an approach to education which embodies a reliance on principles such as the following, which seem to me to represent the core of "progressivism":

1. A displacement of the teacher as the person principally responsible for bringing about experiences which are genuinely educational
2. A belief that, if left primarily to their own devices, children will be guided by spontaneous curiosity and discovery to further their own education
3. A dismissive attitude to the past, associated with the belief that contemporary insights possess a superior wisdom to anything which preceded them

A careful reading of the distinctive works of authors still widely associated with "progressivism", namely, Froebel, Pestalozzi, Montessori and Dewey, reveals that authority for the kind of principles just outlined cannot legitimately be claimed by any appeal to these works. The notion of judicious and systematic leadership by discerning adults is central to the thinking of each author mentioned. Not even Rousseau, so frequently regarded as the arch-scoundrel of educational thought in the modern period, can be placed in the pillory as the architect of such proposals. This is an important point, because, despite the general impression of educational anarchy occasioned by less than circumspect reading of Rousseau's *Émile* in the generations since it was first published, the aura of licence which the book is thought to evoke is quite illusory. True, Rousseau made bold statements like: "Reverse the usual practice and you will almost always do right"[13] and "love childhood, indulge its sports, its pleasures, its delightful instincts".[14] More importantly, however, he drew attention to the particular meaning conferred on words by the context in which they are used in argument and he warned accordingly: "I must admit that my words are often contradictory but I do not think there is any contradiction in my ideas."[15] He also warned that the surest way to make a child miserable is to give him everything he wants.[16]

Again, the central importance of the teacher, not as an overbearing pedagogue, but as a gifted individual with a singular capacity for adroitness and foresight, pervades the entire *Émile*. The spontaneity which the pupil is undoubtedly allowed occurs within a

context and within limits systematically *decided in advance by the teacher,* but about which the pupil is kept in the dark. If further proof of this point is needed let me suggest the following experiment. Carefully subtract all the arguments and actions in the *Émile* which are attributable to the teacher and then consider what is left. With the disappearance of the teacher the entire argument disappears! All along, it now emerges, the text was a plea for — and indeed presupposed — a more sophisticated and less military type of authority for the teacher.[17]

We could perhaps continue in this critical vein by removing piecemeal the philosophical clothing which "progressivism" appropriated unto itself from the works of serious thinkers. Such a procedure hardly seems dignified, however, and besides, there is the distinct probability at this point that the spectacle thus revealed in the end, at which the eye of the vulgar might still wish to gaze, might not only be embarrassingly naked but might also be far from imposing. Suffice it to reiterate then that "progressivism" as an ideology cannot legitimately claim warrant from any of the more distinctive works in the history of educational philosophy.

A brief word now about Piaget. Dr. Murphy identifies "Piagetian learning theory" and its "pedagogical inadequacies" as an important contributory influence to "progressivism". I was somewhat surprised by this, as I had never understood pedagogy to be in the forefront among Piaget's concerns. Whether rightly so or not, I am inclined to view Piaget not as an educational psychologist but rather as a genetic epistemologist. His studies on concept formation seem to me to represent not so much a comprehensive learning theory as an attempt to provide an *epistemological* theory to explain the dynamic structures of concept formation from a genetic standpoint. That such a theory might properly comprise an element of a learning theory or a pedagogical theory seems reasonable enough, but it cannot claim *to represent* such a more embracing theory. I am not sure that Piaget himself would advance such a claim. It cannot be denied, however, that he has been widely regarded *as* an educational psychologist. By way of analogy, the study of physiology is not primarily concerned with sporting activities, but a study of the physiology of adolescence is of obvious benefit to a physical education teacher in a post-primary school. In any case, it seems to me that "progressivism" can no more claim authority from the work of Piaget than it can from that of Dewey or Pestalozzi, or Montessori.

