

The problem of teaching

Ricardo Mella

1910

In contrast to religious education, which is increasingly opposed by people of very diverse political and social ideas, secular, neutral and rationalist education is advocated and implemented.

At first, secularism sufficiently satisfied popular aspirations. But when it became clear that in secular schools one was merely putting civics in place of religion, the State in place of God, the idea of an education that was alien to both religious and political doctrines arose. Then, some proclaimed the neutral school, others the rationalist one.

Objections to these new methods are not lacking, and soon the corresponding denominations will also be in crisis.

Because, strictly speaking, as long as teaching and education are not perfectly distinguished, any method will be defective. If we were to reduce the question to teaching, properly speaking, there would be no problem. There is a problem because what is wanted in any case is to educate, to instill in children a special way of behaving, of being and of thinking. And against this tendency, against any imposition, will always rise those who put the intellectual and physical independence of youth above any other purpose.

The question is not, therefore, whether the school is called secular, neutral or rationalist, etc. This would be a simple play on words transferred from our political concerns to our pedagogical opinions.

Rationalism will vary and varies at present according to the ideas of those who propagate or practice it. Neutralism, on the other hand, even in the relative sense that should be given to it, remains at the mercy of remaining free and above its own ideas and feelings. As long as teaching and education are confused, the tendency, if not the purpose, will be to mold youth according to particular and determined ends.

But in the end the question is simpler if we pay attention to the real purpose rather than to the external forms. Those who speak out against religious teaching are encouraged by the desire to emancipate children and youth from all imposition and all dogma. Then political and social prejudices come to confuse and mix the educational mission with the instructive function. But everyone will clearly know that only where there is no politics, sociology, morality or biased philosophy being carried out or attempted to be carried out will true instruction be given, whatever name it may be given under.

And precisely because each method claims to be capable not only of teaching, but also of educating according to pre-established principles and consequently waves a doctrinal flag, it is

necessary that we make it clear that if we were to limit ourselves to instructing youth in the acquired truths, making them accessible to them through experience and understanding, the problem would be completely solved.

However good we may recognize ourselves to be, however much we esteem our own goodness and our own justice, we have no worse or better right than those on the opposite sidewalk to make young people in our image and likeness. If there is no right to suggest, to impose on children any religious dogma, there is no right to instruct them in a political opinion, in a social, economic and philosophical ideal.

On the other hand, it is evident that to teach first letters, geometry, grammar, mathematics, etc., both in their useful aspect as in the purely artistic or scientific, there is no need to rely on secularist or rationalist doctrines that suppose certain tendencies, and because they are, are contrary to the instructive function itself. In clear and precise terms: the school should not, cannot be republican, nor Masonic, nor socialist, nor anarchist, in the same way that it cannot and should not be religious.

School cannot and should not be anything more than the gymnasium for the total development, for the complete development of individuals. Therefore, we must not give youth ready-made ideas, whatever they may be, because this implies castration and atrophy of those very faculties that we are trying to excite.

Education must be instituted outside of all factions, removing youth from the power of doctrinaires, even if they call themselves revolutionaries. Conquered truths, universally recognized, will suffice to form intellectually free individuals.

We will be told that youth needs more extensive teachings, that it is necessary for them to know all of mental and historical development, to come into possession of events and ideals without which learning would be incomplete.

Without a doubt. But this knowledge no longer belongs to school, and it is here that neutrality claims its privileges. To present to the young, previously instructed in proven truths, the development of all metaphysics, all theologies, all philosophical systems, all forms of organization, present, past and future, all accomplished facts and all ideals, will be precisely the obligatory complement of the school, the indispensable means to arouse in the minds, not to impose, a real conception of life. Let each one, before this immense arsenal of rights and ideas, form himself. The preceptor will easily be neutral, if he is obliged to teach, not to dogmatize.

It is a very different thing to explain religious ideas from teaching religious dogma; to expound political ideas from teaching democracy, socialism or anarchy. It is necessary to explain everything, but not to impose anything, however true and just it may be believed to be. Only at this price will intellectual independence be effective.

And we, who place freedom above all, all freedom of thought and action, who proclaim the real independence of the individual, cannot advocate for young people methods of imposition, not even methods of doctrinal teaching.

The school we want, without denomination, is one in which the desire to know for themselves, to form their own ideas, is best and most aroused in young people. Wherever this is done, we will be there with our modest support.

All the rest, to a greater or lesser degree, is to retrace the beaten paths, to voluntarily get back on track, to change paths, but not to throw them away.

And what matters is precisely to throw them away once and for all.

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