
A CONVERSATION BETWEEN JOHN DEWEY AND RUDOLF STEINER:
A COMPARISON OF WALDORF AND PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

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John Dewey and Rudolf Steiner were contemporaries who each launched radical worldwide educational approaches: Progressivism and Waldorf schools. Each wrote and spoke about his philosophy and formulated concrete ways to put it into practice in schools. Steiner wrote over sixty books and 6,000 essays, lectures, and articles.¹ Dewey was such a prolific writer that whole books have been published as Dewey bibliographies.² In many respects, Dewey and Steiner differed greatly in their philosophies and methods, but they also shared some common premises about education. With many professional parents sending their children to Waldorf schools, it is time to look at Waldorf education from a Deweyan perspective.

Although John Dewey and Rudolf Steiner were born only three years apart and both published extensively on philosophy and education, there is no evidence that they ever met. Since Dewey was a person who exchanged ideas as if conversants were learners in a common enterprise, and since Steiner had an almost missionary zeal to share his approach to education, one can imagine them having a lively dialogue, had they ever met.³ Presented here is an imaginary conversation between the two that elucidates the similarities and contrasts in their approaches to education. Whenever appropriate, direct quotations are used to preserve their own styles of expression. While I have tried to present both men's philosophies as fairly as possible, I find it easier to present Dewey than Steiner. My apologies to Steiner fans for any slant this paper has toward Dewey.

Throughout this conversation, certain deeply held principles of each man will be evident. Both believed in evolution. Steiner was of the Hegelian camp which believed that spirit, Absolute Reason, was behind all evolution. Dewey was of the pragmatist camp that

developed at a time when debate between science and religion was particularly active, especially with respect to the implications of evolution. This debate had its philosophical expression in divisions between empiricists and rationalists....Empiricists, who mostly drew upon British thinkers, such as Locke, Hume, or Mill, promoted a naturalistic or scientific attitude....Rationalists, who were mostly influenced by German thinkers, such as Kant and Hegel, defended humanistic or religious claims from the intrusions of science.⁴

1. William A. Reinsmith, "The Whole in Every Part: Steiner and Waldorf Schooling," *The Educational Forum* 54, no. 1 (Fall 1989): 80.

2. Milton Halsey Thomas, *John Dewey: A Centennial Bibliography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

3. Sidney Hook, *John Dewey: An Intellectual Portrait* (New York: The John Day Co., 1939), 18.

4. Eric Bredo, "The Social Construction of Learning," in *Handbook of Academic Learning*, ed. Gary Phye (San Diego: Academic Press, forthcoming).

Dewey took the pragmatist view, a middle-ground between religion and science which retained mind. He wanted neither reductive science nor floating spirit, believing instead in people's abilities to think and to change in this world. Because Dewey was staunch in avoiding dualities, he would have had difficulties with the spiritual/material split that Steiner emphasized. Dewey saw life as transactional, hence his emphasis on children learning through experiences with objects and through their subsequent conversations about those experiences. Steiner placed great emphasis on spirituality as the key to growth for both the individual and society. He thought it was essential to integrate spirituality with all of education. He believed in cultural recapitulation, seeing the growth of the child as reflecting the history of the growth of society. Despite these differences in approaches and language, at a deeper level both Dewey and Steiner strove for an integrated view of education that recognized the whole child.

WHAT IS WALDORF EDUCATION?

In this imagined conversation, Rudolf Steiner has just taken John Dewey for a tour of a Waldorf school. As they walked through the school and observed classes, John Dewey noticed that each classroom was painted in a different color from the others and that the classroom walls connected in a curve rather than a corner. On chalkboards were flowing stories written in multicolored chalks. He saw hand-knit recorder cases, hand-sewn and decorated books written by students, flowers and other natural objects used as decorations, students acting through expressive dance while others retold a story from history, and students singing in unison their math answers.

DEWEY: What an unusual school you have. Being filled with art, music, and movement, it has a feeling of humanness, but in many ways it reminds me of a traditional classroom. What are your aims in this Waldorf education?

