



# INTERACTION

## The Democratic Process

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D. C. HEATH AND COMPANY

Boston

## *Preface*

**F**OR many years I have been studying the individuals and groups in and out of the schools that are shaping the American educational system. For the past ten years I have been convinced that the central problem in improving education is to aid these groups to mature their authoritarian actions into the more cooperative, democratic, social interactions. I believe this is still our most crucial educational problem. On the speed and intelligence with which it is studied will rest the service which the schools can render to the maintenance and extension of democratic living.

The substance of this book has been discussed in classes with thousands of students. It has been expounded in lectures and conferences with educators and laymen throughout the United States. My debt to these many interactors can never be adequately expressed. I extend deep appreciation to my colleagues for critical appraisal of the ideas and their organization. My bond to my greatest teacher, William H. Kilpatrick, is obvious. I owe much to two former students, Fred M. Alexander and James H. Griggs, who read the entire manuscript and offered many helpful criticisms. Finally, this book would never have been written without the encouragement and continued aid of my secretary, Florence S. Kowal, and the sympathetic, creative suggestions of my wife, Hester Rich Hopkins.

L. T. H.

Hopkirk  
Truro, Massachusetts  
*April 1, 1941*

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# **INTERACTION**

## **The Democratic Process**



## *Viewpoint*

THE education of a child is an inclusive continuous process. It goes on all of the time anywhere and everywhere he may be. It is affected to some extent by everything that is within his psychological field. This education takes place through his environment — human, physical, institutional, and ideological. Of these educative aspects of the environment, other human beings are the most important. The physical, institutional, and ideological conditions operate in the child's life more through others than directly by themselves. Thus the way that other individuals place themselves and the culture which they represent into the expanding field of the child's life determines the quality of his education. This process of relationship among individuals, young and old, is clearly defined for us as the democratic way of life. The quality of the child's total education is the quality of that democratic living. And the quality of his education through the school is judged by how well it squares with the principles of democratic living. In this book the author suggests some implications of the democratic process for the improvement of living generally, but more especially for the improvement of the education of all children through the schools. This opening statement gives briefly the over-all viewpoint which is expounded in the chapters that follow.

All peoples struggle to achieve the good life. This has been true in the past. It is going on in the present. It will probably continue endlessly in the future. The meaning of what is the good life varies among culture groups and within culture groups at various stages of their development. Thus the good life among the Arapesh is not the same as the good life in

America today. And the concept of the good life among the conquering Romans at the height of the Roman Empire was in many respects quite different from the good life as conceived by Mussolini for his people in his dream of a new world empire. Americans hold that the good life must be good to and good for the individual at one and the same time as he lives it in managing his everyday affairs. And it must also bring the better life to every other individual and to all groups of individuals with whom any person comes in contact. Achieving the good life by anyone is not due to his efforts alone, but to the combined efforts of all who are struggling to achieve the same ends. Thus the attainment of the good life is a continuing social affair.

The good life is found in the living itself, not outside of it. Since this living is in the present and not at some other time, the good life must be achieved today in order to be better tomorrow. The past in some form conditions the present struggle, but the individuals face each other in the present as they give thought to today's problems in what they anticipate to be tomorrow's conditions. Thus the good life is a constantly growing, changing, developing affair. It is not something which can be fixed, charted, mechanized, and realized by routine procedures. It is never fully achieved. It is always *in the process* of becoming, since the insight derived from practical realization brings new meanings which enable individuals to create broader and deeper demands. The struggle for the good life is as continuous and endless as life itself.

To achieve the good life the American people have wisely centered their attention upon the *process* of living. They realize that the way in which the good life of the present is achieved will determine whether any of it will exist for the future. The process of deriving the abundance of today may be the means toward the scarcity of tomorrow. The needs which the American people must satisfy in order to feel the goodness in the life are reasonably clear. They need (1) adequate food, shelter, and clothing to keep the body functioning effectively; (2) reasonable freedom of movement, speech, and



thought; (3) some personal distinction before others; (4) acceptance by others into the activities of group life; (5) opportunity to build an unique self and personality; (6) favorable conditions for earning a livelihood; (7) economic security for old age; (8) opportunity to marry and rear children in a wholesome family life; (9) faith in their ability to make life continually better or faith that the best efforts of the group will bring the better life in the present and reveal new needs to raise their level of living in the future. The American people believe these conditions for the good life can be achieved satisfactorily in the long run only by a process which enhances the individual through improved working relationships with his fellow men. Thus they have accepted, promoted, extended, and improved the *democratic process*, or what is perhaps more frequently called the democratic way of life.

