

The Way Schools Perceive our Children. An Exploration of the Images of the Child and of educational systems

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Abstract

This article explores the way that different educational models conceptualize children. Using Nathan Deen's book, *Een begeleidende school* ("A Guiding School") as a primary source, it explores the images of the child and deduces images of the child within the existing Dalton, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Waldorf and Iederwijs schools. Achievement-focused schools are seen to possibly have a negative influence on the self-images of children by teaching them that only one aspect of their person is valued: the achieving aspect. The Images of the child differ greatly among the schools reviewed. These differences can be found not only in their focus on achievement but also in how independent children are seen to be. Newer schools increasingly expect children to take a more active role in their own education. Although this is a positive development, formats like Iederwijs appear to take this notion too far, and this has led to the closing of half of their schools. The conceptualization of the child is an important aspect of schools which has a great influence on our children. It is therefore an area that merits additional research.

Keywords: children; image of the child; educational models; Dalton; Montessori; Reggio Emilia; Waldorf; Iederwijs.

Introduction

Schools are the formal institutions which are charged with the responsibility of transmitting to our children the knowledge and skills they need to know prior to reaching adulthood. By the time children have their high school degree they have spent, on average, about 14,000 hours of their lives in schools. It is in these early years of life that human beings change and develop the most. This is true not only in physical terms, but also emotionally, socially, and cognitively. It therefore is no wonder that schools have such a tremendous influence on what kind of adults we eventually become. Schools are complex social systems that differ from one another in many ways, including class size, time of transition from one school level to the next, intra-student relationships, the relationship between teachers and students and, perhaps most importantly, educational philosophies and the image of the child. The transmission of a schools' philosophy to the child is not one that is mediated solely through the teacher (Berk, 2009).

In this regard, there exists the phenomenon of the "educational self-fulfilling prophecy", in which children may adopt teachers' positive or negative views and start to live up to them, for better or for worse (Described in: Berk, 2009). But the child's internalization of school ideology depends on many other factors as well: for instance, on the educational materials utilized by

the school, time management, and degree of autonomy granted the student (Deen, 2006). The purpose of this article is to explore the philosophy of different schools by deducing how they view children. Nathan Deen (2006) wrote the book *Een begeleidende school*, which can loosely be translated as "A Guiding School". This book provides a great deal of insight into different educational models and will be used as a primary source of information for this article. Schools' underlying views of the child will first be explored by describing four general types of educational models. We will then examine some specific educational models currently being employed in the Netherlands in order to explore how children are viewed within each of the different frameworks.

General Educational Frameworks

Controlling Schools

Although schools existed even in ancient times, the school as we know it today began to emerge with the advent of industrialization. From ancient times until now, the image of the child has always been linked to the image of the adult man or woman. When Western societies underwent the Industrial Revolution, the image of man radically changed, and so did the image of the child. Man became one of the gears in a large production line and was put in a uniform; his work also became uniform, and

deviation from accepted standards was punished. If this was what man had to become, schools had to be designed to assure that this would happen. Modern education was born. All children were given the same assignment and all children were given the same time to finish each task. Children were expected to work in a quiet and orderly fashion, and to unquestioningly obey the teacher. Deen describes the kind of school where this type of education was provided as “the controlling school” (Deen, 2006).

Although much has changed since the dawn of industrialization, there are still elements of the controlling school inherent in contemporary schools. The rules, strict control and the expectation of compliance with the dictates of someone with more experience that is typical of today’s schools grow out of a particular view of the child. This view holds that children cannot be left to make their own decisions, and that they need to be taken by the hand and led step by step, not only the books and lessons of school, but also through life. Within such a framework, the child tends to be seen as an irresponsible creature that needs to be tamed. Otherwise, chaos would ensue and education would not be possible. In short, a controlling school assumes that children *need* to be controlled. Deen (2006) writes that this notion of education as applied to large groups of children represented a step forward. Spontaneous development was no longer good enough and education thus had to provide more guidance and be directed towards a defined goal.

There are more examples of important components of this model that can be observed in the schools of today, in one form or another. Wherever people live together in a society, there are rules and regulations that need to be followed. A school serves as a kind of model of the larger world, since both are societies with rules. The school is smaller and simpler, but it is still a social environment with rules and regulations. In this way, schools prepare children to deal with complex social constructs like authority, just like the modern school was meant to do when it was initially constituted when Western societies began to become industrialized (Deen, 2006).