STEINER: Seeing rows of children whose instruction is directed by a teacher does remind one of a traditional classroom but what and how we teach is very different from traditional classrooms. "In the last sixty or seventy years the outer configuration of social life has entirely changed, yet our mode of education has continued as if nothing had happened."⁵ This Waldorf school is my reaction to this situation. "The great aim at the Waldorf School is to bring up free human beings who know how to direct their own lives" (*MAE*, p. 201).

DEWEY: Development to satisfy an individual's own needs seems much more individualistic than I think education is. I see the aim of education as the development of the individual to function as part of a society and to contribute to the ongoing formation of that society. The focus is not on the development of the individual as

5. Rudolf Steiner, *A Modern Art of Education* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1973), 172. This book will be referred to as *MAE* in the text with page numbers for all subsequent citations.

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the end but on the individual's full development for functioning in society, thereby enhancing society, which in turn enhances individuals.

STEINER: That is close to our philosophy too but in ours both the individual and society are part of the larger spiritual world. Being a free human being is important but this comes about as a result of the group consciousness in the classroom. When the free being takes his unique place in the universe, he is then free to serve humanity, to be a part of society. My concern is that the individual should be interested in others and aware of our interdependencies so that we can avert a fragmented society full of self-centered individuals.⁶ Our aim is to protect and enhance the free spirit of each child so that he sees his interdependence with all people and the earth.

DEWEY: You seem to think of education as preparing a child to join society in the future. Since I see education as growth and see school as a social community, I am not looking for education to serve some distant goal but rather see education as being a process of living.⁷ From the time a child is born, he is a part of the society of his family. School is a mini-society. Education helps children develop the skills necessary to participate fully in society. Our differences in aims, no doubt, reflect our differences in theories of education. You seem to focus on an individual's development for spiritual purposes whereas I see the individual's development more in terms of a dialectical, mutually interactive relationship with the child's society in the school. One influences and depends on the other.

STEINER: True, I focus first on the individual but that is ultimately for society's benefit. This is part of my belief in reincarnation. There are deep unconscious forces within each person that guide his choices as he faces consequences from his previous lives. I see education as helping a child to develop his latent inner capabilities so that he is free to bring those talents to society, thus helping to create a new society rather than having to conform to a fixed social organization. So what is education for you?

DEWEY: What is education? "It is that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience."⁸ Experience can be on a precognitive aesthetic level, what is felt and sensed. Everything that is experienced, either directly in physical terms or indirectly such as interacting with stories from history, must therefore be put into the child's own words by the child. The child is bringing those experiences from history and his own experiences into the present situation, thereby gaining tools for use in the present and in anticipating and affecting the future.

STEINER: I agree. How we expect the child to use the experience may be slightly different. You recognize that experience may be on a precognitive level, full of feeling

6. Christopher Shaefer, "Rudolf Steiner as a Social Thinker," *ReVision* 15, no. 2 (Fall 1992), 57-58.

7. John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," in *Dewey on Education*, ed. Martin Dworkin (1897; reprint, New York: Teachers College Press, 1959), 22. This article will be referred to as *MPC* in the text with page numbers for all subsequent citations.

8. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 76. This book will be referred to as *DE* in the text with page numbers for all subsequent citations.

but in your pragmatism you emphasize how an experience is used. I see experience more in stages. I want a young child to experience on an intuitive, feeling level, and allow that experience to work on the child's inner powers. Then, when the child is older, all those experiences will be a part of him and will be subconsciously involved in the flowering of the person, all of which is ultimately for a spiritually enhanced world.

