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A Philosophical Reflection…

This text presents some ideas about the seemingly contradictory but persistent practices characteristic of implementation and evaluation within current educational reform projects. Countries geographically distant from one another and differing in social and cultural contexts report similar challenges: Australia, Canada, Chile, Finland, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay (International Conference, 2014). It is possible that the roots of these disparate practices originate in competing worldviews that form an integral part of our philosophical heritage. As Theodor Adorno (1963) indicates, the purpose of philosophy is to offer reflections on experiences.

Charles Taylor (1989) in his book, *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity*, explores the origins of our modern identity and concludes that three themes are at the heart of our modern concept of self: from religion or metaphysics we seek transcendence or universalism through morality; from the Enlightenment we have learned to value progress through science and rationality; and, the Romantic Movement has given us a strong sense of individuality and originality. Thoughts, ideas, and practices in the Western world continue to draw from all of these complex and contradictory sources.

How do these coexisting but oppositional worldviews manifest themselves within education systems? Are contradictory practices inevitable or is it possible to sufficiently understand the roots and influence of our ideas to the point of creating coherent systems of education?

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Two common preoccupations of recent educational reform projects are: (1) an emphasis on democratic and citizenship education; and, (2) the development of cross-curricular competencies that traverse diverse learning situations in and out of formal education contexts. In educational research, these pedagogical preoccupations are described as **qualitative** because they concern the formation of the whole person.

Current evaluative practices are guided more by the goals of economic growth and civic efficiency (i.e. Rationality) and thus reduce the aims of education to narrower purposes (Rabinovitch, 2005). International testing is becoming more frequent and more valued as a means for classifying and comparing students from disparate regions of the world. This homogenization of student learning is rooted in scientific beliefs about patterns and categorizations and stands in opposition to the humanist (i.e. Romantic) view of transformative pedagogy. What is the real purpose of evaluation – to create standards and procedures that measure educational systems, or to maximize the overall benefits of evaluation on individual student learning? Or can both purposes co-exist?

As the impulse towards more democratic systems of government migrates across the globe, philosophical literature about varying models of democracy also increases. Educational reforms that aim to enhance democracy and citizenship advance a vision of the self in development, whether explicitly stated or not. Not all democratic practices serve the same ends; not all societies have the same requirements. Taylor's (1989) three sources of the modern self – morality, romanticism or individuality, and rationality – can each be linked to a particular model of democracy and attendant concept of self (Changeux & Ricœur, 2000). Democracy and citizenship are concepts that manifest themselves through the social and political relationships within a society – its practices. An educational reform that aims to teach for and about democracy and citizenship does so by orienting students to act and relate to one another and their environment in particular ways. Buried inside these practices are values that describe a particular model of democracy and citizenship.

When a reform is based on socio-constructivist principles, such as the reform launched in 1997 in the Province of Québec, Canada, the evaluation of student learning must also account for various modes of learning, diverse ways of thinking, and multiple manifestations of the same basic knowledge. Standardized tests – ministerial or international – cannot measure the authentic learning of individual students. Neither is this their role and purpose. But where does this leave the results of these tests, with their comparisons and classifications and public global pronouncements?

Practices originating from within a rationalist paradigm value the concept of objectivity and reflect a belief in a world that is knowable. Knowledge is not constructed but discovered. A socio-constructivist pedagogical model understands knowledge as situated and connected; objectivity is not an important part of this viewpoint. Within a socio-constructivist vision of educational reform, democracy is comprised of deliberative procedures under constant negotiation. The whole purpose of socio-constructivist learning is that it fosters change.

Educational research and attendant practices that are rooted in humanist traditions reside uncomfortably close to discourse inherited from a rationalist worldview wherein educational practices are mechanized and student learning is commodified. But real change does not occur because it is mandated by policy. Transforming the way we conceive of and practice education is a slow, messy, incremental process. Any meaningful implementation of the qualitative reforms being proposed by countries around the world will require an experiential approach to education and a learning environment that nurtures trial and error, change, contextual analysis, diversity, and a pluralism of values.

Evaluative practices will need to be re-examined and reformed, not because they are failing to fulfill their intended purpose but because the intended purpose of education in general is undergoing significant change. Evaluation must keep pace.

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