Related to the “controlling school” model is the subject of what Deen calls “investing of trust”. Although this feature is not typical of the schools of old, it is indeed a facet of controlling schools—or, more accurately, of controlling

governments. Deen (2006) writes fairly contemptuously about the nationwide exam-system, which constitutes the epitome of organized mistrust. Schools are apparently seen as not capable of grading an exam fairly. In turn, schools perceive children as not capable of grading their own work fairly. Children grading their own work is a concept certainly not seen in schools that follow a controlling model and, even in today’s more progressive schools, it is an uncommon phenomenon. Thus, children in modern schools are typically ensconced in a system in which very little trust is invested in the school administration, the teachers, and finally in the students themselves. Deen concludes his examination of the subject of trust with the assertion that society does make demands on its future employees in the form of certain qualifications. It might not be very trusting but, for the moment, the exam system does provide nationwide standards which can be used to determine qualifications for securing and maintaining employment.

Facilitating Schools and Society-Orientated Schools

Following industrialization, the twentieth century was another time of progress and renewal in many different areas, one of those areas being schools and their corresponding image of the child. Children began to be increasingly seen as beings with an inner potential which needs to be cultivated and developed. Deen (2001, P. 18) writes:

“Observing, waiting for the right moment, offering material that stimulates development and motivates, and making space and time for the uniqueness of every individual. This is not about controlling, but about facilitating.” (Translated from Dutch.)

This emphasis on development is evident in the hallmark of Montessori’s educational philosophy: “The child is father to the man”. A fight for children’s rights and freedom began in the early 20th century, and the general idea that children needed to be given the space for development they needed became dominant. Space needed to be granted. The question was, “How much space?”. “A child is not a photograph” is a phrase that expresses another idea about development that was prevalent during that time. For, although they need to develop, children are not going to do so spontaneously. An analogue can be found in plants. The development

of plants is dependent on external stimuli like the quality of the soil, climate, water and human attention. Similarly the “facilitating school” makes sure there is enough space for the child’s development while staying in control of the educational process (note here the distinction between “staying in control” and “controlling”).

Examples of the philosophy of the facilitating school can be seen in the educational materials used in schools following this model. Deen (2006) describes a variety of such educational materials. A few examples of these will be discussed here. One of these are materials that teach children lessons simply by being handled. One example of this is having children bake bread in the form of letters. While shaping the dough, baking, and then eating the bread, the children also learn the alphabet. Maria Montessori (1870-1952) designed material designed to develop the senses, while Célestin Freinet (1896-1966) employed the printing press to produce educational materials for the classroom (Deen, 2006). These are just a few examples. Another kind of material involves that which is used to explore and find information. In this category, one could think of reference books, encyclopedias of any kind, or of course the modern personal computer. These tools allow children to search for information of their own choosing (Deen, 2006).

Freinet was a champion of reform—not only with regard to school policy, but also in the context of society as a whole. Actually he tried to change society by changing the way schools taught children. He involved children in their own education by letting them make choices about things like planning their daily activities and allowing them to vote on important decisions, thus introducing a heightened level of democracy into the classroom (Deen, 1989). Most reformers kept “society” in mind, although most did not do so in the revolutionary way that Freinet did. Montessori saw her methods as a way to achieve a new world through new ways of educating children. Thus, “facilitating schools” can be thought of as schools that prepare children for work situations (Deen, 1989), albeit in a different way from that of the “controlling schools” described above. This difference grows out of the way children are viewed within the context of each respective model, and also has consequences for the self-image of each individual child.

Achievement-Orientated Schools

Deen (1989) describes the process a lot of children go through during their school years that prepares them for future employment. Schools that emphasize such a process are referred to here as achievement-orientated schools. This process starts with the premise that going to school is the next step in “growing up” and thus school is exciting and fun. They look forward to it. Often this is because young children do not yet feel the pressure of a society that expects things of them. But as time goes by, this pressure becomes something that students begin to feel in the way the school views and interacts with children. Children learn that it is not their person as a whole that is being appreciated and valued but one aspect of their person: namely, the way the child meets expectations of parents, the school and thus society (Deen, 1989). This influences their self-image. Deen (1989) says that, in a way, modern children are not very different from children living in more primitive cultures. In primitive societies, children are sometimes seen as potential resources to be utilized when their parents are old. Similarly, in modern societies, governments invest in children because they expect that they will later derive concrete benefits from this investment.

Another way that an achievement-orientated focus influences children is the following: The student quickly learns that it is important to perform, to be the first and the best. The whole system of schooling and the inherently competitive nature of the grading system requires each child to think of his own good and to see other students as rivals (Deen, 1989). The individualism that is thus fostered could lead to egotistical self-absorption.

