The child in the center – how?

Comparison of the child-centered approach in democratic education and Waldorf education

Abstract

From the beginning of the Enlightenment and particularly during the twentieth century, for many thinkers, scholars, and educators the child-centered approach became a pillar of their educational doctrine. The child-centered approach has diverse practical applications in alternative educational frameworks. Two such prominent frameworks introduced in Israel in the 1980s, are democratic education and Waldorf education (anthroposophical education). In this article, I present the history of the child-centered approach and examine its conceptual roots and applications in these two alternative educational streams. The same conceptual approach is applied in entirely different forms in democratic education and Waldorf education, stemming from their different conceptual-spiritual perspectives. Notwithstanding significant differences in application of the child-centered approach, alumni studies of these two educational streams report similar findings with regard to its positive benefits. My treatment attempts to ascertain the meaning of this similarity.

Key words: child-centered approach, democratic education, Waldorf education

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An introduction

From the beginning of the Enlightenment, through the educational teachings of John Dewey and the wave of progressive education, to the educational doctrines of innovative thinkers and educators such as Tolstoy, Alexander Neal, Neil Postman, Ivan Ilyich, and John Holt, a conceptual concept originated and developed that places the child at the center of the education system. The child-centered approach has diverse practical applications in frameworks of alternative education. Two such prominent frameworks, present in Israel from the 1980s, are democratic education and Waldorf education (anthroposophical or Steiner education). Here, I present the historical development of the child-centered approach and then examine its conceptual roots and applications in these two alternative educational streams. The same conceptual approach is applied in entirely different forms in democratic education and Waldorf education, stemming from their different conceptual-spiritual views. Notwithstanding significant differences in application of the child-centered approach, alumni studies of these two forms of education reported similar findings with regard to its positive benefits. The analysis presented attempts to assert the meaning of this similarity.

The child in the center?

> The change that is currently taking place in education is a turning center of gravity. This is change, it is a revolution, similar to that of Copernicus, when the astronomical center turned from earth to the sun. In this case the child becomes the sun and the educational system revolving around him; it is the center around which all the system organizes (Dewey, 1902/1990, p. 34).

For thousands of years, until the Enlightenment, education was inspired by ideologies that Egan and other thinkers call socialization or culturalization (Egan, 1997; Lamm, 1976). At the center of these educational ideologies lies the importance of society and/or its cultural

values. The aim of education, therefore, is to inculcate behavioral norms in young people, in order that they fulfill their intended roles in the society in which they will live (Egan, 1997).

These ideologies treat children as raw material for the continuity of social forms, beliefs, and values. What individual children think, feel, and want, their aspirations and goals, may interest sensitive educators, but are irrelevant to socialization and culturalization-based thought and educational endeavors (Egan, 1997). The educational discourse of these ideologies emphasizes the struggle (the conquest of the urge) between the "higher" – intellectual thinking, cultural values, cultural and artistic works, tradition, and religious values, and the "lower" – instincts, aspirations, desires, and all that stems from the child's physicality (Egan, 1997, Chapter 1). The educational institutions are designed accordingly. They emphasize adjustment, adaptation, restraining urges, discipline, and compliance. As long as the educational institutions were intended for the elect and esteemed, their goals appeared consonant with the circles they served. However, with the gradual implementation of compulsory education laws, initially in Europe and America, and then throughout the world, there were and still are heavy personal prices for educational policies that prioritize the good of society's institutions and cultural traditions over the child (Egan, 2009).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778) was the first modern European thinker to revolutionize longstanding educational ideals by placing the child at the center of his educational thinking (Rousseau, 1921). Rousseau's approach is based on the belief that every child possesses a permanent essence or inner nature to be nurtured, which is essentially good and unique and that strives toward self-realization and fulfillment. (Noddings, 2015). Dewey's words, quoted at the beginning of the section, capture this approach through description of the relationship between the individual soul and the educational environment (which is always shaped by the adults): The relationship is reversed, the latter does not impose itself on the child by greater or smaller force or skill, to resemble it, but rather constitutes a nurturing and nourishing environment for the sake of the child's development (Maslow, 1959).