But the fact remains, as Dr. Murphy rightly points out, that "progressivism" as an educational ideology was widely embraced by authorities in the Soviet Union and in the United States. How can such apparently indefensible events be accounted for? Were any

critiques of "progressivism" advanced or entertained? If so, why did they seem so ineffectual? In relation to this point it is worth noting that Dewey's own critique made a timely appearance in 1938. By this time, however, it seems that the Soviet authorities had already jettisoned what they had taken to be the "Deweyan philosophy". It also seems that the ideological momentum of 'progressivism" in the United States was so great that this most essential contribution of Dewey's was largely ignored, and indeed *remained* largely ignored. Thus, we return once more to the theme opened up in the introduction: when ideological fervour lays hold of the experimental formulation of a new conception by an original thinker, not only do the thinker's own modifications and reformulations tend to become eclipsed, but the thinker's own name tends to get associated with the excesses which the earlier formulation, now raised to the level of dogma, are seen to propagate. Accordingly, one of the primary features of any ideology which actively promotes itself as an "ism" is its antiphilosophical bias, that is, its antagonistic attitude towards other "isms" and its inability to put its own claim to truth at risk in a critical interplay with ideas from elsewhere.

III. "PROGRESSIVISM" AND THE PRIMARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Perhaps the ground has been sufficiently prepared now to explore the question of "progressivism" in the Irish Primary School Curriculum of 1971, to what extent is "progressivism" the inspiration of that curriculum? The Foreword to the *Teacher's Handbook,* written by the then Minister for Education, Pádraig Faulkner, clearly identifies the inspectors in the primary branch of the Department of Education as the main authors of the curriculum. This fact in itself should give pause to any suggestion that the new proposals might represent a charter for "progressivism" in Irish primary schools. It would be quite uncharacteristic of the Irish primary school inspectorate — and perhaps of any inspectorate — to acquiesce in any proposal which would remove teachers to the periphery of the educational stage. Equally surprising would be any recommendation from the inspectorate to the effect that progress in education would entail a decisive severing of links with the past.

In this connection it is worth noting that, wherever the language of the *Handbook* might seem to reveal the influence of "progressivism", the authority of tradition is ever in close attendance. "The child is now seen to be the most active agent in his own education" and "the teacher is no longer regarded as one who merely imparts information etc."[18] — both statements which Dr. Murphy selects for critical elaboration in his essay — may seem at first sight to signal something quite unprecedented. Immediately however, this

new departure is placed in the context of "the words of Pearse", which stress the qualities of inspiration, enthusiasm and infectiousness as distinct from those of pedantry and didacticism on the part of the teacher.[19] Lest doubts might remain among its readers concerning a diminution in standing for the teacher, the *Handbook* adds: "The role of the teacher while thus seen in a new and different light is in no way diminished in importance."[20]

Other issues which call for examination are those of individual and discovery learning, integration of subject matter and the underlying principle of learning from first-hand experience. In Dr. Murphy's essay there is a concern expressed that a reliance on "enquiry-discovery" will preclude "the disciplined reflective logical process traditionally thought to require development through systematic instruction." This is an understandable concern, particularly if school comes to be seen as a centre where pupils gather to "do their own thing" as they please. If we examine the chapter of the *Handbook* dealing with Social and Environmental Studies, which provides perhaps the most novel suggestions in the entire curriculum, it should soon become evident that anything but haphazard self-indulgence by the pupils is authorised here. This section of the handbook also explains that the concept of integrated studies is a pedagogically appropriate one for children but that it does not represent a threat to the traditional disciplines of knowledge. Separate syllabuses for these are very much in evidence in the various chapters of the *Handbook*. The potential for integration and for pedagogical advantage in the natural curiosity of children is introduced in the following terms:

> *This natural curiosity points to an ideal way of integrating the school curriculum, for the child's questions concerning the world about him know no subject barriers but range over a wide field of knowledge. His experience and unorganised knowledge are the basis of many fields of study, some of which such as History, Civics, Geography and Elementary Science are a natural development of Social and Environmental Studies.*[21]

Rather than being left to develop in an unstructured way on its own, the *Handbook* continually emphasises that this natural curiosity provides fertile possibilities for judicious and systematic action by the teacher. The recommendations on Nature Expeditions, for instance, quickly kill any idea that these represent a careless romp through the countryside and also refute any suggestion that order and disciplined reflection have been abandoned:

> *They (expeditions) will have little value unless carefully*

planned beforehand. Each expedition should have a set purpose . . . and the pupils should have a clear idea of this purpose and the work to be done. The amount of preparation will vary in proportion to the duration of the trip. It may entail careful preliminary discussion with the pupils, the arranging of groups to carry out certain tasks and the drawing up of a simple plan of the route. It will also be necessary for the teacher to visit beforehand the area involved to enable him to plan the visit and anticipate the pupils' questions.[22]

Finally, from the viewpoint of moral education, or, as I would prefer to put it, the engagement of the pupil's ethical and spiritual sensibilities, this innovatory section of the new curriculum has much to recommend it. Not only does it seek to promote favourable attitudes and habits in such matters as conservation, the planning of work, and co-operation in industry; more profoundly, for children born into an overwhelmingly technological age, it can bring to light in a *directly experienced* manner a deep appreciation of an entire order of things in the environment which cannot be attributed to the achievements of mankind, namely the enduring rhythms and mysteries of Nature.

IV. QUESTIONS FOR A REVIEW

In this final section I should like to consider the question of inconsistencies in the primary curriculum and to examine also the implementation of the curriculum. The question of inconsistencies is properly raised by Dr. Murphy as a serious issue. Perhaps the most significant of these inconsistencies is the incompatibility between, on the one hand, the insistent and distinctly puritanical flavour of the brief chapter on religion, and, on the other, the tone of suggestion, advice and discussion which generally predominates in the other chapters. The authors of the curriculum betray a distinct "steer clear of that province" attitude to the question of catechetics, despite the fact that the keynote of the new proposals was that every opportunity was to be availed of for integration of learning from the various subjects studied. Therefore, any serious attempt to resolve this contradiction during a review of the curriculum would it seems to me, benefit greatly from the experience of those upon whom responsibility for integration is primarily placed, namely teachers in the country's primary schools. Accordingly, the review would have to begin with an acknowledgement that wisdom in the matter of Religious Education does not rest solely in ecclesiastical quarters.

Reference to integration just now places in focus a second in-

consistency, namely, that beween the expressed emphasis on the curriculum as an "essentially integrated entity" and the separate syllabuses provided for the various subjects. As already intimated in the previous section, however, a close reading of the individual chapters makes the reader aware that, while the standing of the traditional disciplines is not to be placed in jeopardy, some new approaches to these disciplines are advocated. We have briefly seen how these approaches give effect to the principle of integration in the case of Social and Environmental Studies. Similar recommendations to relate the material being studied to work in other areas are also made in the other chapters, for example, Irish, Mathematics, English.[23] Thus, it might be said that this inconsistency melts away on a detailed study of the various chapters. This is a less than satisfactory answer, however, to the pertinent question raised by Dr. Murphy about how the principle of integration affects the standing of the traditional school disciplines. In order to resolve this issue properly, I would argue that Chapter II of the *Handbook* entitled "The Structure of the Curriculum," needs to be revised and enlarged somewhat from its present one-and-a-half pages. Irregularities might thus be removed and the chapter might provide *a concise, coherent rationale,* explaining adequately the concept of integration, together with some brief practical illustrations of how the principle might operate within and between the various subjects of study.

Proceeding now to survey the operation of the curriculum in the schools, perhaps it should not be necessary to ask — in the light of what has been argued — if the excesses of "progressivism" have made inroads upon the daily conduct of primary education in Ireland. I suspect however, that the agenda of questions at the end of Dr. Murphy's essay presuppose a different view, and reveal a measure of uneasiness on this matter. Most of these questions have already been addressed above; for example, the standing and role of the teacher, traditional disciplines and the structure of the curriculum, the arts in the curriculum, Piaget's theories and the authority of tradition more generally. But two which still call for attention concern (i) the possibility that a decline in standards in basic disciplines like mathematics and languages may have been occasioned by the new curriculum, and (ii) the possibility that socially disadvantaged children may have suffered particularly badly as regards "the teaching of the basics".

