THE ACTIVITY SCHOOL: RATIONALE AND HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

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Introduction

The Parent Commission on Education in the Province of Quebec has already recommended to the Government that the *école active* should constitute the basic pedagogical principle for the Provincial educational system. To the Commissioners, the "activist school" entails an institution where pedagogical efforts reflect a twin principle of child psychology — namely, the child is "essentially an active being and it is through use that his capacities develop and his personality expands." [1] In recommending "genuinely child-centered education" in which the pupil's natural curiosity is to be utilized to develop intellectual and moral autonomy, the Parent Commission criticizes the traditional school for generally limiting itself "to more immediate goals" and not striving "to cultivate the spirit of initiative and any feeling of responsibility." [2]

The present article is based on Gustav G. Schoenchen's *The Activity School: A Basic Philosophy for Teachers* [3] (an adaptation of his 1939 doctoral dissertation at New York University) and aims to review a major section of this significant and relevant treatise. Schoenchen's book consists of three major parts: 1- Historical and Philosophical; 2- Methodology; 3- Application. The following analysis is primarily drawn from Part 1 which sets forth the basic historical antecedents of the activity school. Emphasis is upon those individuals in Europe whose writings and practices contributed to the underlying principles of what has come to be called activity pedagogy.

Rationale

Offering the analogy of a mathematician as he approaches a limit — "always progressing but never arriving" — Schoenchen contends that in order to include all valid subordinate aims (both now and in the future), the supreme aim of the activity school must be human perfection. Although the goal can never be reached, it is "in its aspiration toward the ideal (that) our human nature manifests itself as its best." (p. 96) The ideal for physical life becomes "the most preferable" health and the ideal for mental life combines "beauty as ideal of ideation, truth as ideal of judgement and reason, and virtue

as ideal of will or emotion." Taking geography, creative writing and art as examples, Schoenchen subsequently describes the methodology which activity pedagogy employs in progressing towards these various ideals.

Averring that activity pedagogy is fundamentally an expression of Pestalozzianism, Schoenchen defines "the activity school as that type of education which, through activity pedagogy, makes the widest possible use of the principle of pupil self-activity in the teaching process." (p. 283) Activity pedagogy recognizes two inter-related aspects of the basic self-activity principle. The first comprises the "things to do" or subject matter, an example being manual training as an activity itself (or coordinated with other subjects) or non-manual training activities in any subject. Schoenchen refers to this first aspect as "pedagogical activity" and describes it as "every purposeful application of human power, mental or physical, through which cultural values are created." (p. 107)

The second aspect of self-activity constitutes a principle of teaching or a formal methodology. Schoenchen calls such methodology "heuristics" which, he states, "must be stimulative of the seeking-and-finding powers of the child . . ., aiding or guiding in discovery, inciting to observation or invention." (p. 113) As already mentioned, there are three ideals to be sought after in relation to man's mental life. Schoenchen outlines a specific heuristic for each.

a. Ideation is to employ "empirical heuristics," whereby concepts are built upon a pupil's experienced percepts. Here the author takes geography as a subject and describes seven characteristic forms, from simple material collection to map study and even "direct telling by the teacher," which can be efficacious in stimulating "the pupil in the mental process . . . called ideation." (p. 118)
b. Development of the child's ability for independent judgement requires "logical heuristics." The objective here is to stimulate "the pupil in the field of assimilation," for which the teacher acts as a Socratic mid-wife. Logical heuristics are "the very core of activity pedagogy on the formal side." (p. 140)
c. Will or emotion necessitates "technical heuristics," which utilize pupil interest and become manifest as self-expression. Such expression is basically in response to man's innate drive to create or re-create (re-present?). As in the

two other heuristics, the correlation between subject matter and teaching method — that is, between the two aspects of the principle of self-activity — must be recognized and honoured.