John Dewey (1859-1952), one of the most influential thinkers of the child-centered approach, not only shaped but put into practice an educational philosophy honoring and nurturing the needs, requests, and independent thought of the child. His theoretical writings

and Chicago Experimental School launched the Progressive Education Movement (Dewey, 1990, 1997). Interestingly, Dewey, himself, opposed the dichotomy between what he called the "new education" and the "old education" and tried to create a synthesis between the two (Dewey, 1990, 1997). Yet, he was unequivocally clear about the differences between the two modes of education, as he expresses in *Experience and Education*:

> Compared to coercion from above, they [progressive schools] put the expression and cultivation of the individual, Compared to external discipline; they put free activity, Compared to learning from texts and teachers; they provide learning through experience, As opposed to acquiring separate skills and techniques through practice; they put their acquisition as a means of achieving goals that have direct and vital gravity, Compared to preparing for a distant future; they make the most of the opportunities of life in the present, Compared to static materials and purposes… (Dewey, 1997, p. 20).

The starting point for Rousseau, Dewey, and their successors was to critique the methods of "the old education": although knowledge was at its epicenter, children do not really learn. Knowledge dictated from the outside, unrelated to the child's inner world and transmitted by memorization is erased hours or days after the exam, losing all worth (Egan, 2009; Kohn, 1999; Postman, 1979). Moreover, despite congruity of professed valued goals such as broadening horizons, developing curiosity, creativity, and moral sensitivity, not only does the old educational approach fail to achieve these goals, it results in promoting their negative: insensitivity, indifference, narrowing horizons, and immoral behavior (Egan, 2009; Kohn, 1999; Postman, 1979). Educational philosophers also demonstrated how traditional educational institutions preserve social classes, reproducing the preceding structure of society for the benefit of the hegemonic class (Boronski & Hassan, 2015).

The end of the nineteenth century to the present has witnessed numerous initiatives to realize what Dewey called a "new school": diverse educational models with the stated goals of placing the child at the center of the curriculum and imparting behavioral habits and instilling values rather than knowledge. These initiatives include the John Dewey Experimental School (Dewey, 1990), Lev Tolstoy Country School (Tolstoy, 1967), Summerhill School founded by Alexander Neil (Neil, 1960), the educational teachings of Paul Goodman

(Goodman, 1960), the teachings of Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner (Postman & Weingartner, 1973), the critical education of Paulo Freire (Fereire, 1972), homeschooling initiated by John Holt (Holt, 1976), Herbert Kohl's Open Class (Kohl, 1970), and the radical education of Jonathan Kozol (Kozol, 1978).

In Israel, progressive education initially impacted the kibbutz collective and schools of the workers organizations. For example, Dror (2001) notes Dewey's influence on Ron-Polanyi, Idelson, Golan and Segal, founders of kibbutz education. Later, following the progressive wave in America, several open schools were founded in the late 1970s, including The Experimental and Lyphita in Jerusalem and schools in Maagan Michael and Haifa. The main figures in their establishment were Eliezer Marcus and Moshe Caspi (Caspi, 2016). In the late 1980s, the Democratic School in Hadera was established (Hecht, 2005), followed by others, paralleling the establishment of the Waldorf education kindergartens in Jerusalem and the founding of the Waldorf School in Harduf (Goldschmidt, 2010).

I have described, generally, the philosophical approach of child-centered educational thought and practice and compared it to the approach in which the child must play a role based on social and religious values and adapt to local social and cultural norms. However, among the thinkers and educators of each approach there is a great deal of variance. In an effort to deepen understanding of application of the child-centered approach, I will examine how this variance is expressed in two streams of alternative education: democratic education and Waldorf education.