DEWEY: I disagree with your view of children's thinking. Thought does not develop in stages. "At present, the notion is current that childhood is almost entirely unreflective — a period of mere sensory, motor, and memory development, while adolescence suddenly brings the manifestation of thought and reason.... But thinking remains just what it has been all the time: a matter of following up and testing the conclusions suggested by the facts and events of life. Thinking begins as soon as the baby who has lost the ball that he is playing with begins to foresee the possibility of something not yet existing — its recovery; and begins to forecast steps toward the realization of this possibility, and, by experimentation, to guide his acts by his ideas and thereby also test the ideas. Only by making the most of the thought-factor, already active in the experiences of childhood, is there any promise or warrant for the emergence of superior reflective power at adolescence, or at any later period."⁹

PHILOSOPHIES

OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

STEINER: As I hear you describing education, you seem to have a very fluid view of child development that does not have stages, and therefore your view of education does not seem to have stages. I see the child developing in stages just as mankind has developed historically. Early man was absorbed in his environment, then came the times of spiritual awakening, then the times emphasizing the rational, and now we are in a time to meld the rational and the spiritual. Likewise, the child develops in seven-year stages. I am one of those whom you just spurned for seeing early childhood as a period of sensory and body development. In the first seven years, the child is totally sensual and absorbs the environment around him. This is the time for the child's body to develop. Then, between the shedding of the primary teeth and the onset of puberty, the child is absorbed in developing his soul, his feelings. The child learns through the imagination, using art, stories, and myths. In the last seven years, from puberty to age twenty-one, the student develops his intellect and accepts moral accountability. Finally, around age twenty-one, willing, feeling, and thinking are integrated and the being is free to take one's unique place in the universe. I stand by these stages because they not only fit into my philosophy of the spiritual unfolding of the child but because I have seen how both normal and developmentally handicapped children flourish when their education is based on these developmental stages.

DEWEY: Before I respond to your view of development in stages, let me first ask a question. I'm curious why there is little use of books in your classrooms, especially

9. John Dewey, *How We Think* (1910; reprint, Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1991), 65-66.

with children under eight. I have often said that traditional schools rely on books too exclusively, but you seem to have veered to the extreme. Is this connected to your theory of child development?

STEINER: Yes, it is. Children's bodies are usually not ready for reading until their primary teeth fall out. We have found that by waiting until the body is ready for reading, children eagerly learn to read, taking much less time than it takes when reading is introduced too early. By following the child's natural development, we do not disturb the child's physical growth. Your approach to education seems far too haphazard for my tastes. Perhaps it is the German in me, but I like more organization and guidelines.

DEWEY: Put that way, perhaps I like more freedom because I am American. I do not agree with your rationale for delaying reading until the body signals with its loss of teeth but I do agree with your emphasis upon being sensitive to the growth of the individual. Rather than viewing growth as following a preordained course, as you seem to, I see growth as being contingent on interactions of the child and his environment, social interactions being particularly important. You seem to wait for body signs that the next growth stage has occurred, as if it simply emerges on its own.

STEINER: The loss of teeth is only the outward manifestation of the inner transformation of the body. Children develop in orderly stages that correspond to the history of the development of man. At each stage in the child's development, the proper subject matter is the material produced by society at the corresponding period in history. Therefore, Greek myths are appropriate at one stage but not at another.

DEWEY: Your adherence to cultural recapitulation bothers me. Rather than reliving history as the child develops, I say that "an individual can live only in the present....The study of past *products* will not help us understand the present, because the present is not due to the products, but to the life of which they were the products. A knowledge of the past and its heritage is of great significance when it enters into the present, but not otherwise" (*DE*, pp. 75-76).

STEINER: But children thrive when they are immersed in the past corresponding to their developmental stage. By immersion, the soul of the child experiences what life was like in the past and so learns to appreciate other cultures as well as learning compassion for others' life struggles.

DEWEY: The problem with focusing on the past is that it disconnects the child from the present so that the child does not see a connection between the past and present. The child is unable to use the past to solve present problems. "A mind that is adequately sensitive to the needs and occasions of the present actuality will have the liveliest of motives for interest in the background of the present, and will never have to hunt for a way back because it will never have lost connection" (*DE*, p. 76). Pragmatically, I see history as only relevant in solving a child's present problems.

STEINER: Conversely, I see history and child development as part of a larger spiritual view of the world. By allowing the child to live fully in history, his development is not thwarted and he can blossom as a full individual who reflects the whole

community. "The healing social life is only found when in the mirror of each human soul the whole community finds its reflection and when in the community the virtue of each one is living."¹⁰

DEWEY: You speak so nebulously sometimes. I guess that is your spiritual bent. These are areas where we obviously disagree. You are seeing the child as a reflection of history whereas I focus on the child in the present and what implications that has for the future. How important is spirituality in the classroom?

