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A COMPARATIVE EXAMINATION OF TRADITIONAL AND PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION APPROACHES IN WILLY RUSSELL'S OUR DAY OUT

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Abstract

Our Day Out is a television play (also published in book form) which is written by Willy Russell to describe daily activities in a school in England in 1977. Russell gives place to traditional and progressive education approaches in the play. In this study, the educational approaches are compared and discussed based on the characters' views in the play. Document analysis method is used in the study as a qualitative research method. The results show that traditional education approach is associated with academic success, but the feelings and thoughts of the students are ignored, as well as the progressive education approach is associated with academic failure but students are valued in school and taken into consideration as individuals.

Keywords: Our Day Out, Willy Russell, traditional education approach, progressive education approach, discipline.

1. Introduction

Our Day Out is a television play (also published in book form) which is written by Willy Russell to describe daily activities in a school in England. The script was written in 1977, but it is based on Russell's teaching experience in 1973-1974 in a school in Liverpool. Considering the period in which the book was written was approximately 30 years after World War II, it can be assumed that environmental factors affect the quality of education negatively. The main characters in the play are students with low socioeconomic status, a teacher with progressive class and an idealistic teacher prioritizing traditional approaches. Russell gives place to traditional and progressive education approaches in the play (Russell, 1993). In this study, educational approaches are compared and discussed based on the characters' views in the play. It would be beneficial to deal traditional and progressive education approaches first.

Perennialism and essentialism perspectives can be classified within traditional education approach. (Kooli, Zidi and Jamrah; 2019; Ranjitkar; 2020). Both perspectives contain common elements of the traditional approach. These are:



Deep historical roots, teacher centered instruction, subject centered curriculum, discipline centered instruction, passive learner students (collecting knowledge), liberal arts oriented subjects (extended core subjects based on trivium/3R's and quadrivium), educating students who embrace the current status quo and will maintain it and disregard socio-economic differences of students (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2017; Gutek, 2011; Cevizci, 2019).

Progressive education approach is a relatively new perspective that emerged against the traditional understanding of education. Main principles of this approach are:

It is a new approach (20th Century), student centered instruction, flexible curriculum, democratic learning environment, active students (teacher is facilitator in the classroom), project-based and integrated subjects, giving more importance to student interest and freedom than societal expectation, considering socio-economic differences and individualised learning and students' taking responsibility for their own learning (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2017; Gutek, 2011; Cevizci, 2019).

2. Method

Document analysis method is used in the study as a qualitative research method. Document analysis includes the analysis of written materials containing information about the phenomenon or facts to be investigated. In the field of education: Textbooks, instructional regulations, internal and external correspondence, official documents... can be used as data source (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2013, pp.217-218).

3. Characters

It would be also beneficial to introduce some of the play characters in the Our Day Out. The characters can be briefly described as follows:

Mrs. Key: Teacher of progressive class, representative of progressive education approach.

Mr. Briggs: An idealistic teacher and authoritarian towards students, representative of traditional education approach.

Headmaster: A principle who values discipline and approves traditional education approach.

Carol: A student with low socioeconomic status. She smokes. She wants better living conditions.

Les: Helping students cross the road.

Reilly: A student wants to join progressive class trip.

Susan: A young teacher.

Colin: Another young teacher.

4. Progressive Education Approach

In the Our Day Out, progressive education approach is included as follows:

-Carol: *"...Don't y' know what the Progress Class is? It's Mrs Kay's class. Y' go down there in the week if y' can't do reading' or sums for writing'. If you're backward like."*

-Les: *"By Christ, I'll bet she's kept busy. They're all bloody backward round here."*



As can be understood from the text, students in the progressive education class are unsuccessful and do not have basic educational skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic. This also shows that educational goals and practices are not success oriented in the progressive class.

Headmaster (to Mr. Briggs): *"...I'd just like you to be there and keep an eye on things. I don't want to be unprofessional and talk about a member of staff, but I get the impression she (Mrs. Key) sees education as one long game."*

Mr. Briggs: *"Well.. if the antics in her department are anything to go by...! She always reminds me of a mother rather than a teacher."*

Headmaster (to Mr. Briggs): *"Well, anyway, just try and keep things in some sort of order."*

Mrs. Key is seen as a teacher who cannot give students educational discipline and only make them pass good time by school management. Some other teachers who follow traditional approaches in school share this opinion as well. This means progressive approach is not seen a serious and fruitful education approach. It can also be understood that traditionalists consider approaching students with kindness as a kind of weakness.

As can be seen below, the progressive approach is identified not only with unsuccessful teachers but also with unsuccessful students.