Democratic education

The concept of "democratic education" is very broad and not easy to define. Keisel (2012) and Miller (2007) see one educational undercurrent from Dewey and progressive education in the 1920s and 1930s through what they call the "second wave" during the 1970s, when the terms "free education" or "open education" were prominent, to the current wave that began in Israel at the end of the 1970s with the founding of the Democratic School in Hadera. Hecht (2011) also views democratic education as a direct continuation of progressive education.

At the time, although each stream emphasized different elements of their schools and used different terms, they have much in common: an ideology and educational practice whose purpose is to instill democratic values and personal responsibility and foster choice and self-fulfillment (Hecht, 2011; Kiesel, 2012). The assumption underlying this common ideology is that in order to educate students for a democratic life, partnership, contribution to the community, and respect for others, the school must realize the principles of democracy within itself both on the organizational level and in its daily routine (Hecht, 2011; Kiesel, 2012, see also: Greenberg, 2002).

The conceptual view that the child is the center of educational practice and the child and not the rules and demands of society or culture should inspire educators is at the heart of democratic education. Aloni calls this ideological-educational concept the "romantic-naturalistic approach": "The premise is that there is a permanent personality, or inner nature, which is essentially good and unique to detail, and which pushes to realize and fulfill itself..." (Aloni, 2002, p. 48).

In 1921, Neil founded Summerhill, the first Democratic school, and served as its principal. He opens his book *Summerhill, a Radical Approach to Child Rearing* with a clear statement of his educational motto, "When my wife and I founded the school we had one central idea: to adapt the school to a child - instead of forcing the child to adapt to the school..."…to "establish a school in which we will allow children the freedom to be themselves" (Neil, 1960, p. 11). This position significantly affects the role of the teacher: "In order to achieve this we had to give up all discipline, all intentions, any suggestions, any moral training, any religious guidance..." (Neil, 1960, p. 11). The adult, the instructor, the teacher, the educator becomes a dialogue partner without any hierarchical status. For Neil and most of his followers, this principle stems from the belief that, "All we needed was what we had: complete faith in the child as a good creature. For 40 years, our faith was never undermined by the goodness of the child, in fact it became an absolute faith" (Neil, 1960, p. 11).

With these remarks, Neil continues Rousseau, whom he admired. Of the role of adults in education Rousseau wrote, "What is incumbent upon us to shape this rare person? A lot, no doubt, because we must prevent any action…The first education should be the purity of negation" (Rousseau, 1921, p. 119). Neil influenced Daniel Greenberg, founder of Sudbury

Valley School in California, a school that inspired the democratic education movement in Israel (Hecht, 2011). Greenberg articulates his foundational precept thusly: "The starting point for all our thinking was the supposedly revolutionary idea that the child is a man worthy of the full dignity of a human being" (Greenberg, 2002, p. 9).

The child-centered approach assumes that children must be respected, the school must grant them freedom of choice (and to face their consequences), hear them, take them into account in every educational and organizational decision, develop teaching methods consonant with this approach, and run the school organizationally, pedagogically, and systemically accordingly. Hence, the democratic school becomes a workshop for democratic life (Greenberg, 2002; Hecht, 2011; Miler, 2007). The educational goals and the means to achieve them are congruent. The school must become a microcosm of democratic life, with students as full partners and possessing equal rights in all processes occurring within it. The students are no less than adult citizens in every practical and educational aspect. Democratic life experience includes:

- Respectful treatment of the student and maintaining a state of mind of openness and tolerance for their beliefs and safeguarding of their inner freedom.
- Establishing self-governing student bodies through free elections, including a parliament, officeholders, and committees.
- Granting of full and executive powers for student institutions.
- Establishing a parliament as the school's top governing institution, in which students and teachers have equal rights.
- Drafting a school constitution that guarantees full and equal rights of both students and teachers.
- Establishing three separate authorities for legislation, judgment, and school management.
- Granting choice of fields of study and/or learning processes in general.