Many schools have the elements of an achievement-orientated school by virtue of their awarding stars or other tokens for achievement, or simply as a result of using a grading system. Seeing schools as the place where children are prepared for assuming adult responsibilities in society seems to be a worthy goal, but one that is certainly debatable. The negative consequences for students’ self-image that results from the approach and image of the child employed by achievement-orientated schools is a subject worthy of empirical research.

A Guiding School

Until now, various kinds of schools and their ideologies have been discussed. Now it is time to look at what Deen (2006) thinks schools should

actually be like. This article does not aim to provide a complete view of Deen's argument in favor of the guiding school, but instead seeks to give a general idea of this concept. But what is meant by a “guiding school”? In a guiding school, the development of the student as an ethical individual who can act as a responsible and autonomous agent is very important. But learning to live together is also emphasized in such schools. Another aspect of such schools is nurturing the relationship between the school and society as a preparation for active citizenship (note the distinction between “preparing for active citizenship” and “preparing for work situations”) (Deen, 2006). According to Deen, perhaps the most important objective of the guiding school is the following:

The creating and maintaining of a safe, accepting working environment where both the environment and the care provided are conducive to the student profiting optimally from the opportunities and motivation a school can offer for his or her personal development. (Deen, 2006, P. 100, translation mine)

The guiding school model holds that it is best to view each student as a unique person with a unique history. Deen (2006) defines three functions of guidance: emancipating guidance, person-focused guidance, and preventive guidance. Emancipating guidance focuses on strengthening the self-concept of the child and improving the motivation of the child by encouraging support. So not only does it provide the space to develop and explore. It actually stimulates the child to do so and to have faith in his or her own capacity to make choices. The act of grading students can have consequences for their self-concept. Emancipating guidance makes sure such grading is done in a dignified way— one that encourages the child by, for example, pointing out what he or she did well on a particular task (Deen, 2006). Furthermore, it is important that schools see children not as empty vessels one needs to fill with knowledge, but as individuals who each have their own problems. It is the school's responsibility to address these problems. Fear of failing, conflicts in the family, or the development of a homosexual identity are all possible situations where a child could need help, support, or professional counseling. Person-focused guidance is the process of being observant in order to be able to detect anything that might be going

wrong and of providing the extra attention required to address that situation.

Preventive guidance is a form of indirect student-guidance, and has to do with acting to prevent problems by carefully choosing school policies such as time management and the pace of education in the classroom. Preventive guidance involves the school assuring that it is fostering an environment in which the school evaluates both its students and—even more importantly—its own performance, particularly with respect to its guiding function (Deen, 2006). This process is also called the analytical process (Cruickshank & Haeefe, 2001; in Noort, 2010, in this issue).

The guiding school is a place where the student “owns his or her learning process” (Deen, 2006), and where the leading role the teacher had in the controlling classroom is replaced by a more guiding role. Deen (2006) writes that guiding schools that succeed in making the student aware of his or her own capabilities are the schools of the future.

The underlying philosophy in guiding schools is one that sees children as individuals capable of participating in their own education—not all by themselves, but guided by their teacher in a variety of ways. For more on teachers, see Noort (2010 in this issue). In the guiding school model, children are seen more as active agents and less as passive receptacles of knowledge. In their article in this issue, ten Brinke and Kanters (2010) describe this distinctive view of the child in more detail.

How Four Different Educational Methodologies View Children

Now that we have considered a number of different educational models, it is time to look at how four specific educational methodologies view children. The methodologies examined here are Dalton, Montessori, Reggio Emilia and Waldorf. These models have been chosen for this article because of their progressive approaches to teaching, their distinct images and conceptualizing of children, and because of their prominent presence not only in the Netherlands but also internationally.

Dalton

Dalton Education is more a movement than an educational methodology, but with over two hundred grammar schools and 18 secondary schools in Holland it has had such a profound influence that it deserves mention here. Dalton education is based

on three pillars: freedom within limits, autonomy and cooperation (Dalton, www.dalton.nl, 2009).

What is meant by “freedom within limits” is that, although children have a lot of free choice in terms of what to do during class, those choices are structured. For example, a child might be told that he or she can choose a weekly chore to work on during a given hour interval. Although he or she is free to choose any single chore to work on, the student does not have the option to play outside during that hour. Another example is that, during some weeks, three specific chores must be done, but each child can choose the time to do them. Providing children these kinds of choices fosters autonomy and responsibility at a very young age.

