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PROFILES OF FAMOUS EDUCATORS

MAURICE DEBESSE

(1903–98)

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The name Maurice Debesse is well known in educational circles in France and abroad. A scientist, he also demonstrated unusual and profound insight into academic subjects as well as into areas beyond traditional academic boundaries. He was a keen student of “life”, with remarkably perceptive opinions about people and world events. Maurice Debesse was not just a scholar, he was a man in the fullest and deepest sense of the word.

Debesse came to teaching out of a love for humanity. His affection for and understanding of others were reflected in his open and caring nature and ready smile. He was fond of saying that a teacher was not a pundit, that he should know how to smile and enjoy smiling, or else he was in the wrong profession. Debesse, master of the smile, of being serious light-heartedly, was an unforgettable figure, with his elegant and slim silhouette, familiar greying beard and the tenderness of his understanding and caring smile. Yet he could be severe and demanding about work, never wavering from his moral rectitude, his “moral armature” as he liked to call it, faithful to his principles and ethics. A loyal friend, he embraced a noble humanism inspired by the fundamental

values, ideas and ideals of the noblest French tradition. While open and understanding, he was never swayed by a need to conform or be “in fashion”, or tempted by sterile intellectual games. Despite this apparent severity, he was admired and honoured by young people and radical educators alike. The passing of Maurice Debesse marked the end of an era in which individuals of great moral and intellectual stature were able, through psychoeducational experimentation, to unite philosophic traditions with the modernism of research.

Biography and career

Maurice Debesse was born on 19 November 1903 in Firminy in the Loire département in France.

As Debesse himself wrote: “Music and reading were always part of my life, music being as it were a counterpoint to my reading. Following the death of my father in the First World War I gave up my dream of becoming a musician. Nevertheless, the violin, choir directing, listening to records, going to concerts and so forth have continued to be a passion ... I learned to read quite early in an unusual way: under the lamplight, sitting beside my mother – then a teacher in a Loire village – I would sort through the tiny soup noodles shaped like the letters of the alphabet. I started reading at the age of five and at the same time I began learning music theory.”

Debesse’s interest in teaching may have begun during the First World War when, as a young schoolboy, he was appointed class monitor in his own school since all the teachers had been mobilized for the war. He attended the Ecole normale primaire (teachers’ college) in Montbrison from 1919 to 1922 and then continued his studies at the Ecole normale supérieure in Saint-Cloud from 1923 to 1925. In 1927, he was appointed to teach history and geography at the Ecole normale in Châlons-sur-Saône and later at the Ecole normale in Dijon.

As a young student, Debesse came in contact with the Sorbonne’s leading thinkers: Henri Wallon, a philosopher who later became a physician and psychologist, and Paul Fauconnet, sociologist and disciple of Emile Durkheim. Both were remarkable for their broad philosophical culture and both, by virtue of their personal interests, encouraged the scientific leanings of the

young Debesse. Debesse began his university studies under the philosopher and psychologist Professor Henri Delacroix; at the same time, his interest in observation, stimulated by the objective clinical research of Wallon, led him to attend courses at the Institute of Psychology founded by Henri Piéron. The form taken by Debesse's doctoral thesis provides the most striking illustration of these parallel inspirations and interests. While his principal dissertation, *La crise d'originalité juvénile* (Adolescent identity crisis), was influenced by the idealist and intellectual psychology of Delacroix, his supplementary dissertation, *Comment étudier les adolescents. Examen des confidences juvéniles* (Studying adolescents. An examination of adolescent confidences), reflected the objective rigour of Wallon. In the 1930s Debesse's intellectual personality began to take shape: a broad philosophical framework, a firm belief in empirical data and observation and, simultaneously, an open-mindedness which early on steered him away from the rigidity of certain methods used in clinical psychology and led him to focus on the historical and individualist aspects of human development. It was this outlook that led him to realize that the general stages of child development should be replaced in adolescence by a theoretical structure which postulated varying forms of development. Debesse was also influenced by his geography teachers and models, Albert Demangeon and Emmanuel de Martonne (who inspired him to develop the idea of a geography of education), and by Gaston Bachelard, met while working in Dijon, who stimulated his interest in the creative imagination.