OF SPIRITUAL

STEINER: Connecting with the spiritual is very important. The rounded corners and soft colors in the classroom and the use of fairy tales encourage the development of the imagination that then fosters the spiritual.

DEWEY: You and I differ greatly in the value we place on the spiritual in education. I see fairy tales as a secondhand view of the world. As a pragmatist, I would rather the children be immersed in their real world, using their minds to interact with it.

STEINER: The spiritual is just as real as a town. I used to struggle with this idea until I was editing Goethe's scientific writings and discovered that he too saw the spiritual as real. "He admitted no difference in principle between the spiritual and the sensible perception, but only a transition from the one to the other. To him it was clear that both had the right to a place in the reality of experience."¹¹ Now I see the spiritual as paramount to understanding and solving the world's problems.

DEWEY: I have gotten the message that the spiritual is very important to you. I do not focus there, but for the sake of understanding, let me say that if the development of the spiritual requires the imagination, then I still think that fairy tales are a circuitous route to imagination. Real problems that affect the children are what actually stimulate the imagination. The children have a personal reason to think creatively to solve problems that affect them. For instance, take the fast-paced arithmetic drill where the students stood in a circle and passed a beanbag from one to another. Each child said the next multiple of 9. So the first said 9, the second said 18, then the third 27. When they got to 108, they then said the descending multiples of 9 until they reached 9 again. Now, I say that was a contrived problem that belonged to the teacher more than the students. Had they instead been faced with a play they were performing to which admission cost \$9 and they needed \$108 to break even, then the problem of multiples of 9 would have been theirs, not the teacher's. Rather than relying on rote memory, they could have used objects to count when they could not remember the next multiple. Imagination would have been used as they thought of creative ways to solve this very real problem.

OF SOUL

STEINER: You missed the purpose of that activity. What was being developed was not math problem-solving skills but the soul, the feeling aspect of the body.

10. Rudolf Steiner's "Motto of the Social Ethic," quoted in Shaefer, "Rudolf Steiner as a Social Thinker," 54.

11. Rudolf Steiner, *The Story of My Life* (New York: Anthroposophic Press, 1928), 68.

DEWEY: That's interesting that you identify soul with feeling. That is similar to my thoughts about soul. I think of soul not as a mystical entity or force but as a quality of sensitivity and response. "To say emphatically of a particular person that he has soul or a great soul is not to utter a platitude, applicable equally to all human beings. It expresses the conviction that the man or woman in question has in marked degree qualities of sensitive, rich and coordinated participation in all the situations of life."¹² Again, let me stress that I do not see the soul as an entity that acts independently of the person. I do not want to split mind and body.

STEINER: Actually, I do think of soul as consisting of active forces. There are three members of the soul, the Sentient Soul, the Intellectual Soul, and the Spiritual Soul. We could spend hours elucidating this. It is difficult to translate matters of the spirit into ordinary language.¹³

DEWEY: That's not surprising. Maybe you have created that problem yourself by having artificially divided spiritual and material into exclusive dualities. Had you not divided them, it might not be so difficult to talk about them in ordinary language. However, let's get back to that quality of sensitivity. Art seems to play a large role in a Waldorf classroom.

OF ART IN EDUCATION

STEINER: We believe that art helps liberate the intellect. That is why we emphasize art for our youngest students rather than intellectual activities. Art is not in dualism with the intellect but rather in service to the intellect.

DEWEY: That's different than my conception of art. Again, I do not like to compartmentalize but rather to understand interrelations. I see art as permeating the curriculum since it is a beautiful integration of mind and body. Art is not just painting, sculpture, and all those activities that are traditionally considered to be art. "Work which remains permeated with the play attitude is art — in quality if not in conventional designation" (*DE*, p. 206). Thinking may be artful and art thoughtful. I see art as involving the intellect and emotion in a transformative experience. Art has both ordered qualities such as is evident in symmetry and composition but it also has the unexpected, allowing one to see possibilities that otherwise would be hidden. Art opens up further possibilities so that future creations and actions are possible. The artist "accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities."¹⁴ This is how I want all of us to approach life, how I envision all learning to be, a deepening and intensification.