The Dalton model also encourages its teachers to be attentive to the needs of each individual student. At the same time, it stresses that the teacher is there to guide, and the initiative remains with the child. Field trips are also an important part of the educational experience, given the Dalton view that children learn best by exploring. Both cooperation and learning from one another are also important aspects of this model. Children are encouraged to ask one another for help if the teacher is unavailable at a particular moment when help is needed (Dalton, 2009). It can thus be seen that the Dalton philosophy views children as intuitive researchers of the world around them who are able to make choices and assume a high degree of responsibility. Children are viewed as both requiring guidance and as being capable of taking the initiative themselves.

Dalton education, however, remains a model in which a lot of leeway is given to individual schools. While its foundation is always the three pillars mentioned above, in the end, each individual school is free to decide how best to implement the underlying philosophy (Deen, 2006). Because of this, not every single feature highlighted in the present description will be present in a given Dalton school.

Montessori

Montessori education was created between 1898 and 1904 by Maria Montessori. By now there are over two hundred Montessori schools in the United States and about the same number in Holland, not accounting for other European countries (AMI, <http://www.amiusa.org>; <http://www.montessori.nl>). Initially, the model was created for children with special educational needs.

Maria Montessori designed educational materials, and created a classroom environment, that kept such challenging children productively engaged for hours at a time. Consequently, the material and environment of a classroom are, along with careful observation of students by teachers, the central elements in the Montessori method. Montessori's philosophy dictates that the environment where children live should be appropriate for learning. Classrooms should be filled with carefully selected stimuli. The child should be challenged by his or her environment to pick things up and try things out. This also implies that children should have the choice of where they work. This model also encourages children to plan their classroom activities by letting them choose material with which they will work that day. Another aspect of Montessori education is that there are few extrinsic rewards or punishment. There are no grades to compare and no stars to count (Edwards 2006). One of the ways the Montessori paradigm sees children is formulated as follows:

“A child is active, not passive. Activity is something inherent in life itself and thus inherent to the child. Each child is naturally curious, eager to learn and has the nature to want to know. A child is not formed exclusively by his or her environment. Instead, development is a process to which the child contributes an Indispensable part.” (NMV, translated from Dutch.)

One need not be a researcher to see that the ways Montessori and Dalton see children are not incompatible with one another. Both of these models value freedom of choice and allow children to participate in planning their own activities. As ten Brinke and Kanters write, the child is seen in both of these models as “more agentic and less passive, protected and receiving status” (2010, this journal). A very important aspect of both models is the need for a teacher who pays attention to how children progress (Deen, personal communication, January 6, 2010). The difference between the two models mainly lies in Montessori's slightly greater emphasis on materials and environment. Another feature characteristic of the Montessori method is the heterogeneous groups in which children work. Each class contains children of three different ages. In this way, the child is always surrounded by older or younger children, and every child experiences how it is to be the youngest, the middle child, and

the eldest within a group (NMV, 2009).

Reggio Emilia

With a few schools in the UK and Spain, and more than thirty in Italy, the Reggio Emilia approach is one of the least widely used educational models described here (www.reggioemiliaapproach.net). The Reggio Emilia method stresses that the way we view people to a large extent determines how we approach them. An example could be of the difference in the way you see boys and girls. If you think boys differ fundamentally from girls, you will approach a boy in a different manner than you would a girl. The image we have of children is thus a central theme in the Reggio Emilia Method. Loris Malaguzzi (1993) argues that teachers should not see children as fragile or incompetent, but rather as intelligent and strong. *“Instead of always giving children protection, we need to give them the recognition of their rights and of their strengths”* (Malaguzzi, 1993, translated by Rankin, Morrow & Gandini.) Reggio Emilia also focuses on fostering planning and autonomous behavior among children.

Thus, when children are working, adults are to interfere as little as possible with the learning process: If children can learn something without assistance, they should. An important aspect of the Reggio Emilia method is that it sees parents as a vital part of the educational process. Malaguzzi writes that parents give away a part of the upbringing of their children, and that parents entrust schools with their children, but that this is hard for them when they do not know “what is going on”. Schools should keep parents informed about what they are doing with children, and they should explain how and why things are done. Few of the other methods laid such emphasis on the relationship between the school and parents (Malaguzzi, 1993). It is important to note that the Reggio Emilia model is focused mainly on children aged three to twelve years old, whereas educational methodologies like Montessori are meant to teach a wider range of ages. The Reggio Emilia method is one that sees each child as a unique and highly capable being that needs interaction with others in order to fully realize his or her potential.