In 1937, as a doctoral candidate (*doctorat d'Etat*), Debesse defended his two theses at the University of Paris (Sorbonne). These works, showing his unusual sensibility and his interest in contemporary problems – a rare attitude in those days –, generated immediate excitement in contemporary psychological and educational circles. Debesse, mobilized for the war and later taken prisoner, was awarded a number of distinctions: Croix de Guerre 1939-1945; Croix de Chevalier of the Legion of Honour in 1955; Croix de Commandeur of the Ordre des Palmes Académiques in 1968. His university career did not really begin until after the war. From 1945 to 1956 he was professor of educational psychology at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Strasbourg.

During that time he continued his systematic observation of children at the newly established Strasbourg psychoeducational centre, directed jointly by Debesse and Ms Favez Boutonier and modelled after the Claude Bernard psychoeducational centre in Paris. In 1957 Debesse was appointed to the Education Chair at the Sorbonne. In addition to his courses at the Sorbonne, he taught psychology at the Ecole Normale Supérieure de l'Enseignement Technique and the history of education at the University of Geneva (1972-1973) and, in 1967, was a visiting professor at Laval University and the University of Montreal in Canada. He made numerous trips abroad to give lectures in Europe, North America and the Far East (Japan). He was awarded honorary doctorates by the University of Ghent and the University of Geneva. A regular participant in the congresses and activities of the World Association for Educational Research, he organized, in cooperation with Professor Gaston Mialaret, and was honorary president of the Association's Congress in Paris in 1973. From the end of the 1940s until the 1970s Debesse was the name most closely associated with the education sciences in France. In 1967 he was entrusted with the task of organizing, in collaboration with Jean Château and Gaston Mialaret, the first education science courses within the French university system.

Professor Maurice Debesse died at Archamps on 18 July 1998.

Research and studies

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

The work of Maurice Debesse is part of the enormous wealth of educational studies and research inspired by the ideals of the “century of the child” and the New Education movement. These movements, which stressed the application of psychological principles to education and the need to transcend the didactic and authoritarian character of traditional educational approaches, were, as Debesse himself often pointed out, revolutionary. He nevertheless warned that an overemphasis on psychology might mask the “richness of children's reality” and divert interest from the real problems of education. Debesse was a “psycho-educator” in the proper sense of the term: he believed neither in the direct application of psychology to education nor in an education system founded solely on psychological principles. The ideal educator, in his view, was one whose

thoughts and behaviour were guided by an overarching approach which took into account the interaction between practice and theory, the stages of human development and, naturally, the knowledge to be transmitted. It was in fact a “genetic” conception of education wherein each individual is helped to express and use their natural gifts and personal qualities.

Maurice Debesse never concealed his own intellectual preferences and his sources of inspiration. His thinking was profoundly marked by the most brilliant French minds: Montaigne, Descartes, Rousseau, among others, and the French-speaking disciples of the New Education. Nevertheless, he had his own independent opinions and despite official recognition of them, he maintained a certain distance from the public authorities.

Debesse’s intellectual career was marked by an interest in the study of the psychological aspects of individual development. His work, innovative for the period – in particular, his studies of the adolescent identity crisis and of the creative aspects of early childhood – was well-known and valued. These two dimensions of his work will be presented in more detail further on.

What were Debesse’s own views on psychology and its role in education? While acknowledging the contribution of psychology, especially child psychology, to formal education, he disagreed with the widespread view that psychology was all that mattered in education. Highlighting the respective roles of genetic, functional, differential and educational psychology, he developed the concept of “psychological geography”, to underline the simultaneous diversity and unity of psychology, which may be viewed as a set of variations on the universal theme of child behaviour.