Historical Antecedents

It is a truism to say that all life involves activity of some sort and in some degree. In primitive societies one senses that an implicit injunction might very well have been: "survival of the active-est." Nor is there any question that the activity concept engaged Graeco-Roman minds, in both educational and non-educational domains. In many respects, however, the matter of activity education most noticeably challenged Western man during and immediately following the Renaissance and Reformation eras — that is, after several centuries of comparative in-activity or passivity. This general line of thinking leads Schoenchen to credit John Amos Comenius (1592-1670) with having provided the first principle of activity pedagogy. As the outstanding representative of educational sense-realism, Comenius' contribution rests on his insistence that the pupil do things for and by himself. For Comenius training through eye, tongue and hand in object lessons enabled the pupil to acquire all knowledge or *pansophism.* Thus, the first of twenty-two activist principles which Schoenchen identifies is derived from Comenius:

1. An activity school makes use of pupil activity as a principle of instruction. (p. 6)

Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), "the father of modern pedagogy" and one of the first modern educators to assert the inherent goodness of man, recommended a "negative" or natural education during the first dozen years of a child's life. He advocated pupil activity as a major means of learning and condemned over-emphasis on education as a preparation for life. To him we credit the following:

2. The activity school advocates many forms of manual training for their cultural values.
3. The activity school arranges the subject matter of instruction in accordance with the natural interests of the child.
4. The activity school advocates direct experience as preferable to vicarious experience.
5. The activity school is opposed to merely verbal teaching.

6. The activity school emphasizes the need for training the senses so that learning through the senses may be furthered.
7. The activity school would modify the learning process so as to take account of individual differences among the pupils.
8. The activity school recognizes that education is life, and must therefore be lived in a communal environment. (p. 7)

Meanwhile, there was the ever-present and increasing opposition by the scientific realists (from Bacon through to Newton) to all forms of verbalism and their even stronger advocacy for inductive reasoning, observation and experimentation. However, not until the latter half of the eighteenth century do we find any new general principles. While Christian Salzmann was acting as literary propagandist for the activity movement as a whole, Ferdinand Kindermann (1740-1801) "first applied the principles of activity education to vocational training, thereby creating the vocational school." (p. 9) In addition, he valued industrial training for its potential in fostering human happiness through economic productivity. To this end he also instituted a policy of alternating academic and industrial subjects. Kindermann contributed two principles:

9. The activity school believes that one of the proper aims of education is vocational efficiency.
10. The activity school advocates a natural form of discipline based on the child's interest in his work, and operative through social control; it is opposed to order imposed upon the pupil from without by the teacher. (p. 9)

Schoenchen mentions the work and ideas of certain minor "rationalists" during this germinal period. Johann Basedow drew attention to the necessity of alternating subjects so as to avoid the consequences of fatigue. Johann Campe somewhat echoed Rousseau by proposing manual work entirely until the age of thirteen. Bernard Blasche, who noted a natural-cultural dichotomy in activities, and Gottlieb Heusinger, who found in them a fertile field for aesthetic appreciation, combined in 1798 to produce *Die Familie Wertheim,* a treatise which "might be called the first book on activity pedagogy."

Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), whose position in German education is generally acknowledged, added several significant principles to activity pedagogy. As an ethical idealist, he advocated that all training should be directed towards human living with manual and academic subjects blending to make man part of a work-community. While Fichte conceived matter as a function of absolute Spirit, he deemed the latter to be active or operative. Doing, accordingly, is eternal: being is merely a function of doing. From this Fichte affirms that activity is not only instinctive (as earlier recognized) but also an insistent urge or universal drive and should be utilized as the chief [4] means of instruction. Fichte is credited with the following principles:

11. The activity school regards pupil activity as the *chief* means of education.
12. The activity school uses the principle of activity not only as a subject (manual training) but also as a method of teaching.
13. The activity school advocates many forms of manual training for their moral value.
14. The activity school advocates self-activity as a means of achieving independence.
15. The activity school recognizes the need for training the individual for membership in society. (p. 10)

Two of Fichte's contemporaries re-inforced most of his views. Johann Gottfried Herder especially stressed sense-training and knowledge in the field of applied science. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, meanwhile, recommended an integrated manual training course from the time the pupil first entered school, with specialization being postponed until personal aptitudes could be determined. In this respect he saw the difference between artist and artisan as only one of degree. Goethe's concept of the reciprocal relation between thinking and doing was later incorporated as part of the psychological basis of activity pedagogy. Schoenchen claims that Goethe's precept "regarding happiness and altruism is destined to become incorporated as an ethical motive or aim in the activity school."