In relation to the first issue here, perhaps it is best to refer briefly to the available evidence gathered since the introduction of the curriculum in 1971. Since that date a total of five evaluation studies, of various scope and depth, have been carried out on the implementation and effects of the curriculum. Bibliographical information on

these is provided in the notes at the end of this essay and the reader is referred to these for a full picture.[24] Suffice it to relate here, however, that all evaluations found that standards in English had improved, with the exception of spelling and handwriting, where some deterioration was noted. Similarly, all the evaluations discovered that understanding of mathematical concepts had improved significantly, with the exception of memorisation of number facts and computational skills. As far as standards in Irish are concerned the evidence from the evaluations is inconclusive, two reporting that achievement in written Irish had disimproved while another reported some improvement in oral Irish. The question of standards in Irish in schools at all levels is a much wider one, moreover, than a review of the curriculum could bring within its scope. Before leaving the issue of standards in "the basics", however, it is worth recalling the overall assessment of the changes by the Department of Education itself, by quoting the following extract from its own evaluation study:

> *The findings of the present survey indicate that the New Curriculum has had considerable impact on the practice of Irish Primary Schools over the past five years. Furthermore, the effects of the New Curriculum on the attainments of pupils are generally considered to be beneficial. Only in a few curriculum areas is the New Curriculum perceived as having the effect of lowering standards of attainment. These findings, based on questionnaires completed by Principal teachers in consultation with their staffs, are in general agreement with the views of teachers as reported in previous surveys.*[25]

The question of socially disadvantaged children becoming even more disadvantaged *vis à vis* their more affluent peers as a result of the new curriculum should not detain us. None of the five evaluation studies included social class as a variable, so no direct evidence is available in this matter. All five of the evaluations commented most frequently and most favourably, however, on the newly introduced principle of *using the pupil's own environment in the educational activities of the school.* Had significant rifts in achievement occurred between various social classes as a result of the new approaches it is doubtful if such a socially sensitive principle would enjoy such universal approval among primary teachers. The last of the evaluation studies — Sr. Marian Walsh's thesis — confirms and extends a finding of some of the other surveys, to the effect that practical action based on this principle was not as widespread among teachers as was acceptance of the principle itself. This was mainly due to the fact that teachers' desire to implement the principle more

widely was considerably curtailed by external factors such as large classes, inflexible classroom layout, inadequate support materials and lack of inservice courses.

And so to our own conclusions. Firstly, whereas the thrust of Dr. Murphy's criticisms are directed against "progressivism" as an educational ideology, and in that regard I would find' myself in general agreement with him, I would also wish to argue with emphasis that "progressivism" cannot claim authority from the central educational writings of Dewey, nor indeed from the works of Piaget. This is not to deny that the works of these authors might have shortcomings in other respects, but to say that such shortcomings should not blind us to some rare merits in their thinking.

Secondly, "progressivism" cannot be regarded properly as the inspiration of the 1971 curriculum. Notwithstanding its inconsistencies, this curriculum does not undervalue the importance of the teacher or the authority of tradition. Indeed, insofar as any serious attempt is made to implement it, it offers much greater scope for professional responsibility to the teacher. Although the extent of this professional autonomy may sometimes be curtailed in practice by local circumstances, the principle should be welcomed by all who have the enhancement of quality in education at heart. Thereafter, the priority becomes one of further action to secure more widespread implementation of the principle.

Thirdly, related to these two points is the significance, briefly mentioned in the first part of this essay, of the teacher's standing within history and the challenge arising from this. To see the new curriculum with a proper historical perspective is not merely to appreciate the final emergence of Irish primary education from the "payment-by-results" mentality which pervades post-primary education. Many primary teachers, who are increasingly coming under pressure to groom their sixth classes for secondary school entrance examinations, are already aware of how injurious this pressure can prove to their understanding of themselves as educators and to the quality of their work with pupils.