Reilly: *"Ey, Miss, hang on, hang on. Can we come with y', Miss?..."*

Susan: *"But Brian, you're not in the Progress Class any longer, are you? Now that you can read and write you're back in normal classes."*

Reilly: *"Agh, Miss, come on .."*

It can be said that in the progressive approach, the physical and cognitive needs of the students are taken into consideration more:

Students are in the shop...

Mr. Briggs: *"To be quite honest, Mrs. Key I do not think we should all be inside, looking after them. Do you think it was wise just letting them all pour in there at once?"*

Mrs. Kay: *"Ohh... leave them. They have been cooped up for over an hour. They'll want to stretch their legs and let off a bit of steam."*

Additionally, the students are trusted more in the progressive educational approach than in traditional educational approaches. In this approach, belief and confidence that students will show positive behaviours is more than traditional perspectives:

Mr. Briggs: *"I do not mind them stretching their legs. It is not the children I'm concerned about."*

Mrs. Kay: *"Well, just who are you concerned about?"*

Mrs. Kay: *"Considering the profit they make out from the kids I don't think they've got too much to complain about."*

Mr. Briggs: *"...I'll have to say this to you, Mrs. Kay, there are times when I really think you're on their(students') side."*



In the progressive approach, expectations from the school and learning outcomes are unsatisfactory, educational goals are uncertain, and efforts towards student academic success are less. Environmental conditions are blamed for educational failure. Also, it can be said that plans for the future of educational institutions and students' vocational development are also ambiguous:

Mrs Kay: *"...All right, the headmaster asked you to come along, but can't you just relax? There's no point in pretending that a day out to Wales is going to furnish them with the education they should have had long ago. It's too late for them. Most of them (these kids) were rejects the day they born... Can't we just try and give them a good day out? At least we could try and do that..."*

Mr. Briggs: *"Well, that's a fine attitude, isn't it? That's a fine attitude for a member of the teaching profession to have."*

Mrs Kay: *"Well, what's your alternative? Eh? Do you really think there is any point pretending? Even if you cared do you think you could educate these kids, my remedial kids? Because you are a fool if you do. You won't educate them because nobody wants them educating."*

When examined in general, the following statements can be used for the progressive education approach in the game Our Day Out: Students' feelings, characteristics and needs are important in learning environment, the education plan is flexible and the risk of academic failure is high, there are discipline problems in the learning environment, the expectation of academic success is low and students may not be blamed in case of failure.

5. Traditional Education Approach

In the Our Day Out, traditional education approach is included as follows:

Mr. Briggs: *"You know what her problem is, don't you?"*

.....

Mr. Briggs: *"Well! She thinks I can't see through all this woolly-minded liberalism. You know what I mean? I mean, she has her methods and I have mine but I can't see why she has to set herself up as the champion of the non-academics! Can you? It might look like love and kindness but if you ask me I do not think it does the kids a scrap of good."*

The progressive education approach is seen as a reflection of the liberal philosophy in schools. Love and kindness which are significant in learning environment in progressive approach is not considered important in traditional approach, because love and kindness have no academic contribution to students. It can be said that 'success' in traditional methods means academic success.

As seen below, in the traditional education approach, student feelings are not considered or are considered at a low level in learning environment. The teacher must carry out the curriculum in a disciplined manner and the students' thoughts about him/her are not important. The teacher must be leader and authoritarian.

Mr. Briggs: *"I think you have to risk being disliked if you're going to do any good for these type of kids. They've enough freedom at home, haven't they? With their two quid pocket money and television till all hours, haven't they? ...I think her philosophy is totally confused. What do you think?"*



In the traditional education approach, planning and implementation of plans in educational activities are also very significant. Students should be controlled, and this is the responsibility of the teachers. Not only classroom activities but also extracurricular activities should be planned and controlled:

Mr. Briggs: “...*You mean you’ve not noticed all this, sort of, anti-establishment, let the kids-roam-wild, don’t check them attitude?*”

Colin: “*Of course I’ve noticed it. But she’s like this all the time. This trip isn’t organised according to any startling theory.*”

Another dialogue that shows the importance given to planning in the traditional education approach is as follows:

Colin: “*The only principle behind today is that the kids should have a good day out.*”

Mr. Briggs: “*But if they’re going to have a good and stimulating day, then it’s got to be better planned and executed better than this.*”

It can be said that in traditional methods, there is limited trust in students. Students are not treated as unique individuals but rather are seen as a group of people who have gathered to fulfill their responsibilities in school.

At the Zoo...

Mr. Briggs: *Ah, Can I though? If I go off for a cup of coffee with Mrs Kay, can you people be trusted to act responsibly?*

Chorus of ‘Yes Sir’.

Mr. Briggs: *All right Mrs. Kay. We will trust them to act responsibly.*

As stated below, in the traditional approach, maintaining strict discipline and students achieving the educational program outcomes are focused rather than negative conditions in education environment. In this perspective, there are idealistic teachers and students who must achieve the goals determined in the curriculum. Students’ main purpose is not to learn skills to find a job or develop their own personal interests, but to acquire national and international competencies determined for them.