With the advent of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) and August Friedrich Wilhelm Froebel (1782-1852), the activity school entered a period of rapid growth. Schoenchen points out that because Pestalozzi put Comenius' and Rous-

seau's ideas into practice, the activity school owes more to him than to any other educator. (p. 12)

Fundamental is Pestalozzi's conception of "self-activity" as comprising spontaneity rather than mere activity. Henceforth the principle of pupil self-activity entails "activity initiated and motivated by the pupil himself." (p. 13) Significant also is the view of human nature held by Pestalozzi — he combines Rousseau's and Fichte's respective individual and social concepts by recognizing an inter-action between the individual's inner and outer world. A century later inter-action became one of the two principles in John Dewey's theory of experience. Further, we note that perception *per se* is merely passive, according to Pestalozzi, who insisted that the process be carried through conceptualization and expression back to the original object. In this manner and through pupil effort, concept formation would become active or meaningful. Schoenchen claims that Pestalozzi herein "adumbrates the later work of activity psychologists, who trace activity through the three departments of the mind — the ideational, the judgement, and the interest-volitional." (p. 14) Pestalozzi's contributions to the activity school are:

16. The activity school is organized on the basis of pupil self-activity.
17. The psychological basis of the activity school is the truth that pupil self-activity affects the three categories of consciousness — the ideational, the judgement, and the interest — volitional.
18. The activity school values experimentation as a means of education because experimentation applies a pragmatic test to ideas. (p. 15)

Froebel, in effect, combines Fichte's principle of doing with Pestalozzi's sense training (or object lesson) when he advocates that knowledge should be obtained through *anschauung*[5] or "sensing an object in every possible way." (p. 315) Play for Froebel was both its own justification and yet it could also develop into social cooperation or work. Regarding the "culture epochs" or "recapitulation" matter, Schoenchen at first states that "the theory rests on some questionable evidence . . . (and) it is not essential to the activity school." (p. 16) He then contends that because Froebel only supported it in so far as each man's recapitulation is different, "the theory need not be at variance with the observed facts of

human individualization." Recapitulation's practical value resides in its insistence on the sequential arrangement both of the curriculum as a whole and also within each specific subject. In this respect psychological order assumes priority over logical order. To Froebel are attributed:

19. The activity school maintains that sense training and self-activity must go hand in hand, pedagogically.
20. The activity school recognizes the pedagogical importance of play.
21. The activity school tentatively accepts the recapitulation theory.
22. The activity school recognizes that the development of the child at any level is conditioned by the development of the child at lower levels. (p. 18)

During the second half of the nineteenth century variations of activity school principles spread to various European countries. Uno Cygnaeus, a Froebelian, introduced the philosophy into Finland's public elementary schools and teacher seminaries. The Swedish *sloyd* [6] movement was inaugurated by August Abrahamson and developed by his nephew, Otto Salomon. By the end of the century Norway made *sloyd* compulsory in the public schools. Denmark, under the guidance of Adolph von Clauson-Kaas, adopted the utilitarian emphasis of Kindermann, although general teaching methods reflected the broader activity school principles. The "écoles maternelles" in France accepted the theory of Froebel's kindergarten, but in practice they invariably emphasized its abstract elements. In England, Herbert Spencer's philosophy most closely represented the activity position. Some "hand and eye" techniques appeared in primary schools, with specialized manual training being offered after Grade 4. Generally speaking, English activity education featured "complete informality, and considerable individualization of instruction." (p. 22) In describing the activity school in the United States, Schoenchen disassociates the influence of John Dewey. [7] In a short summary, it is claimed that activity education in America mirrors the general features attributed to its development in England.