The goals which continuously motivate the behavior of democratic peoples are long-time *directional process goals*. They lie in the way in which individuals and groups achieve their purposes. They are broad, flexible, but none the less definite and applicable principles which are guides to the actions of persons of all ages and at all times. Being principles, they are amenable to revision through proved experience, but they also set limits to the process in the experiences by which their validity is established. Such directional process goals are in sharp contrast to the fixed end or knowledge goals which all too frequently prevail in our school system. Here individuals are motivated by the demand to achieve a body of knowledge relatively fixed as to subject, grade, amount, and acceptable achievement. Thus children meet minimum standards in subject matter in order to be promoted from one grade to another. Pupils in high schools and college are given knowledge tests to determine their fitness for entrance into or for successful exit from certain subjects required or elective. In all of these instances little account is taken of *the way in which the knowledge is acquired*. Yet without adequate consideration for such inclusive way the pressure to achieve the knowledge goal may

entirely submerge the democratic process. A simple illustration may clear this point.

A college professor was very elated when his young son showed proficiency in learning a fixed list of spelling words in his second year of school. Some of his friends asked about the methods by which the words were taught. The professor replied that he was little concerned with the method. He wanted results in spelling and the school seemed to be obtaining them very satisfactorily, as indicated by his son's perfect reports. Two years later this same professor was vigorous in his criticism of the school for failing to obtain results. His son now disliked spelling and failed approximately half of the time. In addition, he was falling down in meeting the fixed knowledge ends in other subjects, such as reading, geography, and arithmetic. It was some time before this fundamentalist professor realized that the way in which his child learned to spell determined whether in the long run he would continue to spell, or that the way in which he learned to read determined his interest and facility in reading in later years. He came to see that the end was included in the means and that in the long run the quality of the end could never rise above the quality of the means. Thus the directional process goal assumes a superiority over fixed end goals. Any end which cannot be achieved by the democratic process is usually not worth achieving, except possibly in some emergency to protect the very process itself.

The outstanding characteristic of the democratic process is the emphasis upon *cooperative social action*. In a literal sense cooperation means working together. One person cooperates with another when he works with him to achieve his purposes. In school a pupil cooperates with a teacher when he works with the teacher to achieve his purposes, or a teacher cooperates with the pupil when he works with the pupil to achieve his purposes. This literal interpretation leaves cooperation on the relatively low levels of compulsion, compromise, exploitation, or individualistic bargaining in which a strong person may elevate himself at the expense of others. The emotional concomi-

tants to these low levels of cooperation are usually undesirable since they engender suspicion, hatred, a feeling of unfairness, and a spirit of revenge. The cooperation ceases as soon as the compelling force has been released. Group unity is not achieved, individuals are set against each other, and groups are pitted against groups. Such cooperation is not desirable in that it does not leave the individual in a position to raise the level of his cooperation in the future. In many affairs in life, and especially in schools, this low level of cooperation means *working for* rather than working with or working together. The boy works for the grocer; the carpenter works for the contractor; the salesgirl works for the department store owners; the pupil works for the teacher. In all of these instances there is some form of working together but the purposes to be met are set up by one person apart from the other, or, as usually happens in schools, by the teacher apart from the pupils. The democratic conception assumes a higher level of cooperation. The situation is studied by the group and the purposes are formulated by the members of the group working together. And these purposes are achieved by everyone to the extent of his need or ability by many and varied activities, such as exploring, experimenting, interviewing, creating, sharing, evaluating, listening, delegating, practicing, accepting, leading, and many others. The reason underlying democratic cooperation or working together rather than working for someone is that each individual attains a more desirable achievement or a more desirable progress in the good living now and in the future. The individual is not sacrificed for the group; neither is he lost in the group achievement. Rather, his individuality is enhanced and glorified by the cooperative action. Thus the democratic conception places cooperation on a higher level than that usually found in practice in the general affairs of life or in the school.