Mrs Kay: “... *Mr Briggs, you listen and perhaps you’ll stop fooling yourself. Teach them? Teach them what? You’ll never teach them because nobody knows what to do with them. Ten years ago, you could teach them to stand in a line, you could teach them to obey, to expect little more than a lousy factory job. But now they haven’t even got that to aim for. Mr Briggs, you won’t teach them because you’re in a job that’s designed and funded to fail! There’s nothing for them to do, any of them; most of them were born for factory fodder, but the factories have closed down.*”

Mr. Briggs: “*And I suppose that’s the sort of stuff you’ve been pumping into their minds.*”

Mr. Briggs (for Carol): “...*Look! Carol! You’re talking as though you’ve given up on life already. You sound as though life for you is ending, instead of just beginning. Now why can’t, I mean, if it’s what you want, what’s to stop you working hard at school from now on, getting a good job and then moving out here when you’re old enough? Eh?*”



As stated below, it is understood that teachers who support the traditional education approach are generally disliked by the students, and they make students feel worthless. This shows that students' feelings are not seen significant, and discipline is seen more important than personal ideas in traditional approach. There is no place for a sincere relationship with students in the educational environment.

(Carol climb up a cliff-top, she doesn't want to turn back from the school trip and threatens to jump off. Mr. Briggs try to save her.)

Carol: *"Because if I jumped over, you'd get into trouble when you get back to school. That's why, Briggsy, so stop goin' on. You hate me."*

Mr. Briggs: *"Don't be ridiculous. Just because I'm a school teacher it doesn't mean to say that..."*

Carol: *"Don't lie, you! I know you hate me. I've seen you goin' home in your car, passin' us on the street. An' the way you look at us. You hate all the kids..."*

Carol: *"...Sir, you should smile more often, y'look great when y'smile."*

6. Conclusion

In our day out, Mrs. Key is the representative of the progressive education approach, while Mr. Briggs is the representative of the traditional education approach. Although some personal opinions and behaviours of the characters are included in the play, their arguments and discussions show profound intellectual roots of educational approaches.

In the play, it can be said that progressive education approach is seen as a reflection of liberalism in education. Gutek (2014, p.379) support this idea by emphasizing that progressive education and liberalism are more compatible with each other than other ideologies. He expresses that freedom, and individual rights are significant in liberalism and progressive education approach. Also, progressivists give an important place to John Stuart Mill's views who is a liberal theorist.

In line with what is stated in the play, traditional education approaches criticise progressive education because of its lack of providing academic success. Gutek (2014, p. 316) states that William Chandler Bagley (essentialist professor) criticized progressive education approach in 1938 for the following reasons: 1) Elementary school students were deprived of basic educational skills in the USA. 2) Large number of high school students were not capable of reading effectively 3) Deficiency in basic math skills and basic reading skills were observed 4) Despite of increasing education level, crime rate increased.

As mentioned above, discipline in school and academic success expectation is significant in traditional education approach. Traditionalists openly criticize democratic and free classroom environment in terms of educational success and classroom discipline is more important for them. This situation was given an exaggerated place in the play and Mr. Briggs destroys the pictures taken in the trip so that the fun moments during the trip would not spread among students and does not affect discipline in the classroom negatively (Russell, 1993, p. 55). In this way, the importance that the traditionalists give to discipline in education is shown even maintaining discipline goes to the extent of being offensive.

Teacher-centered education in traditional approach does not show that students respect and love the teacher. The teacher is seen by the students as an authority who only conducts the



courses, and the interaction is limited (Russell, 1993, p.48). Sönmez (2014, p. 92) states that teacher can use punishment when necessary to ensure classroom discipline and authority in the traditional education approach. It can be said that the student-teacher interaction emerged by the progressive education approach produces positive results in the educational environment in terms of respect and love.

Accepting each student as a unique individual and growing each student as competent and happy in his social life Dewey (1939, as cited in Schwab,1959, p.156) can motivate them to be more successful in their academic success but a corrupted progressive education understanding can create discipline problems. In the play, this is exemplified by the progressive class students stealing animals at the zoo despite they promised to be quiet to Mr. Briggs but breaking their promise and betraying his trust (Russell, 1993, p.33). Progressivist Dewey's (1955, p.62) statement that discipline can be provided by trusting the student and not from outside, partially justifies the traditionalist approach in this regard.

In our day out, the association of the traditional education approach with academic success but ignoring the feelings and thoughts of the students, as well as the association of progressive education approach with academic failure but valuing the students as unique individuals and caring them are two fundamental issues that need to be discussed in educational sciences.

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