Schoenchen claims that the influence of Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841) caused a "temporary eclipse" of activity education. He attributes this eclipse to the fact that, although pedagogy was "the most important outcome of his philosophy,"

(p. 23) Herbart insisted that thought preceded action. Consequently, concept building assumed a sterile intellectual guise and Herbart's only sympathy to activity pedagogy was in his acceptance of manual training in secondary school level workshops. This acceptance was on condition that the vocational side was subordinated to the cultural.

> . . . from 1857 to 1902 a series of nation-wide teachers' conferences in Germany reflected the Herbartian distrust of the activity school, with the result that advances in activity pedagogy during this time were made in countries other than Germany. (p. 24)

Tuiskon Ziller is noted as representative of the anti-activity group because he advocated manual training for classes of secondary importance *(neben klassen)*, to begin only after the pupil had reached twelve years of age. Although he termed all-round manual skill "polytechnic" and claimed skill to be more cultural than vocational, Otto William similarly subordinated manual classes to formal academics.

Schoenchen then describes European modifications of activity pedagogy which occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The expansion of the concept of manual training from "little more than woodwork" to its function as general method and even as a subject with its own specific method in the general curriculum was due considerably to the combined efforts of Georg Woldemar Goetze and his successor Alwin Pabst at the Leipzig teacher-training courses. True, their loyalties were to their teacher Ziller and to Herbartianism, but as a result of the "Leipzig Method" individual educators adapted activity pedagogy to such subjects as geometry, drawing, natural science and to the study of form itself.

Heinrich Sherer stands out at this time as one of the chief exponents of the psychological basis for activity pedagogy. He pointed out both the injurious effect of stifling the child's innate drive for self-expression and also the sociological relevance of creating objects. Meanwhile, the Leipzig Teachers' Association was accentuating individualization through an undifferentiated and broadly conceived "Home-and-Civilization" theme in all elementary grades. Accepting Froebel's principle of child development and endorsing the child-centered school, the Leipzig group thereby accepted the physical-mental view of pupil activity. William A. Lay, principal of the Karlsruhe teacher-training institute, is singled out for his experimental

work which particularly concerned itself with the "R" end of the "S-R bond." With reference to this problem-solving step in the learning process, Schoenchen states:

> The great pedagogical problem of the activity school is the difficult act of so influencing the mental set of the child through pedagogic techniques, that the child does not realize that he is being influenced by the teacher, or being subjected to a pedagogic technique, but believes that the assumption of the problem is an act of his own free will without suggestion from outside sources. (pp. 39-40)

Only pupil self-activity, he continues, will enable one to approach "salvation" which is defined as "the achieved acceptance of man's place in the world, with conscience as the bearer of ethical claims upon him." (p. 40) Salvation permits one to harmonize outer and inner worlds and become "an active worker in the world for the good of all."

Combining Spencer's naturalism and Dewey's pragmatism, George Kerschensteiner (1854-1932) represents the chief exponent of education through socialization with citizenship as its aim. As superintendent of Munich schools, he increased the ratio of activity over language subjects and made the historical and social aspects of human institutions the form and substance of the curriculum. At about the same time the social philosophy of the Swiss Robert Seidel was instrumental in bringing activity education into the schools of Zurich, Basel and Berne.

While various individuals and institutions in Europe were promoting such features as individualization and natural science — the latter as both subject and method — perhaps the most significant modification was that made by the administrators. W. Wetekamp, principal of a *real-gymnasium* in Berlin, gradually introduced activity methods into all twelve grades and made specific activities sub-serve separate subjects. In fusing the traditionally antagonistic learning and doing type of school, Dr. Max Loeweneck proposed the following guide-lines: 1. programming of suitable activity-subjects for each grade; 2. using only simple, inexpensive tools for all projects; 3. subordinating of vocational to cultural consideration; 4. neither teacher nor pupil expected to demonstrate great technical skill; and 5. activity time to be borrowed from correlated subject.