OF SOCIETY

STEINER: We continue to use art throughout all the upper grades in a Waldorf school but what students study changes. After age seven, we make less use of fairy tales and

12. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (1929; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1958), 294.

13. Rudolf Steiner, *The Education of the Child* (1909; reprint, London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1965), 13-19.

14. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; reprint, New York: Perigee Books, Putnam's Sons, 1980), 34.

more of the real world. Our focus on practical, real world problems comes after the students reach puberty. "At the Waldorf School, therefore, when the children are fourteen or fifteen years old, we begin to give instruction and actual experience in matters that play a role in practical life....The truth is, that at puberty the human being opens out to the world. Hitherto he has lived more within himself, but he is now ready to understand his fellow-men and the things of the world....This will enable [him] to understand and find [his] right place in social life" (MAE, p. 171).

DEWEY: I am concerned with how people live in a democratic society. I am glad to hear that you also value the social responsibilities of being human. I do not agree with you, however, about when a child is ready for social concerns; as I think all ages are ready in their own ways, since life is continual growth. I see society as being interactive; the place a child takes is determined by the mutual interactions of himself and a particular group of people. I was concerned when you kept emphasizing the spiritual, which seems too otherworldly to me. Your way of focusing on the spiritual seems to me to be avoiding learning skills for becoming citizens in a democracy. I also have a problem with your focusing on spirit as an entity such that to be spiritual means implanting spirit into a person. Attributing supernaturalism to spirit detracts from a recognition of all that people can be. I prefer a practical, active view of spirit as "a character in operation, not an entity."¹⁵ Thus, I emphasize *being* spirited as opposed to inculcating spirit.

STEINER: I focus on the present and I also look further. Spiritually developed persons will bring strengths to a society that will transform it in ways we cannot even envision. Spiritual development is learning respect and tolerance for others — this is essential for a just society.

DEWEY: Rather than attributing the creation of a just society to spiritual powers, I prefer to speak of recognizable personal traits that create society. Take the trait of sympathy, for example. Education should result in all persons being concerned about the common good. Sympathy allows one to be concerned about others for the good of society rather than just being selfishly focused.¹⁶

STEINER: An important part of a teacher's work is to help the child in his spiritual development by being sensitive to what spiritual work is appropriate. This goes back to our discussion of child development, where I said the loss of teeth is only an outward sign of the inner transformation of the body. A teacher must study the child to be sensitive to developmental stages and needs for spiritual development.

HOW TEACHERS LEARN ABOUT STUDENTS' NEEDS

DEWEY: And how does a teacher study a child?

STEINER: "Naturally the teacher must not come into the room and stepping back with folded arms proceed to 'study' the pupils!" (MAE, p. 209). Here's where you and I will

15. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 73.

16. John Dewey and James H. Tufts, *Ethics* (1908; reprint, New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1932), 268-72.

differ. I use clairvoyant consciousness to gain insights. All people have this capacity but often are unaware of it. I urge my teachers to grow in their abilities of awareness and perception. "If the teacher brings sufficient vitality and devotion to the work with his pupils, then simply by taking them with him through sleep, as it were, in the right way, he will wake up next morning with really significant discoveries about the happenings in school on the previous day; he will become aware of this process in a comparatively short time, and everything that should happen in this way will do so as a matter of course" (*MAE*, p. 209).

DEWEY: Your reference to dreaming as a solution to complex problems troubles me. "Dreams, reveries, emotional idealizations are roads which are taken to escape the strain of perplexity and conflict....The short-cut 'solutions'...do not get rid of the conflict and problems; they only get rid of the feeling of it. They cover up consciousness of it. Because the conflict remains in fact and is evaded in thought, disorders arise."¹⁷

STEINER: The dream does not solve problems. The insight from a dream heightens the teacher's consciousness of the intricacies of a problem.