Waldorf

The Waldorf method (Easton, 1997) tries to develop spiritual and interpersonal sensibilities in children in order to enrich and reinforce their intellectual knowledge. This feature is what distinguishes

Waldorf from other educational methodologies. There are over 900 Waldorf schools located in sixty countries across the world

(<http://waldorfschule.info>). Easton (1997) describes a series of interviews with Waldorf students:

“Students talked about learning to balance the intellectual with the artistic and the practical, to enjoy work but “not get lost in professionalism or materialism,” to be a “person beyond one’s work,” to “think for oneself but consider others” ... Many had strong social concerns that transcended their own self-interest; a desire to help less privileged people, protect animals, and preserve the natural environment.” (Easton, 1997, P. 87)

Because of this distinct goal of going beyond the teaching of the usual math and language skills, Waldorf’s advocates believe that their method engages the “whole child”. At the root of the Waldorf philosophy lies the idea that children are three-dimensional human beings, composed of body, soul, and spirit. Each one of these dimensions is related to four senses, thus changing the customary view of five human senses to one of twelve. It is because of this that Waldorf lets its children actively contemplate, create artistic work, or practice an instrument. “Consider the what, but consider the how even more” said Goethe. This dictum is often quoted by Waldorf teachers (Easton, 1997).

The way Waldorf sees children is very far from the image of children as empty vessels waiting for knowledge to be poured into them, and even farther from the image that controlling schools have of children. Waldorf sees children as beings that can be molded into artistic and open-minded people. As Deen (2006) writes, through their anthroposophical principles, Waldorf schools take a position that is unique and that makes one wonder if they should be grouped with other schools, or if they constitute a category of their own. Even so, because their image of the child differs so much from the other schools, it would be interesting to explore the differences between those who have been schooled according to the Waldorf method and those who have been schooled by one of the other three methods described above.

Iederwijs

After having described some of the more prominent schools that have flourished in recent years, this section will provide an overview of a revolutionary school system that redesigns education and that might represent the wave of the future. The image of the child in the Iederwijs model is very different from that of the schools discussed previously.

Iederwijs is a Dutch educational methodology whose name is a combination of the Dutch words for “everyone” and “education”. Iederwijs's first school was launched in 2001, so the concept is rather young. Not only is it young: it has some rather revolutionary ideas about how to educate children. Both its recent arrival on the scene, as well as its radical ideas, have led to it being viewed with a great deal of skepticism and suspicion in many quarters. In Iederwijs schools, children are given—according to Iederwijs representatives—“true” freedom, whereas in other schools, they contend, children are still being manipulated (Greenberg et al.,; in Deen, 2006). Dalton's “freedom within limits”, which was described earlier, would be one example that Iederwijs proponents would see of manipulation. In the Iederwijs method, by contrast, children choose what, how, and when they want to learn something and can choose almost anything they like. The Iederwijs classes consist of a group of children that represent a wide range of ages. “Classes” might actually not be the right word in this case, since a single classroom is not utilized. Instead, students use different spaces and rooms for different activities.

Greenberg et al. (2003) wrote a book about a Iederwijs school which provides a detailed overview of the Iederwijs method. The burden shouldered by children within this model is, as one can see, enormous. They are required to plan, think about, and decide what they want to learn. This raises the question as to whether such an approach is realistic. The Iederwijs method has, for this reason and others, gathered its fair share of critics and cynics (Deen, 2006). Iederwijs schools are, just as any other school in Holland, subject to governmental inspection. Results of these inspections reveal that only slightly more than half of the Iederwijs schools meet national educational standards (Volkskrant, 2006). Those that failed to meet such criteria were required to close. Deen writes that this model might work better if there were more aspects of a guiding school in the

Iederwijs system. Still, he contends that Iederwijs, being a very young concept, certainly deserves the chance to prove itself, just like any other school (Deen, 2006).

Conclusion

Different educational models have different underlying views of the children they educate, and these views can profoundly affect not only the quality of education that children receive, but the lives they live once they graduate from school. It is therefore no wonder then that when parents have young children, they want to investigate the schools in which their children will end up spending some 14,000 hours of their lives. Schools have been achievement-orientated for a very long time, but it appears as if schools are now changing, offering more freedom in one way or another and seeing children less and less as future workers and more as unique individuals. Such a change should have a positive effect on the self-images of children. We have also seen that there are very different images of the child that underlie the philosophies of different schools. Furthermore, if one looks at the amount of freedom given in the controlling, facilitating and guiding schools, schools like Iederwijs seem to represent the next logical development. The amount of freedom that is given to children is very closely linked with the amount of responsibility that children are thought capable of handling. The critical question here is whether this represents a positive development. In other words: Is granting more freedom and responsibility to children a good thing? Or is it instead a well-intentioned but misguided step in the wrong direction? Because the answer to this question has such profound ramifications for the lives of so many children, future research comparing various educational models, and the images of the child they reflect, is sorely needed.

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