This democratic cooperative action seems to have a number of important aspects. Some of these are: (1) determining the purposes to be realized; (2) formulating plans for achieving them; (3) devising methods of putting the plans effectively into

operation; (4) evaluating the results in improved living; and (5) selecting new and improved purposes for continued cooperative planning and action. In this democratic level each individual is a leader; he carries full responsibility for the group achievement; he voluntarily performs his part in carrying the accepted plan into action; he works intelligently with any director who may be designated by the group to coordinate better the efforts of individual members. This democratic level of cooperation is difficult to achieve because it demands self-control and self-direction from each individual. The focused and coordinated thinking of a cooperating group can bring reasonable solutions to problems of living which the ablest individual alone could not solve satisfactorily. Thus by democratic cooperation desirable growth of the individual and the improvement of the good life go on simultaneously. To isolate them means disaster for each.

Cooperative democratic action is always qualitative interaction. In a literal sense, interaction means action between or among people or between the individual and his environment regardless of what this environment may be composed. An individual does not live *in* an environment; he lives *by means of* an environment. Thus in one sense, breathing, the ingestion of food, and the elimination of waste products represent interactions, since the individual has had action between himself and the environment. In like manner, an individual working for someone else to meet the other person's purposes has had an action between himself and the other person. Or the pupil in school who acts to meet the requisites in subjects made for him by the teacher in the light of the teacher's needs has had an interplay of energy which many laymen and educators call interaction. If so, it is a very low level of interaction, essentially a reaction, for the purposes, means, direction, and evaluation are all controlled by the outside person for whom he works. Thus the pupil who struggles to meet the imposed requirements of the teacher or his associates is cooperating by reacting to the external pressures. This form of interaction is on a low level be-

cause the energies between individual and the environment take place for the most part through direct contact. The tension in the individual is that between his surface and its exterior. The satisfaction of the purpose is relatively immediate. The hungry rat gets his food after a short trip in the maze; the seal catches the fish tossed to him by his keeper after a five-minute performance; the child receives the approval of the teacher after a fifteen-minute spelling lesson or a few hours of work on some project. When the performance is over the tension is released until it is again stimulated by some outside force. There is no deep-seated internal need in the rat, the seal, or the pupil of increasingly significant quality which remains a constant propulsive force. Such low levels of interaction are closely associated with the low levels of cooperation and such reactions can in no sense be considered as democratic interactions, even though they represent the existing relationships among individuals and groups in life in general, and between the pupil and his school environment.

In democratic interaction the purposes are set by the group after inquiry into the needs of the individuals who comprise it. In this exploring and sharing of difficulties each individual modifies his previous beliefs and judgments so that the group derives a *new* purpose. It is not the same as that held by any individual at the beginning. This is very important, for in the low levels of interaction there is always someone who has a constant, unmodifiable purpose and who curbs free play of inquiry that might lead to a new purpose. Thus there are instances of secondary schools in which interaction is on a low level, for some individuals fear that free play of inquiry might result in new pupil purposes of eliminating the homework, of modifying the requirements for a high school diploma, or, indeed, of demanding participation in the management of the school. And much low level interaction takes place in colleges, even in teachers colleges and graduate schools. Furthermore, in democratic interaction there is always time between the formulation of the purpose and its satisfaction. This is because the action is not one

of direct contact. Not all of the necessary materials are at hand. Contacts have to be made with remote aspects of the environment. Certain activities may lead in one direction; others may move in a different direction. These movements must continue, ensuing conditions must be evaluated, consequences must be anticipated, and choices must be made until a satisfactory self-integration occurs between the individual and the environment. Thus the individual modifies the environment as he uses it in meeting his needs. These modifications given back into the environment make a new environment both for him and for others. And this process enhances both individual and group creativeness.

Democratic interaction is based upon mutuality of relationship among individuals. This is inherent in any high level of cooperative action. It means that each individual assumes full responsibility for the group achievement and voluntarily performs his part in cooperating with the group plan. But it goes beyond this. It means that each individual is motivated more by the desire for social service than for personal gain. With such social drive he does not allow himself to become a part of a policy, plan, or achievement which hurts individuals and debases group welfare or action. And the group promotes only such policies as enhance the self and personality of all individuals. The greater the respect each individual has for others in their common struggle for the good life, the greater is the degree of mutuality and the higher is the quality of the interaction. Thus any action of a teacher, supervisor, or principal neglects mutuality when it so lowers the respect of a pupil for himself and for others as to make him feel inferior and incapable among his peers, or believe that he has been unfairly and unintelligently treated. While instances of low level mutuality may occur, no educator should knowingly commit them or allow them to exist once they are recognized.