Waldorf Education

Waldorf education is based on the anthroposophical worldview of Rudolf Steiner. At the center of anthroposophical thinking lies the importance of the individual, with the potential for freedom, sovereignty, and independence (Steiner, 1964). In the *Education of the*

Child, Steiner's first and most important book, he treats his spiritual teachings philosophically, attempting to prove the spiritual independence of each person and thus their ability to be free in their actions (Steiner, 1966). Steiner saw humanity's progress as a gradual development from a framework of religious beliefs and "from above" discoveries toward free thinking and individual perception, which he called "ethic individualism" (Steiner, 1966, Chapter 14). He saw every person as an independent, free, and potentially infinite entity. The development and fulfillment of the center of the human being, the soul, is the ultimate goal of every person and of humanity as a whole (Steiner, 1966, 1985, 1994). Hence, at the heart of anthroposophy lies the spiritual path to the dignity and freedom of each individual. In his books and lectures, Steiner repeatedly emphasizes that no practice or mode of thinking should be imposed on those who follow the anthroposopic path. The anthroposopic movement must always remain open to all people regardless of race, gender, religion, and social or national affiliation (Steiner, 1994).

Steiner's theory of education, which he honed in practice when serving as principal of the first Waldorf school from 1919 to 1925, draws its spiritual inspiration from this doctrine, placing the development of the individual child at its center: "We should not ask: What should man know and do for the social order that already exists, but what lies in man, and what can be developed from within it?" (Steiner, 1966, p. 8). Therefore, the goal of any educational process or learning in the spirit of Waldorf education is the children themselves, their most harmonious and multilateral development.

A central element of Waldorf education is the developmental view of the child (Goldschmidt, 2010; Steiner, 1966). Steiner established a developmental psychology similar to that of Piaget, Ericsson, and Kohlberg, although he developed his ideas independently (Ginsburg, 1982). He identified universal development at different stages (Edmund, 2012; Steiner, 1966) and how each child, more or less at the same age, undergoes a kind of metamorphosis of inner forces that is so substantive that Steiner calls them "births" (Steiner, 1966, chapter 2). In his assessment, only if we consider these changes and understand them can we treat children holistically and fairly.

This series of "births" led Steiner to divide childhood into three periods of six to seven years, each of them concentrating educational efforts to cultivate specific qualities: activity,

senses, play, and movement in the first stage from birth to age 6 or 7; art and aesthetics, internal images, and working with the mind in the second stage from age 6 or 7 to adolescence; and abstract thinking, professional handiwork in workshops and crafts, and community involvement in the third stage (Edmunds, 2012; Steiner, 1987). However, developmental thought does not end with this division, it penetrates the entire educational endeavor in Waldorf schools. For example, the various curricula are aligned with the stages: "The study materials are transferred out of reference to the child's age and development" (Richter, 2006, p. 24), and each field has expected outcomes to be reached before moving to the next stage. Steiner also professed to base teaching methods on an individual approach: "In the art of education we are talking about here, the most important thing is to cultivate the child's inner soul and development. Hence, teaching must fully be in the service of education" (Steiner, 1956, p 96).

Combining an individual and a universal developmental approach is not simple conceptually or practically, and raises many questions about the two poles and the possibility of their integration. How can we refer to each child individually if they are going through the same developmental stages at the same age? How do we implement an individual-oriented curriculum when it is, at the same time, general and relates to universal developmental stages? Can the same teaching methods be applied on general developmental lines and to address each child and their individual needs?

Indeed, when examining the educational practice in Waldorf schools, especially in elementary schools, we are witnessing educational conduct that, at least externally, is not individual-oriented but group-oriented. Most classes take place in large groups of usually over 30 students seated in rows, facing the teacher as the center of the learning process. There is no choice given in the class schedule and all the students in a particular class learn all lessons together. Although the teaching methods employ art and are creative, teachers work with all students as a group. Even art classes are guided, with a generally uniform task given to all class students (Edmonds, 2012; Goldschmidt, 2016).