Debesse was always conscious of the need to renew constantly the image of the child, to discover previously unnoticed facts and to develop and confirm new hypotheses based on such facts. He emphasized, and rightly so, that psychology was a source of data that had to be verified at the individual level by educators in the classroom. For Debesse, child psychology was the history of the child’s behaviour as he or she developed. This “genetic” perspective was not in itself enough to guide educators. It had to be supplemented by a “functional” dimension encompassing memory,

language, motor skills, symbolic functions and so on and by a “differential” dimension which made it possible to analyse individual psychic differences and particularities. While the genetic, functional and differential approaches were, in his view, necessary to a basic understanding of child development, it was important not to give too much weight to the theory, which was often rigid and schematic. Debesse hoped to make educators and psychologists more sensitive to the individual aspects of development as expressed through the astonishing richness of creativity. In his analysis of psychology and its important role in education, undertaken at the start of the 1950s, he concluded that French schools made too little use of psychological insights. *The Psychology of the Child*, a collective work initiated and edited by Debesse, with contributions by leading specialists of the time including Jean Château, Irène Lézine, René Zazzo, Gaston Mialaret and Roger Gal, was a response to that problem. Published in 1956 in France, the book included articles on the first French psychoeducational centres where Debesse was developing the concept of “curative pedagogy”.

Debesse studied children and childhood with great affection and esteem. While appreciating the scientific precision of observation, he enriched his research by his personal touch and his understanding. For him a child was not simply a research subject but a very real human being who merited a scientist’s professional interest but also the marks of sincere friendship. This attitude summed up the essence of the “century of the child”. After all, his models were on the one hand the leading intellectuals of the time – Henri Piéron, Henri Delacroix, Henri Wallon (joint founders of the great French tradition in psychology) – and, on the other, radical educators such as Edouard Claparède, Célestin Freinet and Robert Cousinet. He was strongly opposed to traditional education, characterized by forced obedience and a passive attitude towards authority. Nor did he share the delusions of child-centred education – although he appreciated the innovative thinking of Claparède, author of *L’éducation fonctionnelle* (Functional education), and Cousinet’s method of free activity in small groups. Debesse had a seemingly ambiguous attitude that combined educational utopianism with an interest in the concrete daily reality of education. All these influences and his own experience as a teacher were brought together in a very personal, relatively

short and profoundly wise book entitled *Les Etapes de l'Education* (The Stages of Education) which faithfully describes his psychoeducational theories. In writing it, Debesse delved not so much into his library as into his own childhood experiences and his career as an educator and psychologist. Presenting the book, he declared: “The idea of studying education by the examination of its successive stages is not new. Nothing is more natural or commonplace, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Maria Montessori, not to mention contemporary authors of textbooks. What is perhaps more unusual is the ambition, or the pretension as some would have it, of basing the entire education system on the concept of stages, as a fundamental element. That is, nonetheless, the argument of this little book” (Debesse, 1980). On the basis of his extensive research in the field of child psychology, Debesse demonstrated that the major stages of development correspond to different realities which make it possible to work out different classroom approaches for each stage. At each stage in their development, pupils reach a dynamic equilibrium and achieve relative stability, a temporary state of perfection; the child gravitates towards a certain style of being. Each age, each stage of life – as Rousseau had already grasped – has its own perfection, its own kind of maturity. Debesse believed that educators had to encourage pupils to reach the perfection associated with each stage and the sum total of those attainments would define the success of the entire educational enterprise. If a single stage were to be missed, there would always be, despite the pupil’s subsequent efforts, something lacking in the developmental sequence. The educational failure would be even more acute, and might even result in maladjustment, if the education process were halted before the end of the growth period.

The idea of stages of education is linked to the particular nature of each stage of growth, in which specific activities are dominant. As Debesse saw it, one cannot be a good educator without knowing children well. But knowing them well is not enough. Education must incorporate contributions from other fields such as psychology, biology or sociology and it must also provide access to moral values. He stressed that the educational process has to be founded on knowledge about the child as well as on a universe of values, a “vertical” dimension of the spiritual, an allusion

to Bogdan Suchodolski's concepts of a "pedagogy of existence" and a "pedagogy of essence". Debesse was not, like some, an unquestioning believer in the omnipotence of education: heredity, biological factors and spontaneous creativity all moderated the impact of the social environment which, in turn, had an influence on the development of human potential. Like Antoine Cournot, he believed that education served to bring out in an individual a potential which, without it, would not have been realized (Debesse, 1980).