DEWEY: I agree that teachers must base their teaching on observations of their children but instead of peering within the child, I again go back to social interactions as the way in which a teacher can understand the development of her students. "Certain capacities of an individual are not brought out except under the stimulus of associating with others" (*DE*, p. 302).

STEINER: I also believe that the social is important, although not as an end point, but for spiritual reasons. We do not treat our children as isolated individuals either. The teacher teaches to the whole group, not just to an individual. Self-esteem grows as children work with others. The teacher's job is to find the strengths of each child and build on them so they can fulfill their role in the larger spiritual society. Recitation and group activities allow all children to participate, regardless of their skills.¹⁸ Through observing how a child interacts with others, how a child walks and talks, how a child shows love and trust, a teacher learns more about the child.

TEACHING METHODS

DEWEY: I noticed that Waldorf class lessons resemble Progressive classes, both having multidisciplinary learning. Reading, writing, movement, and art were all incorporated into the class lesson on Roman history. The children had each made books in which they wrote and illustrated what they learned each day in class, they had made marionettes to enact Roman orators, and they had dramatized long passages that they had memorized. I was dismayed to see that all the children's books, though lovely, looked alike. This reiterated to me how Waldorf education stems from the teacher, and not the students.

17. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920; reprint, Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 140.

18. Ray McDermott, "Waldorf Education in America: A Promise and Its Problems," *ReVision* 15, no. 2 (Fall 1992), 84-86.

STEINER: You are judging the results by what you saw in the classroom whereas I am concerned about the results that cannot be seen.

DEWEY: It is not necessary that every student study the same thing and for every student's work to look almost the same. "The teacher who does not permit and encourage diversity of operation in dealing with questions is imposing intellectual blinders upon pupils" (*DE*, p. 175). Children in a Progressive classroom may also study Roman history but the process and results are quite different. The teacher does not know what the students will learn when the topic is first begun. If each child keeps a book, what is written and drawn will be very different for each child. Rather than plan the play after the class has memorized the passages, in a Progressive classroom the children would choose the play first, or write one themselves, and then would memorize the lines. The activities would stem from the demands of the problem at hand rather than all be planned by the teacher to enhance the dissemination of a subject.

STEINER: I am confused. So what is the role of the teacher in progressive classrooms? Why do you even have a teacher in your classrooms?

DEWEY: People have often misinterpreted me on this issue. When they read me saying such things as, "In such shared activity, the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher, and...the less consciousness there is, on either side, of either giving or receiving instruction, the better," they assume this means the teacher is just like the students or should be a wallflower in the classroom (*DE*, p. 160). I emphasize the co-learner since I see so little of this in traditional classrooms and want teachers to be more aware of their co-learning in progressive schools. Sadly, some have gone overboard and have assumed that students control their classroom. I see a definite role for the teacher. The teacher works with the tendencies of the students. The teacher is the member of the community who selects experiences for the children, with their needs in mind and often their input, and who guides the children in their explorations of these experiences. In this sense I see education as redirection which is neither solely in the students' hands nor solely in the teacher's but rather comes through mutual interaction.

STEINER: Although I agree with you in essence, I see the teacher's role as more central. The teacher is "to receive the child in gratitude from the world it comes from; to educate the child with love; to lead the child into the true freedom which belongs to man."¹⁹ This is part of my belief in cultural recapitulation. The teacher's role is to lead the students through developmental stages that echo the stages in cultural history. The children learn through the work of the teacher. There is a real purpose in how the teacher teaches. By just observing once, you might miss an important aspect of what is really happening. Take our main lesson. "We give one main lesson on the same subject for two hours every morning for a period of three, four, or five weeks. Then we pass on to another main lesson for perhaps five or six weeks, on a different subject, which if you like develops out of the previous work, but again is carried on during the two hours. The child thus concentrates upon a definite subject

19. Rudolf Steiner, "Rudolf Steiner and His Ideas on Education" in *Education Towards Freedom*, ed. Joan and Siegfried Rudel (East Grinstead, England: Lanthorn Press, 1981), 20.

for some weeks. If the lessons have been rightly taught...the previous subject will go on working in the subconscious regions while another is being taken....There is nothing more fruitful than to allow the results of the teaching given during a period of three or four weeks to rest within the soul and so work on in the human being without interference" (MAE, pp. 161-162). Again, notice how what we do in the classroom has spiritual as well as material results. Because our teachers stay with the same classroom of students for eight years, they can revisit subjects as the pupils go through their developmental stages.

