Occupational Therapy and Education: A Shared Vision

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This paper describes the visions that the educational progressives and founders of occupational therapy expressed for their respective professions, and it examines the thematic ideas that each held in common. These shared themes centered on humanistic values, a belief in occupation, and the promotion of scientific research. The parallels in thinking found within the two groups are examined, and the possible influence of the progressive education movement on the development of occupational therapy is suggested. This analysis is placed within the context of the progressive period of American history, 1900 to 1920.

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It has been suggested that the origins of occupational therapy lie in the Moral Treatment movement of 19th century Europe (Bing, 1981; Bockoven, 1971). Although that argument is persuasive, it does not tell the entire story. This paper posits that occupational therapy was also influenced by the progressive education movement of early 20th-century America. It proposes that there were striking parallels between the ideas of the educational progressives and the founders of occupational therapy. Both groups held a humanistic view of the individual and a belief that a primary goal was to enable people to be strong contributors to a democratic society. Both groups believed that engagement in occupation was a vital element of the change process. Both groups emphasized the importance of scientific research in validating practice. Finally, both experienced a similar struggle to develop as legitimate professions. This paper describes the visions that the educational progressives and founders of occupational therapy expressed for their respective professions as it examines the thematic ideas that education and occupational therapy held in common. These ideas are placed within the context of the early 20th century in the United States.

The years 1900 to 1920 in America have been labeled the progressive period (Chambers, 1980). This period has been described as a time of great social and domestic activity as well as a time of great optimism and visionary leadership. The optimism was based on new ideas that produced social movements directed toward rectifying conditions created in the previous century as the United States shifted from an agrarian to an industrialized mode (Hofstadter, 1955). Antimodernists of the period asserted that social and work values eroded by the industrial model should be reclaimed (Boris, 1986; Lears, 1981). Civic reformers argued that corrupt politicians should be replaced with officials whose governance would be ethical and effective (McCormick, 1981). Social reformers advocated the development of policies that would address poverty, disease, and illiteracy (Addams, 1910). Optimism was also based on confidence in a new generation of leaders who were well educated and dedicated—professionals in medicine, education, and business who combined an interest in human welfare with a belief in science (Lubove, 1965; Revery, 1987; Wiebe, 1967). It was believed that these professionals could successfully address social concerns such as education and health care (Cremin, 1961; Stevens, 1989).

A Vision for Education

A group of reformers known as educational progressives proposed a new vision for education. This group included John Dewey, Ella Flagg Young, and Margaret Haley. Dewey, a philosopher and educator, became the most prominent voice of progressivism in education (Cremin, 1961). Young and Haley were teachers and leaders in education.
Young was the first woman superintendent of schools in Chicago, and Haley was the president of the powerful Chicago teachers union (Reid, 1982; Smith, 1979).

While at the University of Chicago, Dewey founded the Laboratory School, an experimental school that introduced new ideas on education to the classroom. He developed a close association with Hull House, in Chicago, and with Jane Addams; Addams' views on social reform and education reportedly influenced Dewey's thinking (Cremin, 1961). Young became a close associate of Dewey when she studied with him for her doctorate at the University of Chicago. She served as supervisor of instruction at the Laboratory School, and they collaborated on a six-volume series on education. Haley was a colleague of both Young and Dewey and as president of the teachers union had a platform from which to present ideas on progressive education to the public and to politicians in Chicago.

They all shared a common concern for a school system that they believed was becoming increasingly mechanized and removed from daily life: “The ideal of the educators places humanity above all machines and demands that all activity shall be the expression of life” (Haley, 1904, p. 151). Their vision of education was predicated on the belief that education should support a humanistic view of life and contribute to a democratic society. They posited that development came about through engagement in occupation. They championed scientific investigation as essential to the development of sound educational practice, and they played a leading role in trying to establish teaching as a respectable profession.

**Humanistic Values**

The educational progressives had a strong belief in the value of the individual and the right “of each soul to develop the inborn power of self-determination” (Young, 1901, p. 37). The child was portrayed as free-thinking, imaginative, and curious. “The native and unspoiled attitude of children [is] marked by ardent curiosity, fertile imagination and love of experiential inquiry” (Dewey, 1910, Preface). Individuals were viewed in a holistic way. Dewey (1916) argued that children act as a whole and that it was artificial to divide them into two parts, mind and body, “for the pupil has a body and brings it along to school with his mind” (p. 141). What was desired, he asserted, was “to have the child come to school with a whole mind and a whole body and leave school with a fuller mind and an even healthier body” (Dewey, 1900, p. 80). It was deemed the teacher’s responsibility to facilitate the physical, mental, and moral development of the child (Young, 1907). The more the teacher knew about the child, the easier it would be to address his or her many facets. “The more a teacher is aware of the past experiences of students, of their hopes, desires, chief interests, the better he will understand the faces at work” (Dewey, 1910, p. 36).