In Austria the Minister for Education, Otto Gloeckel, introduced the principles of activity pedagogy in the 1920 reforms. The major instrument in implementing the principles was the Vienna Pedagogical Institute, directed by Eduard Burger. In Germany, meanwhile, the 1919 Weimar Constitution made activity training compulsory in all State schools. Confusion as to the meaning of the principle, however, occasioned a National School Conference in Berlin the following year, and Schoenchen avers that the report of a special committee which examined ". . . the effect of activity pedagogy upon thought content . . . remains the most important document in the history of the activity school in Europe." (p. 54) Essentially this document supported the twin principle of activity pedagogy which continued to guide German education until the take-over by Hitler in the early 1930's.

Schoenchen's treatment of John Dewey alone remains to be reported; but, as already implied, this topic will be only briefly sketched. On the theoretical side, it may be pointed out that whereas Dewey approaches education philosophically and defines it as "a social life necessity taking the form of intelligently directed activity to insure proper individual growth for social continuity," (p. 209) the activity school simply takes education for granted and endeavours to derive "the best means for achieving education." Dewey "describes education as a continuous process divorced from its end; we think of education . . . as a *process* of becoming, and as an *end product* of that process." (p. 210) Referring to Dewey's assertion that education only functions within a social context, Schoenchen contends that "through the principle of self-activity self-education is possible even in isolation." (p. 210) Dewey deems philosophy to be a method for determining appropriate actions to reconstruct society, while to the activity school it "is a body of truth to which we refer and upon which we base our system of education." (p. 223) Knowledge for both Dewey and the activists has instrumental value "in enabling man to gain newer and wider experiences," but only the latter affirm "knowledge as having validity or truth whether man has the ingenuity to use it or not." (p. 224) Similarly, both agree that morality is realized in and through social living, but the activity school also holds that "moral conduct, or character, transcends the social situation." (p. 225) In brief, Schoenchen claims Dewey would employ education

for "the creation of the ideal society," the activity school "for the creation of the ideal man." (p. 239) Dewey would characterize method by results and the activity school would stress processes. While discipline and interest are blended by Dewey and, in effect, become indistinguishable, discipline is intimately related to the broader domain of moral training by activity pedagogues. Finally, the two protagonists proffer a different meaning of individual freedom: Dewey sees freedom as a means to social improvement, Schoenchen as it permits and encourages the individual to approach perfection.

Such then concludes this synopsis of the major historical antecedents of the activity school as viewed by Dr. Gustav G. Schoenchen, writing during the first year of World War II. To what extent the twenty-two principles are applicable to the Parent Commission's idea of *l'école active* or to the manner and means by which the Government and educators of the Province of Quebec will implement the Royal Commission's recommendations, it is still too early to give any categorial answer. It is just possible, however, that the preceding account may act as a catalyst in future deliberations on the whole question of the activist approach in contemporary education.

References

1. *Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Quebec,* Government of the Province of Quebec, Vol. 2, 1964, p. 90.
2. *Ibid.,* pp. 90-91.
3. Gustav G. Schoenchen, *The Activity School: A Basic Philosophy for Teachers,* New York: Longmans, Green, 1940, pp. x, 359.
   Schoenchen's doctoral dissertation is entitled, "Eduard Burger and John Dewey — A Comparative Study of Burger's *Arbeitsschule* and Contemporary American Activity Schools as Representative of Dewey's Educational Philosophy." Subsequent page references in this paper are to Schoenchen's book.
4. Schoenchen appears inconsistent here because he has already claimed that Rousseau originated the idea of pupil activity as being the *chief* means of instruction. However, he does not include it among the seven principles attributed to Rousseau.
5. Schoenchen omits the implications of immediacy of awareness in defining *anschauung.*
6. *Sloyd* is defined as "deftness of hand — manual dexterity. Its object is cultural rather than vocational; self-reliance, assiduity, conscientiousness, respect for the dignity of work are its intended end products." (p. 316)
7. However, Chapters X and XI are entirely devoted to an appraisal of Dewey's contribution to the activity school.