Another important feature of Waldorf education is the emphasis on diverse, rich, and multilateral curricula (Richter & Rawson 2012). The different areas of knowledge are of great importance both individually and in combination. Steiner repeatedly stressed the importance

of the different areas of study for child development and for their future (Richter & Rawson, 2012). For example, Steiner viewed importance in exposing students to certain narratives such as fairytales, parables, mythology, and folktales, and created a curriculum in this field from kindergarten to the 12th grade (Richter & Rawson 2012).

The questions whether Waldorf education is child-centered on a declarative level only or whether there is a gap between principles and ideals and practical application and, if so, how large, will be considered in the following section.

Discussion

Democratic education, as humanistic education based on the values of liberalism, freedom, and civil rights, sees children as adults and treats them accordingly: respect for their wishes and aspirations and granting the right of suffrage, responsibility for management aspects of the school, and equal status with teachers (Greenberg, 2002; Hecht 2012). The child is placed at the center in the most immediate and simple sense: the child is asked what they want to do with regard to learning and experiences and how they want to organize and manage their life. In the extreme practice of education in this spirit, the school is a place where children are free to do whatever they want at all hours of the day, without a schedule, without lessons, without orderly accompaniment, while bestowing full confidence in their power to choose what is right for them and to develop their self-direction internally (Greenberg, 2002). The child's intention, trust, and abilities are far more important to educators in democratic education than acquiring knowledge, orderly study of the core program, or imparting values. Dewey understood keenly the radical change intended by this educational approach: "This is change, this is a revolution, similar to that of Copernicus... In this case the child becomes center and the educational system revolving around..." (Dewey, 1902/1990, p. 34).

Waldorf education emerges from a spiritual worldview with an affinity for a humanistic approach yet goes beyond it (Edmunds, 2012), educating toward the "ideal person" in the words of Schiller (Schiller, 2004), or "eternal individuality" in the words of Steiner (Steiner, 1983, p87). Whereas the democratic stream asks the children, themselves, about their desires, needs and opinions, thus dialoguing with the child's consciousness, here the intention is not to discover what the children want and choose consciously, especially at

a young age, but what the educator perceives as right, appropriate, and nurturing for the child. There is a kind of "adult bypass" here: the educators attempt to understand and meet the child through themselves.

This objective of educating toward the ideal person is also influenced by the developmental aspect of Waldorf education. Particularly on the questions of choice, independence, and responsibility of students, a long and conscious process of increasingly liberating students occurs in Waldorf education. Educators begin this process in kindergarten, initially sharing the goal with parents, and later with older students as the process continues (Goldschmidt, 2010, final chapter). In kindergarten and the lower grades of elementary school, children have virtually no choice and are guided by their educators in both school learning processes and etiquette. However, as children mature, especially in 11th and 12th grades, they are given increasing responsibility and their choices expand. This includes responsibility for learning processes and for school holidays, events, projects, productions, excursions and more.

This aspiration of educators to respond to the deep needs of children and not to leave this task in their hands at a young age, which I call “adult bypass,” prompted Steiner to emphasize repeatedly the importance of conducting teacher trainings for Waldorf educators. In his books, lectures, and conversations with teachers, Steiner places great importance on the development of the educator's inner power, intuitive work, and self-awareness. He expected educators to develop educational senses and to really know the children who were delivered to their care, so that they could, indeed, meet their deep requests and needs, sometimes unknown to the children themselves (Steiner, 1979; 1983).

We see, therefore, two different child-centered approaches. Democratic education addresses the child directly, placing the child in the face of dilemmas and questions related to the experience of school life consciously and maturely. Waldorf education addresses the child's deep needs indirectly, as understood by the educator, even if the child does not understand these needs or does not agree and even resists.

These two different approaches create, especially for the younger ages in elementary school, a very different educational reality. In a democratic school, particularly in its extreme models (Greenberg, 2002; Neil, 1983), the school atmosphere is one of respect and trust

between the children and teachers and there are almost no disciplinary problems arising from external requirements of the teachers or the system. Children play and study in interest groups undefined by chronological age or classrooms. They devote long hours to areas of their own interest and there is no emphasis on core studies or educational guidance. The children are fully involved in the organizational conduct of the school, hence taking responsibility for it. An important quality that I have witnessed in all the democratic schools I visited is the students' deep identity with their school, a kind of feeling of home (Hecht, 2012).