Debesse divided education into several successive stages, the names of which speak for themselves: the nursery phase, the goat-footed phase, the schoolchild phase, the troubled pubescent phase, and the youthful enthusiast phase. Within this genetic perspective, the symbolic role played by the hand in the educational process is noteworthy: an infant is carried in its mother's arms, then guided by her hand; a young man, on the brink of maturity, waves his teacher goodbye before he sets out to live his own life.

ADOLESCENT IDENTITY CRISIS

Debesse's book on "The adolescent identity crisis" is recognized as an important and original work in the history of the development of French education in the twentieth century. This period was marked by a growing interest in adolescence, the age "when one grows up" – between the end of childhood and the start of adulthood. Researchers in many countries were fascinated by the special nature of this stage of human life when individuals undergo fundamental biological and psychological changes, become increasingly sensitive to social and cultural issues and seek out new experiences as a way of finding their own identity and their place in the world. At that time, however, world interest in adolescence was limited to a few authors: *L'âme de l'adolescent* (1909) and *L'âme de l'adolescente* (1929) by Pierre Mendouse; *Adolescence* (1905) by Stanley Hall; *Lebensformen* (1921) and *Psychologie des Jugendalters* (1924) by Edouard Spranger.

Debesse's interest in adolescence had been awakened by Delacroix and Wallon, his professors at the Sorbonne. He agreed with them regarding the cyclical nature of the growth process, in contrast to the principle of continuity advocated by British and American researchers and the stages

of mental development proposed by Jean Piaget. Debesse saw development as taking place through a succession of crises and his own research centred on the crisis of adolescence. He pointed out that the crisis of adolescence was, for young people, one possible way of affirming their identity and a stage of growth through which all individuals passed. He was convinced that the manner in which that crisis was manifested could vary enormously from one person to the next, thus implying a variety of forms of growth. Debesse studied the crisis of adolescence from a three-fold perspective: he began with a detailed description, proposed an explanation and then derived from it educational principles, a method he termed “crisis pedagogy”. For his research, Debesse drew on numerous and varied sources: works on adolescent psychology, educational theory, general psychology, philosophy, essays, memoirs, biographies and novels. Particularly important were his empirical sources based on his long experience as an educator, on observations of young people and on an analysis of their writings (the subject of Debesse’s supplementary thesis, in which he also defined his research methodology). Making use of both his clinical experience and the principles of general psychology, he undertook a critical analysis of adolescent “confidences” with a view to understanding the personality of young people “in both its innermost recesses and its essential totality”. Debesse believed that, unlike children, young people were capable of self-analysis. With them it was possible to use a method similar to introspection, analysing spontaneous adolescent expression as well as oral and written matter (diaries, literary works). By examining these materials, Debesse could follow the mental development and trace the affective history of his subjects. Other data came from replies to a questionnaire. As a seasoned researcher, Debesse knew that the subjective reports of young people were not entirely trustworthy. He insisted that long-term observation be regularly accompanied by descriptions of behaviour in order to “understand the psyche in action”. He was a careful researcher, aware of the need to use different and complementary methods for the analysis of the delicate material emanating from the capricious psyches of young adolescents.

From the start of his study of the adolescent identity crisis, Debesse realized that adolescence was a stage of life which had not received adequate attention even though it was marked by the desire to be different, to stand out and to be original, and by a taste for contradiction and paradox. Adolescence covered two distinct phases: a critical phase of aggressive non-conformity and a phase of self-awareness and self-affirmation, both occurring in a context of the significant physiological changes of puberty. The most distinguishing feature of adolescence was the young person's rebellion against all social, family and educational organization, against all that came from "outside", against everything that existed. At the same time the adolescent was developing an increasingly strong sense of independence and an elevated sense of his own value. "Understood in this way, the conflict between generations is a problem of adolescent rebellion" (Debesse, 1936). Self-affirmation was often expressed through eccentric dress and outrageous behaviour, both intellectual and emotional. A spirit of contradiction sometimes awakened in young people a passion for reform, a heightened sense of morality, a desire to reshape the world by changing its values. Some adolescents chose the opposite path, escaping from the present through imaginary behaviour close to narcissism. This oscillation between revolt and contemplation, between frenetic activity and a desire for solitude reflected the instability of adolescents, their concentration on both the real self and the desired self. By protecting themselves from the world outside, adolescents widened the gap between their possible self and the self that could be developed through action. "With all his might the original adolescent aspires to the emotional unity of his being, social reflection of the unity of the inner self. Anything which violates or harms this absolute hurts him" (Debesse, 1936).