Democratic interaction is always a mutually contingent relationship between the individual and his environment. In the broadest sense there is a contingency in every action. Even

when one individual is being exploited by another there is always the contingency that further exploitation by his dominator will be conditioned by how he reacts to present pressures. This is also true among small and large groups; even among nations, or what were called nations a few years ago. While some form of contingency is ever present in all interactions of living organisms, democratic interaction does not include those which arise out of compulsion, compromise, exploitation, or any exercise of dominating power over one individual by another. To be democratic, the contingency must be high in cooperativeness and mutuality. It must represent that uncertainty which a group faces in attempting to meet its needs by free study and inquiry leading toward considered, thoughtful action.

The democratic process is directed by thinking, for to aid each individual to improve his thinking in real life situations is one of the long-time directional goals. Without this there can be no democracy. When a few individuals do the thinking, arrive at conclusions, and impose them upon other individuals, democracy has become autocracy. There can be no adequate quality in the sharing or in the cooperative action except as each individual becomes more and more intelligent about the process of arriving at the purposes which the group accepts to act upon. This means that all individuals must participate in the formulation of the policies and plans *from the very beginning*. It does not mean that a few individuals determine the policies and do the major work on the planning so that only a few incidental details are left for the group as a whole to consider. When the children with their teachers, parents, and other educational helpers meet at the beginning of each year, one of their early problems should be to *formulate together* the policies and plans for the year, or for such a period of time as the children are able to do so. In this way the children will learn how to discover and clarify purposes and develop sound means for achieving them. Under wise guidance of adults they will become more and more proficient in this important aspect of democratic action. Thus they will learn how to manage their school

living intelligently by actually managing it intelligently. Yet this practice prevails very infrequently. The usual method is for educators to formulate the policies and make the school program, leaving only relatively small spaces in which the children with their parents and teachers may assume responsibility for planning. These educators are more interested in achieving fixed ends than aiding children to develop more thoughtful directional processes. They do not yet see that the way to better ends now and in the future is through helping children build better intelligence in the process of living day by day.

The theory of learning must support the democratic process of cooperative interaction. It must be directed toward aiding learners, young and old, to achieve all-around growth under intelligent freedom rather than toward aiding children to acquire fixed knowledge selected by adults and taught under rigorous adult controls. This theory of learning must also square with the accumulating information about organic growth, or how organisms reach integrative individuality in the culture in which they live. Low level learning as conditioning or connecting stimuli and responses is present in the general culture and in the laboratory research of many psychologists, but it will not suffice for the schools since it gives inadequate consideration to cooperative democratic interaction and to the building of intelligence. Educators must do much remaking both of their theories of learning and of their present teaching and learning procedures.

The curriculum of the school should be designed by all of those who are most intimately concerned with the activities of the life of the children while they are in school. This, of course, means the children themselves, together with their teachers, parents, other educators, and citizens of the community. Since the children must learn how to manage their living successfully within the democratic process, they must have a large share and an increasing responsibility in making their own curriculum. In fact, one of the most important duties of the school is to help them make their curriculum as intelligently as possible at their



age and maturity. This means that a curriculum must be as flexible as life and living. It cannot be made beforehand by adults and given to pupils and teachers to install. It must find its scope, sequence, continuity in the intelligent pursuit of democratic process goals. It must be variable among groups in a school and among schools in a city. It must have that cooperative mutual contingency which the pursuit of present knowledge goals denies.

The appraisal of the success of cooperative group action comes through individual and group evaluation in the process of such action. The acid test is the extent to which the experience improves the quality of living and clarifies the process of cooperative group action for obtaining better living in the future. Since values are placed on materials which satisfy needs, the experience must be appraised by how well it meets the needs and purposes of those within it, not how well it may meet the purposes of those who are outside of it but trying to control it. Measurement has value only as a means to satisfy some purpose accepted by the individual or the group. It helps them clarify their purpose and make their planning more intelligent. Thus through self-evaluation in the process of experiencing, each individual becomes more critical about his needs and purposes and better able to meet them through cooperative effort. This is quite in contrast with conventional methods of evaluation and measurement, where persons outside of the experience set up knowledge ends and make so-called objective instruments to measure how well pupils achieve this detached-from-the-process knowledge. Such practice tends to draw the attention of teachers and pupils away from the long-time directional process goals and center their efforts on building reactions to external controls for immediate and relatively temporary use.

Administration is the problem of managing an enterprise so that the purposes of those engaged in it may be achieved. This is true whether the enterprise be a simple or a complex one, or whether it be located in or out of school. Children who manage their club activities to meet their purposes are administrators,