Fourthly, the emphasis in the 1971 curriculum on the enrichment of the experience of the pupil and on the recognition of his fullness as a human being do not provide a warrant for self-indulgence or for disregarding what generations of disciplines and fruitful enquiry have achieved. To put it in terms reminiscent of Martin Buber, whom Dr. Murphy approvingly cites, what the majority of chapters of this curriculum invite the teacher to do is to carry out for himself or herself a purposeful, judicious "selection of the world";[26] a selection which becomes concentrated in the presence of the teacher with his pupils.

Far from any spurious integration of inessentials, perhaps one could here begin to appreciate, if one sincerely lived with the *practical* spirit of this curriculum for long enough, what Buber was intimating when he spoke, again stressing the authenticity of personal experience, of "the great dynamic unity of the multiform in which multiformity is formed into unity of character."[27] I have often felt that Buber's remarks in this context refer more pertinently to the teacher than to his or her pupils.

Finally, to speak of living sincerely with the practical spirit of the curriculum, as I have just suggested, is to view education as a conversation, in the best Socratic sense of that word. The lack of consultation which attended the arrival of the curriculum in 1971 is not the kind of event which augurs well for the birth of such conversation, or for the lively consideration of new ideas by teachers. It is earnestly to be hoped that in the current review this deficiency will be rectified.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The first edition of *Experience and Education* was published in 1938 by the scholarly society, Kappa Delta Phi. It was published by Collier-MacMillan in 1963 and has been regulary reprinted since then. The 1978 edition was used in preparing this paper.

2. John Dewey, *The School and Society, The Child and the Curriculum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1902); John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).

3. Dewey, *Experience and Education,* p. 17.

4. Ibid., p. 21.

5. Ibid., pp. 38, 40, 45, 56, 58-59, 71, 76.

6. Ibid., pp. 48, 75.

7. Ibid., pp. 73-74.

8. In this respect his style is in marked contrast to that of writers like R.M. Hutchins or J. Maritain.

9. Dewey, *Experience and Education.* See for instance pp. 39, 44, 47-48, 56, 68, 78.

10. Ibid., p. 77.

11. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1934), p. 105.

12. Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and the critique of ideology," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences,* translated by J.B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univesity Press, 1981), p. 91.

13. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile,* translated by Barbara Foxley (London: Dent-Dutton, Everyman's Library, 1974), p. 58.

14. Ibid., p. 43.

15. Ibid., lengthy footnote on p. 72.

16. Ibid., p. 51.

17. A careful reading of pages 17-19 of the *Emile* underlines this poing.

18. *Primary School Curriculum: Teacher's Handbook Part 1* (Dublin: Department of Education, 1971), p. 18.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid. Part 2, p. 11.

22. Ibid., Part 2, p. 47.

23. This point is made in a more detailed way by Sr. Marian Walsh in a thesis entitled "A Study of the Implementation of the Curriculum for Irish Primary Schools" (Unpublished M.Litt. thesis, University of Dublin, 1980). She concludes as follows: ". . . the implementation of the principle (of integration) is mainly in the traditional understanding of it, where the emphasis is on integration of elements of knowledge by the teacher rather than on the manner in which knowledge is perceived by the pupil." (p. 89).

24. (i) An evaluation was undertaken by the inspectorate in 1974 but the results of this were not published. A summary of these results can however, be found in (v) below. (ii) *Evaluation of the New Curriculum for Primary Schools* (Dublin: Conference of Convent Primary Schools, 1975). (iii) Irish National Teachers' Organisation, *Primary School Curriculum: Curriculum Questionnaire Analysis* (Dublin: Irish National Teachers' Association, 1975). (iv) *The New Primary School Curriculum: Its Implementation and Effects* (Dublin: Department of Education and Educational Research Centre, 1977). (v) Sr. Marian Walsh, "A Study of the Implementation of the 1971 Curriculum for Irish Primary Schools."

25. See page 22 of publication (iv) in the previous note.

26. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man,* translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (London: Collins, Fontana Library, 1961), p. 116.

27. Ibid., p. 146.