In Waldorf schools, students are taught in classes determined by age, there is almost no multi-age learning and the learning requirements are very clear and generally relate to all the children in the class. The school usually has a harmonious atmosphere of trust and closeness between educators and students, but it is also a very authoritative atmosphere. Students have almost no freedom of choice. There is an emphasis on the fields of art and creativity, even within the framework of the learning processes themselves. Again, direction and guidance are given by the teachers. School rules and organizational procedures are determined by the teaching staff and there is an emphasis on core studies similar to ministry of education curricula, even if the teaching methods are quite different, without textbooks and with full autonomy for teachers in their fields (Edmunds, 2012; Richter, 2006).

Do these approaches truly achieve their goal: to develop the child's personality, support development at different levels, and nurture the skills and abilities inherent in each and every one of us? And how well do they prepare their graduates for life after school? How can we examine these questions?

One tool that can give a certain answer, if partial, to these questions is studies of alumni. Such studies, for example, can examine quantitatively the percentage of army enlistment (compulsory in Israel), the percentage of dropouts, percentage of students and graduates of academic studies, the distribution of subjects of graduate study, and more. At the same time, the inner and personal qualities of graduates are much more difficult to measure using quantitative studies; they are qualities that are more sensitive to qualitative or mixed-method studies (Bryman, 2004).

In recent years, two mixed-method studies of alumni in Israel have been published, one on democratic education graduates (Sasson Versano-Moore, 2017) and one on Waldorf education (Goldschmidt, 2013). Both studies reported similar results in several contexts:

- School graduates rejoice in their parents' choice of school (and their own in high school) and recall many positive and meaningful experiences from their studies.
- The vast majority of graduates will choose to send their children to a school with a similar approach to the school they attended.
- The school strengths and their effects on graduates most often noted were those relating to personal qualities such as inner strength, willpower, curiosity, creativity, interpersonal communication, the ability to work in a group, and self-confidence.
- The schools enabled the students to tailor learning to individual interests and pace of learning, through which they developed curiosity and a love of learning.
- A major weakness reported is a lack of acquisition of learning skills and basic knowledge such as mathematics and English (democratic) and science (Waldorf).

The similarities between the Waldorf and democratic education alumni study findings are fascinating. Even if currently the findings are limited to two studies, the similarities raise many questions about the meaning of the educational approaches and their influence given their ideological differences. Each approach is applied through a different educational practice, yet their results are similar. How do we understand this?

My hypothesis is based on three main understandings: First, the two educational approaches, each distinctly, place at the center of the educational act the human connection, the dialogue. In both democratic and Waldorf education, there are orderly methods and tremendous thought and investment in establishing a warm and supportive relationship between the teacher and student in all educational stages (Hecht, 2011; Richter, 2006). Placing connection and dialogue at the center of the school experience is more influential, in my estimation, than ideological approach, teaching methods, and school management. The personality qualities noted by the graduates stem, in my assessment, primarily from this factor.

The second explanation for the similar findings could be the pioneering spirit and innovation of these alternative schools. Notably, in both studies the graduates were partners

in the foundational years of their school and experienced "in the flesh" the establishment of an alternative school, unique and very different from the familiar educational environment. Most of the graduates interviewed studied their entire primary and secondary education in these schools and were partners in creating this educational path. This factor greatly impacted the graduates' assessment of their school and their deep identity with it.

The third explanation may be related to the social status of the students' families. The vast majority of Waldorf and democratic education students come from social strata where parents are relatively aware of educational alternatives and their possibilities, are motivated to seek out these alternatives for their children and, equally important, financially capable of funding the additional expense over public education. Children coming from this socio-educational background usually receive support, reassurances, and a solid educational foundation regardless of the school they attend. Naturally, additional studies of alumni will be of great importance, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, in order to test these understanding and hypothesis more broadly.

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