From this perspective, the public school was seen as the “organized means provided by the people to free intelligence at its source” (Haley, 1904, p. 146). This approach to education, it was argued, would produce responsible, intelligent citizens who would contribute to the betterment of a democratic society. “Education is a social function securing direction and development in the immature through their participation in the life of the group to which they belong” (Dewey, 1916, p. 86). Indeed, the social goals of education were emphasized as much as the intellectual: “Our aim is to educate the children, to make good citizens of them, to fit them to be useful members of society” (Young, 1901, p. 23).

**Education Through Occupation**

The progressives hypothesized that the best way to achieve their educational objectives was to engage the child in an active learning process. This viewpoint was partially a reaction to the rote memorization prevalent in education at the time. It also speaks to a view of education that promotes the benefits of engagement in occupation:

> The difference that appears when occupations are made the articulating centers of school life is not easy to describe, in words: it is a difference in motive, of spirit and atmosphere. As one enters a busy kitchen in which a group of children are actively engaged in the preparation of food, the psychological difference, the change from the more or less passive and inert receptivity and restraint to one of buoyant outgoing energy, is so obvious as fairly to strike one in the face. . . . But the change in social attitude is equally marked. . . . A spirit of free communication, of interchange of ideas, suggestions, results, both successes and failures of previous experiences, becomes the dominating note of the recitation. (Dewey, 1900, pp. 15–16)

Dewey argued that engagement of the child in occupation was a fundamental part of learning. “We should at the outset of any experience in learning. . . . connect new topics and principles with the pursuit of an end in some active occupation” (Dewey, 1910, p. 224).

According to Dewey, occupations enabled development. “In natural growth each successive stage of activity prepares for the next stage” (Dewey, 1910, p. 89). It was important therefore to select “orderly and continuous modes of occupation, which. . . . lead up to and prepare for the indispensable activities of adult life” (Dewey, 1910, p. 51). Learning concerned development not only of the mind but also of the sensory and motor systems: “Every normal organ of sense and motor activity. . . . wants a chance to be active, and it needs some object in order to act” (Dewey, 1910, p. 37). “Occupations furnish sense training and discipline in thought” (Dewey, 1900, p. 134).

Dewey (1910) defined occupation in a particular way: “It must be of interest, worthwhile intrinsically, present problems that awaken curiosity and lead to development” (p. 218). “School occupations,” he argued, “[provide] not mere routine. . . . but active centers of scientific insight” (Dewey, 1900, p. 19). In fact, he argued that the

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The educational progressives called for scientific research that would validate pedagogical methods. Dewey (1900) held that it was the responsibility of university-sponsored laboratory schools such as the one he had founded to study educational practices and their effect on the child’s mind and on the normal growth process. Young (1911) urged that pedagogical inquiry was needed to enable teachers to “form valid conceptions of the activity and assimilating power of each child in the environment” (p. 4).

Given the recognition of the need for a science of education, the progressives were faced with a major difficulty: Their definition of the educational experience was extremely broad. Dewey (1929) defined education as “a mode of life, of action” (p. 75). Indeed, he went on to say that “as an act it is wider than science [itself]” (p. 75). Given such a multifaceted description of the educational experience, it would be difficult to reduce it into parts that might be studied in the typical laboratory experiment. Therefore, Dewey (1929) called for new methods that could be scientifically viable: “Educational science cannot be constructed simply by borrowing the techniques of experiment and measurement found in physical science” (p. 26). In addition, the progressives urged that teachers be partners in educational research, that their potential contributions were “an almost unworked mine” (Haley, 1929, p. 171).

Struggle for Professionalism

An additional benefit of having teachers involved in educational research was that it would help establish their credibility as professionals, also a goal of the educational progressives. Not only were teachers little recognized, but the discipline of education was not well established within the university community. The president of Harvard College referred to the new, struggling education department as “a kitten that ought to be drowned” (Powell, 1980, p. 176). The president of Stanford University gave the head of the education department 3 years to make the school respectable or he would abolish it (Sears & Henderson, 1957). With such inauspicious beginnings, those in the university setting worked diligently to justify the notion that education was indeed a discipline and that its professionals would benefit from sound academic training.

