

Developmentalism

An obscure but pervasive restriction on educational improvement

by J. E. Stone

Over the past 13 years, American public schools have been subjected to an increasing barrage of criticism. The chief object of complaint has been their continuing failure to equip students with the academic and workplace skills needed in an era of increasing economic competition.

Despite mounting concerns, schools have largely ignored the availability of teaching methodologies that seem capable of producing the kind of achievement outcomes demanded by the public. They are experimentally validated, field tested and known to produce significant improvements in learning. Instead, the schools have continued to employ a wide variety of untested and unproven practices which are said to be “innovative”. Equally surprising is the observation that many of the ignored and rejected methodologies are quite similar to those that have been found effective and are routinely used by special educators and school psychologists. In many instances, the otherwise unused practices are successfully implemented, but only after a student has been identified as disabled.

I believe that a long-standing but poorly-recognized educational doctrine underpins the neglect of experimental evidence found in the attempt to find more effective teaching methods. It is a doctrine that pervades teacher education and one that disposes the teaching profession to favour certain practices and to ignore others, regardless of empirically demonstrated merit. Termed “developmentalism”, it is a form of romantic naturalism that inspires teacher discomfort with any practice that is deemed incompatible with natural developmental processes.

Developmentalism’s clearest present-day expressions include the “child-centred” teaching seen in Canadian schools, the “progressivism” seen in the British primary schools and the “developmentally appropriate practice” advocated by early childhood educators. A well-known example is the “whole language” approach.

Developmentalism emphasizes a) the sufficiency of a natural inclination to learning, b) the dangers of interference with native characteristics and proclivities and c) the desirability of learning experiences that emulate those thought to occur naturally. Man, his social contrivances and indeed civilization are seen as distinct from nature, and deliberate efforts to alter the course of child development are suspected of interfering with optimal developmental outcomes.

In general, developmentalist guidance has encouraged parents and teachers to be less assertive and to afford children greater freedom. In particular, it has encouraged lessened parent insistence on study and effort in school and on mature and responsible behaviour generally. Parents are given to believe that, in a developmentally accommodative world, frustration and delayed gratification are to be minimized, while immediate success and satisfaction are to be maximized. Rather than seek to shape the child to social or academic norms, developmentally informed teachers and parents are deemed responsible for affording experiences and opportunities that are compatible with the child’s current proclivities.

In effect, developmentalism discourages teachers and parents from asserting expectations or otherwise acting to induce more mature behaviour. Even in the face of noticeable deficiencies or problematic conduct, the developmentally appropriate course of action is that which is congenial to the child’s apparent developmental status.

Continuing lack of advancement in spite of suitable facilitating conditions is taken to reflect delayed emergence of developmentally governed potentialities, not ineffective teaching or parenting.

Over the last 30 years, a variety of experimentally vindicated teaching methods have been developed and disseminated — only to be ignored or discarded in favour of less well-tested practices that better fit developmental thinking. Direct Instruction, for example, is little used despite having been thoroughly validated and field-tested. Programmed instruction is another example of an abandoned methodology and one that uniquely appears to demonstrate how developmentalism’s hold on the teaching profession influences teaching practices in public schools. Despite its initial acceptance and evident promise, educators rejected programmed instruction in favour of “hands-on” approaches. Among educators less influenced by developmentalism, such as private sector business, military and industrial trainers, and designers of computer-based instruction, it remains well-established.

The restrictions on effective practice posed by developmentalism have largely precluded many otherwise credible attempts to improve education through applications of science. As a result, teaching practices uninformed by developmental considerations are persistently rejected by the teaching progression regardless of demonstrated effectiveness.

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