DEWEY: Yes, in our classrooms, too, "there is a...willingness to let experiences accumulate and sink in and ripen, which is an essential of development....Processes may not be forced. They take their own time to mature" (DE, p. 176). But this does not mean that all education is unconscious! I see education rather as circling back and deepening social experiences through reflection and inquiry. Some of what a child experiences will be deepened and honed in subsequent experiences. This is where the teacher is so crucial, to help guide children in their experiences and to help them reflect on those experiences. Education is thus conscious problem-solving. This reflects my strong belief that education is a social process rather than following a preset series of stages of development, and is certainly not cultural recapitulation. What subjects are taught in Waldorf schools and is there anything that ties them together?

SUBJECT MATTER

STEINER: The subjects taught in Waldorf schools include art appreciation, history and social studies, the sciences, and mathematics. In some form, most of these subjects are taught throughout the school years but they are taught in ways fitting the developmental phase of the pupils. Spirit is the center that ties all of the subjects together.

DEWEY: Unlike you, "I believe that the true center of correlation on the school subjects is not science, nor literature, nor history, nor geography, but the child's own social activities....The social life gives the unconscious unity and the background of all his efforts and of all his attainments" (MPC, p. 25). Like you, I do not believe that there is a succession of subjects but rather different ways of experiencing them depending on the child's development. Again, here is a point upon which we agree in practice although the principles upon which we base these practices are very different. Mine is based on the social whereas yours are based on the spiritual.

STEINER: Yes, precisely. Earlier, you kept speaking of experiences. As I understand you, what those experiences are does not matter so much as what the teacher and students do with them. In the Waldorf classroom we are more careful to follow the child's developmental stages in choosing experiences so that their development proceeds smoothly. For example, around the twelfth year, the child "becomes ripe for the development of the faculties that lead him in a wholesome way to the comprehension of things that must be considered without any reference to the human being: the mineral kingdom, the physical world, meteorological phenomena, and so on."²⁰

20. Rudolf Steiner, *An Introduction to Waldorf Education* (1919; reprint, Spring Valley, N.Y.: Anthroposophic Press, 1985), 8.

DEWEY: Without any reference to the human being? That is impossible. The only way we know about things is through interacting with them and reflecting on that interaction. This is what I call an intelligent experience. What is experienced and who is experiencing are intertwined. The outer nature of the experience is not so critical because we recognize the depth and breadth and stretch of experiences. The main criteria for an experience to be educational are that the experience be genuinely challenging to the students and that it promote rich growth experiences in the future. "I believe that education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; that the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing" (*MPC*, p. 27).

STEINER: Ah, again we see our differences. You see everything in terms of the social whereas I can say "without any reference to the human being" because I am looking at the entire spiritually bounded world, which includes both people and the physical world. I am talking about studying the properties of the physical world. We still include the feelings, the appreciation of the beauty of natural objects, but now we focus on the facts. Adolescents are hungry for all the details. Now we are focusing on what exists in the material world.

DEWEY: There are not facts out there devoid of an event, of interaction. You cannot talk about studying something that exists as if it does not involve the person interacting with it. I disagree with your notion that the young child needs to focus on feelings and the older on facts. One cannot be done without the other. Interaction involves facts and feelings integrally bound with each other, no matter how old the child is.

STEINER: When the children are younger, we emphasize everything in relation to the child. "The child only begins to realize himself as a being apart from the outer world between the ninth and tenth year. Hence, when he first comes to school, we must make all outer things appear as living beings. We shall not merely speak of the plants, but we shall speak of them as living beings, as holding converse with us and with each other in such a way that the child's outlook on nature and man is filled with imagination. The plants, the trees, the clouds all speak to him, and at this age he must really feel no separation between himself and the outer world" (*MAE*, p. 138).