Even when the university programs in education were established, the progressives had the further challenge of convincing teachers to take advantage of the training offered. Haley (1904) tried to persuade classroom teachers that they “must have the ability and skill to do scientific teaching” (p. 150). Young (1907) described the benefit of summer school sessions for teachers as contributing to a “general awakening of the teacher corps” (p. 404). Haley expressed her strong belief that female teachers should be more active than they usually were in looking after their interests. She even referred to women teachers as “the most timid rabbits” because they allowed politicians to decide their fate regarding pay and work issues (“Can You Imagine?” 1914, p. 91). Whereas female educational leaders like Young and Haley were well educated and of good social class, the typical schoolteacher of 1910 was poorly educated and poorly paid. Teaching had become a woman’s occupation and was therefore “less than equal in status to male professions” (Hoffman, 1981, p. 15).

Despite the efforts of women like Haley and Young, it was the men in education who held most of the important administrative posts. These administrators argued for the separation of school management from the practice of teaching, a position that in effect would mean the subordination of teacher to scientific manager (Schwartz, 1987). Dewey (1903) countered that this proposed transfer of authority to school administrators was simply autocracy: “The remedy is not to have one expert dictating educational methods to a body of passive teachers” (p. 197). He based his argument for teacher autonomy on the very principles of humanism and social democracy that informed the educational philosophy of progressivism:

I have dwelt at length upon the problem of the recognition of the intellectual and spiritual individuality of the teacher. . . . [i]n education more than anywhere else the final source of power is in the training, character, and intelligence of the individual. But as long as a school organization which is undemocratic in principle tends to repel from all but the higher portions of the school system those of independent intellectual initiative, and of inventive ability, all other reforms are compromised at their source (Dewey, 1903, pp. 198–199).

In summary, teaching was a fledgling profession in the early 1900s, even though its practice extended over the past two centuries in the United States. Education was not well established as a discipline; it lacked a solid theo-
A Vision for Occupational Therapy

At the same time that the educational progressives were trying to reform education, a new profession was being founded. Its leaders came from a variety of fields: Eleanor Clarke Slagle was a social worker; Susan Cox Johnson, a teacher; Susan Tracy, a nurse; George Barton and Thomas Kidner, architects; and William Rush Dunton and Herbert Hall, physicians. Of this group, the women had the closest ties to education. Susan Cox Johnson originally taught high school arts and crafts in Berkeley, California. She became director of occupation at Montefiore Hospital, New York, and lecturer in occupational therapy at Columbia University, New York. Johnson brought her educator’s perspective to occupational therapy, proposing that therapeutic occupation was “training in adaptation under new and different conditions” (Johnson, 1920, p. 69). Susan Tracy, a nurse who argued for the use of occupation on the medical wards, studied at Columbia University’s Teachers College with John Dewey. In fact, Tracy (1918) used Dewey’s definition of occupation in her book, Studies in Invalid Occupations. She defined occupation as “a mode of activity on the part of the child which runs parallel to some form of work carried on in the social life” (p. 13).

Eleanor Clark Slagle worked at Hull House, where she saw an array of socialized education programs, including a kindergarten and various courses in occupation (Addams, 1910). Hull House maintained a close association with Dewey’s Laboratory School (Breines, 1987). Slagle attended one of the first courses on invalid occupations, given by Julia Lathrop of Hull House, at the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy. The intent of the course was to substitute the “educational for the custodial” (Loomis & Wade, 1975, p. 2). Slagle (1938) later established the Henry Favill School of Occupations in Chicago, using the approach of the Chicago School as her model. Slagle held elected office in the occupational therapy association from 1917 until her retirement in 1937. Her prominence within occupational therapy ensured that her viewpoint was influential in shaping the profession.

