

RICKOVER, DEWEY, AND EDUCATION

AN ABSTRACT OF  
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by  
Peter Michael Steinert  
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In his analysis of the public schools Admiral Rickover has found what he considers to be two very serious weaknesses. First, he charges that the schools do not prepare young minds to meet and solve unique problems. Second, he states that the schools are not identifying and developing enough of our potentially talented youth.

Rickover feels that these weaknesses are the result of several factors. One of these factors is the existence of too many "life adjustment" courses. He states that courses in cooking, fly catching, and cosmetology are cluttering up the curricula of the schools. Another factor which reduces the quality of our students is the existence of the elective system. Rickover believes that this system allows students to take the easy way out. They can bypass the more difficult subjects in favor of the previously mentioned "life adjustment" courses. A final factor which contributes to the weakening of our schools is the fact that many teachers in this country are ill prepared to teach. The teachers' colleges are overloaded with methods courses, but subject matter courses are sadly neglected. All of these weaknesses, according to Rickover, are largely attributable to the theories of John Dewey. Rickover states that Dewey wanted the child's interest to be the main factor in deciding the curriculum and that this led to most of the problems which he finds in existence today.

Rickover proposes to throw out the "life adjustment" courses and return to a liberal arts program for all. He

further suggests that children be grouped for instruction according to ability, since all children do not learn at equal rates. In the area of teacher education Rickover would discard most of the methods courses and replace them with subject matter. In all of these courses Rickover seems to recommend a traditional approach to teaching.

An examination of John Dewey's philosophy reveals that intelligent action on the part of the student is Dewey's primary educational goal. Dewey insists that subject matter is necessary for intelligent action. The danger occurs when the subject matter is isolated in the school and the student is asked to learn the material rather than to use it. Dewey does not agree that the mere acquisition of information will guarantee its intelligent use. Dewey says that it is the educator's task to discover experiences for his students which develop in the student the need to know certain subject matter. Dewey does not suggest that educators should teach children only those things which children find interesting. Dewey feels that interest on the part of the student will be automatic if a real need for subject matter can be developed in the learner.

Another vital facet to Dewey's thinking is his idea that education has a special function in a democracy. Dewey defines democracy as a society in which there are many shared interests among its citizens. At the base of any democracy is the faith that all citizens are capable of controlling their own destinies and are able to contribute something to society. Each citizen

has a right, therefore, to a freed intelligence. He must be allowed to develop to his fullest so that both he and his society may benefit from the full use of his powers. This means that mere vocational training is not enough for the citizen of a democracy. Each man must be educated to his fullest potential.

In comparing Rickover's views with Dewey's we discover that the two have much in common. Rickover insists that education be directed toward the development of critical thinking rather than fact gathering. This was one of Dewey's major objectives. Rickover goes on to state that all of the nation's youth must develop to their fullest potential. This idea is central to Dewey's concept of education in a democracy. Rickover's feeling that a liberal arts background would be useful to all students is in accord with Dewey's argument that members of a democratic society must share as many interests as possible.

Rickover suggested that students should be grouped according to ability. Dewey's position on this matter is not quite as clear cut, since grouping was not an issue in his day. We are forced to examine the idea of grouping in the light of our knowledge of Dewey's general philosophy. Dewey might well suggest that teaching will be ineffective as long as subject matter is divorced from experience. Grouping cannot improve learning if the method of teaching is basically unsound. On the other hand, if the educator wishes to involve his students in experiences which develop a need for subject matter he may

discover that children are not always ready for certain experiences at the same time. In fact, some students may never be ready for some experiences. With this knowledge in mind, grouping becomes essential for the educator.

Rickover also suggested that the teachers' colleges should reduce the number of methods courses taught and concentrate on subject matter. Again, Dewey does not address himself specifically to this problem, but his philosophy gives us a clue as to how he would answer it. It is clear that a thorough knowledge of subject matter on the part of the educator is vital in Dewey's thought. Without such knowledge the educator could not find experiences for students which would lead to further growth in the area. Dewey would probably insist on some methods courses, but he might well argue that an educator who is himself capable of intelligent action will be able to develop many of his own specific methods for each situation.

It is apparent that Rickover's goals are not so different from Dewey's. Rickover believes that the traditional approach will succeed in achieving his goals. Dewey says that the traditional approach has been tried and it has failed.

Rather than discard Dewey's theories we must attempt to discover why they are not working as well in practice as they should. Perhaps those who profess to be using Dewey's theories are not really doing so. Perhaps there are inherent difficulties in the experimental approach. These are the questions which should be considered by today's educators.