DEWEY: That is an unusual way to interpret the connection of objects to people. I see no need to make objects anthropomorphic. Children are smarter than that. By talking like that to students, your teacher says things that adults do not believe. That bothers me. It makes the teacher an actor before a theoretical group of young students rather than a genuine person who is relating to particular children. Another surface similarity between your Waldorf School and Progressive schools is the presence of hand work, knitting, carpentry, and sewing. You don't consider them art. Why are they included?

STEINER: "We do not include these things so much for the sake of giving the [children] a knowledge of them, as for the sake of an all-round understanding of life. One of the chief faults of our present social conditions is that man has so little understanding of what his fellow men are doing. We must really cease existing as isolated

individuals and groups, and face each other with full and complete understanding, and the main point is that this kind of hand-work gives the human being practical skill in many different directions....I know that this may seem far-fetched, but I do believe that a philosopher ought to have some understanding at all events of how boots are made and the like, for otherwise he will simply be a man of abstractions. This is an extreme example, of course, but I want to indicate that, on the one hand, ascent to the loftiest spirituality and, on the other, descent to bodily culture and treatment must be included in our principles of education" (*MAE*, pp. 196-197).

DEWEY: Again, I do not put an emphasis on spirituality as you do but here we do seem to agree on the social value. I, too, see the value of manual work, such as woodwork-ing, cooking, gardening, weaving, and metalwork, to be social. "Their educational significance consists in the fact that they may typify social situations....Representing both the necessities of life and the adornments with which the necessities have been clothed, they tap instincts at a deep level: they are saturated with facts and principles having a social quality " (*DE*, pp. 199-200).

STEINER: "tap instincts at a deep level" — Now *you* are sounding like me!

DEWEY: Although I take them a step further. My reason for including real activities which exist in life outside the classroom is that I see them as ideal educational springboards. "The direct interest in carpentering or shop work should yield organically and gradually an interest in geometric and mechanical problems."²¹ This goes back to our talk about art. A playful attitude toward an activity allows interests to expand into other areas of society. That's art.

CONCLUSION

STEINER: I see how you are always weaving a new experience from a previous experience. I would expand this idea of a new experience to include heightened spiritual awareness.

DEWEY: Although my educational philosophy has developed in direct opposition to philosophies like yours, this has been an interesting conversation for me. Sometime we will have to get together to discuss your reactions to a Progressive classroom.

STEINER: "I have to admit that I do not like answering questions such as: What is Anthroposophy's attitude towards this or that contemporary movement? There is no need for me to do so, for I consider it my task to represent before the world only what can be gained from anthroposophical research. I do not think that it is my task to throw light upon other matters from an anthroposophical point of view."²²

DEWEY: Your choice. I consider education, and therefore life, to be a great experiment.

STEINER: Yes, education is an experiment. I have told those who have dreamed of Waldorf schools as spreading worldwide that that is not my aim. Instead, I hope our

21. Dewey, *How We Think*, 141.

22. Rudolf Steiner, *Soul Economy and Waldorf Education* (1922; reprint, Spring Valley, N.Y.: Anthroposophic Press, 1986), 347.

Waldorf approach will be a model for future experiments in education based on the true understanding of child development.²³

DEWEY: "The lives of all the pupils will furnish the only real test of the success or failure of any educational experiment that aims to help the whole of society by helping the whole individual."²⁴

STEINER: I agree. "The pupils are our great hope, our goal, for our constant thought in every measure adopted is that they shall bear its fruits into life in the right way" (*MAE*, p. 211).

As the sound of a teacher singing math problems to the students and the students responding through song wafted through the hallway, John Dewey and Rudolf Steiner shook hands and parted.

23. Robert A. McDermott, *The Essential Steiner* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 295.

24. John Dewey and Evelyn Dewey, *Schools of To-Morrow* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1915), 59.

SPECIAL THANKS TO the following for responding to earlier drafts of this paper: Eric Bredo, Jim Garrison, Richard Rorty (for the Dewey portions), and Leni and Keith Covington (for the Steiner portions).