What is striking in the early writings of the leaders of occupational therapy is the liberal sprinkling of educational terminology. Dunton (1920) described occupational therapy as a “process of education” in which work or some form of physical activity occupied a leading part (p. 322). Hall (1923) depicted occupational therapy as a process that brought the discouraged patient into a wholesome personal relationship with the occupation teacher, who engaged the individual in occupations that taught concentration and perseverance. Barton (1915) wrote, “The teaching element is more important than ever before, because in every case a new or changed worker must be made useful, self-supporting, and interested” (p. 159). A bulletin published by the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) described occupational therapy as a method of training the sick or injured by means of instruction and employment in productive occupation (AOTA, 1923b). These references suggest that the leaders saw a kinship between education and occupational therapy. They referred to those providing service as occupation teachers, they emphasized the importance of teaching capability, and they described the occupation process as educational. Furthermore, their thinking reflected the themes of the educational progressives.

Humanistic Values

Like their counterparts in education, the progressive-era generation of occupational therapy leaders emphasized the value of human life. Hall (as cited by Dunton, 1923) asserted that “there must be a conception of life wide enough and big enough to bridge all gaps with sufficient faith and understanding” (p. 166). These leaders held that a principle of the profession was to approach each individual in a holistic manner. “To exercise mind and body” (AOTA, 1923b). Johnson (1920) proposed that therapeutic occupation involved “the rejoining of self-confidence, satisfaction in accomplishment, the direction of thought into wholesome channels, and graded physical exercise producing a healthful tired feeling” (p. 70). Kidner (1930) cited the novelist John Galsworthy’s speech to a post-World War I Conference on the After-Care of Disabled Men:

Restoration is a matter of spirit as well as of body, and must have as its central truth: Body and spirit are inextricably conjoined. To heal the one without the other is impossible... A niche of usefulness and self-respect exists for every man, however handicapped, but that niche must be found for him. To carry the process of restoration to a point short of this is to leave the cathedral without spire (p. 41).

The restoration of the individual—soldier and civilian alike—would enable each citizen to make a contribution to society. “Beside [occupation’s] physical effect, the knowledge that he can ‘do something’ and is not a useless unit in the community, gives the handicapped patient a tranquil mind and a feeling of self respect” (AOTA, 1923a). Hall (1923) described the role of occupational therapy as...
helping the individual to “come back into the world better fitted to face its problems and to make good citizens and helpful members of the community” (no page no.). These goals are similar to those cited by Young (1901) when she described education’s responsibility to make children good citizens and useful members of society. “One of the principle aims of occupational therapy,” Slagle (1924) argued, was to direct its efforts “toward returning the patient to community life and economic usefulness” (p. 43).

Rehabilitation Through Occupation

The founders shared a strong belief in the use of occupation. Slagle (1924) proposed that patients would become readjusted, both socially and industrially, through “organized occupation” (p. 98). Dunton (1931) asserted, “No matter what may be the environment, occupation of some sort is a necessity for men, women, and children” (p. 6). Hall (1913) described the changes that took place when a patient was engaged in occupation: “After a few weeks of work... observe the change in facial expression, in precision and skill of movement and in the morale of the patient” (p. 10). Hall’s depiction is reminiscent of Dewey’s (1900) description of the “difference that appears when occupations are made the articulating center of school life” (p. 15). The benefits of therapeutic occupations were many: They roused interest and developed initiative; trained the faculties; kept the muscular and nervous system in good condition; and developed strength, courage, and manual skills (Hall, 1923). Occupations facilitated development by offering opportunities for creativity. “Whatever the medium, a patient should feel that in occupation treatment lies an opportunity for self expression” (Slagle, 1933, p. 11).

Although there was agreement about the benefits of occupation, the definition of what constituted occupation was less clear. Johnson (1920) asserted that therapeutic occupation should combine elements of play with work and accomplishment. She particularly endorsed the use of handicrafts. However, those concerned with reeducation of the soldiers urged that rather than handicrafts, occupation should focus on return to work: “Occupation should bring men back to the masculine world, not make old ladies of them...” (Johnson, 1920). Kidner (1923) supported a vocational emphasis: “Creative occupations [have] a dual purpose of patient restoration and helping to earn a living” (p. 418). Barton (1916) disagreed, voicing concern that an economic focus on occupation would diminish the value of “labor as a therapeutic agent” (no page no.). In agreement, Hall (1922a) asserted, “We should make clear as aides and teachers... that occupational therapy is not vocational training” (p. 146). This disclaimer was similar to Dewey’s (1910) plea that occupation in education not be seen as a vocational enterprise.

Research in Occupations

Scientific research was endorsed by the leaders of occupational therapy as a way to gain knowledge about occupations. Slagle (1924) acknowledged that although there was considerable empirical knowledge about occupations, there was little research to validate practice. Hall (no date) envisioned Devereux Mansion, in Marblehead, Massachusetts, as a “small experimental station for the study of the problems of invalid occupation” (no page no.). Barton (no date) suggested that the time and motion studies employed in scientific management might be a model for occupational inquiry. Dunton (1928) championed the effort to make activity analysis scientific. He played a major role in an undertaking by the Committee on Installations and Advice to analyze the most commonly used crafts for their therapeutic value (Putnam, 1925). One difficulty that researchers in occupational therapy faced was the broad definition of practice: “The term occupational therapy has a broad meaning, denoting not only the restoration of function, but also the adjustment of the patient to as nearly normal living conditions as is possible” (AOTA, 1923a [no page no.]). Occupational therapy faced the same problem that Dewey (1929) had documented in education: Although the definition reflected a humanistic view and a social concern, its breadth made research based on the reductionistic paradigm of the physical sciences difficult. Dewey (1929) responded to this difficulty by calling for a new approach to research. Similarly, Dunton (1934) reminded psychiatrists, “[We] are unable to present the results of research because psychologists have not yet given us the formulae for judging the emotional effect of pounding a copper disk into a nut dish... In other words, we lack a quick and snappy means of measuring the emotions” (p. 325). He urged therapists to develop other methods of research, such as systematic observation, to avoid reducing the occupational therapy process to “fractions, tangents, and cosines” (p. 325).

Struggle for Professionalism

As with education, occupational therapy was working to establish its legitimacy as a profession. The schools were in a formative stage, having evolved in part as an outgrowth of the War Emergency Courses (Hall, 1922b). There was a concentrated effort to attract promising candidates to the profession. Hall (1923) asserted that the profession should “draw on a high grade of womanhood” (no page no.). Tracy (1914) believed that nurses had the most suitable background to become occupationalists. Slagle (1924) believed teachers had the most promising background: “What we need are teachers who are trained
for this particular line of work” (p. 100). Dunton (1928) argued for candidates with analytical capability: “Unless one has the desire to develop one’s work, to analyze it, to improve it, then it becomes irksome and we are little more than robots” (p. 348). He wanted persons who could carry out the needed research to validate practice.

Those who chose the field of occupational therapy had to make their way among fellow disciplines also struggling to establish themselves. The broad definition of occupational therapy made overlap with other professions inevitable: “The duties of the occupational therapist are broad and far reaching, including as they do something of arts and crafts, social services, trades and industries, and humanity” (AOTA, 1923a [no page no.]). There are indications of the beginnings of turf battles with nursing and vocational education in Johnson’s (1919, 1924) writings. Even more challenging was criticism from physicians suggesting the profession’s lack of substance. Hall (1922b), a physician himself, asserted that “anyone who doubts the need of special training and preparation...has only to try a few difficult cases” (p. 61). Johnson (1924) took exception to a physician’s comments regarding competence: “I cannot agree, however, with the public statement recently made by a physician—that occupational therapy aids ‘fool themselves’ into thinking they are benefitting the patient when they know nothing” (p. 196).

Conclusion

There is strong ideological agreement in the visions of the educational progressives and the first-generation leaders of occupational therapy. They shared a humanistic view of the individual and a concern for social welfare. They believed that education and rehabilitation were best accomplished through engagement in occupation. They supported scientific research as a way to develop sound practice. Occupational therapy and education personnel also faced similar challenges in establishing themselves as credible professions. Their leaders were products of the progressive period in America. The ideas they held were consistent with some of the beliefs of that era. A common ideology of the period was a holistic and humanistic view of the individual and the belief that each person could make society a better place (Manuel & Manuel, 1979). There was also an excitement about science and its potential for contributing to society (Haber, 1964). A belief in humanism and science was not seen as contradictory until later years, when the nature of science’s reductionist paradigm became apparent. Finally, the term occupation was understood in the early 1900s to mean any activity with which one was engaged. Similarly, education was also broadly defined. It was only later, as more professions developed and defined their turf, that narrow definitions were demanded.

A goal of historical inquiry is to increase our knowledge by placing events and ideas within the context of their past. The purpose of this paper was to provide an elucidation of some of the ideas and values upon which occupational therapy was founded. When viewed from a historical vantage point, the contemporary movement within the profession to develop a theory that encompasses a humanistic, broad-based understanding of occupation seems in concert with the vision first expressed by its leaders 75 years ago. ▲

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