The explanation for the adolescent crisis was to be found in an analysis of young people's organic, social and mental conflicts. Debesse saw a parallel between the adolescent identity crisis and certain mental pathologies, psychoses, states of psychasthenia and hyperemotivity. Sensitive to the particular spirit of each age, the adolescent identity crisis found its most intense social expression during periods conducive to the exaltation of the self: the Romantic period, the French Revolution, individualism. But the crisis occurred wherever young people were forced to conform.

Loyal to his notion of the stages of growth, Debesse believed that the adolescent identity crisis was not a step on the road to maturity but rather a distinct state with its own equilibrium. Rejecting Piaget's purely intellectual conception of adolescence, he considered adolescent thought processes as being "charged with emotions". The adolescent identity crisis had to be understood as a dramatic expression preparatory to self-fulfilment and as such it needed an appropriate form of individualized education, a "pedagogy of accompaniment", in a context of understanding and respect.

Debesse pursued that line of reasoning in his subsequent work, notably his study on *Adolescence*, in which he emphasized the discovery, during that period, of social and aesthetic values. For him, the adolescent identity crisis was a time of intense intellectual development marked by emotional sensitivity and the emergence of new creative possibilities. Adolescence was an aesthetic age during which the sense of beauty was greatly heightened: the beauty of the human body, of an act, of a work of art, of nature. Young people were, in the expressive words of Rodin as recalled by Debesse, the "high priests of beauty". They were naturally drawn to art, a form of individual expression *par excellence*, corresponding both to self-affirmation and the awakening of individual thinking. Art also reflected the "pre-eminent role played by the imagination", and aesthetic contemplation was "one of those disinterested activities which young people enjoy and from which they derive particular pleasure because it is based on one of their guiding forces – admiration – which takes the individual out of himself and into the realm of the absolute" (Debesse, 1957).

Debesse regarded adolescence as a period of cultural maturation for which a specific type of education was needed. He elaborated this idea in a series of publications including *L'adolescence* and *Les étapes de l'éducation*. From an educational standpoint, adolescence appeared to be divided into two successive phases: troubled pubescence and youthful enthusiasm. The first phase called not so much for intellectual training as for "personality" development which took into account the rich emotional life of adolescents. Young people did not really need a teacher so much as another open

and understanding human being, capable of taking a critical stance if necessary and of providing assistance in difficult times. That realization gave rise to a significant educational paradox and Debesse did not shy away from pointing out another even more dramatic one. While young people were capable of intense effort, the social environment frequently destroyed such inclinations by reorienting the young towards self-centred and often anti-social goals. The awakening of an individual moral conscience thus entailed risks, which became even more serious during the transition to the following phase of adolescence.

For young people arriving in the second stage of adolescence, Debesse proposed an axiological approach to education based on three related principles: make use of the strong attraction of values for adolescents to inculcate a sound culture; channel the feeling of exaltation which takes them out of themselves; and exercise their intelligence and determination so that they gain the necessary lucidity and competence (Debesse, 1980). Education for adolescents should include a creative dimension.

CREATIVE ACTIVITY

The question of creative activity occupied a primary place in Debesse's research. This line of investigation reflected his positive attitude towards and affection for childhood, in the spirit of the noble intentions of the "century of the child" and the grandest traditions of the New Education movement. It was in particular the years between 3 and 7, the age of childhood *par excellence*, when creative activity achieved its most spectacular expression. In his book *Les étapes de l'éducation*, he used the metaphor "goat-footed", evoking the age of Pan and a sort of Dionysian mentality. It was the period whose natural form of expression was complex game playing and a growing awareness of personality and of self. These natural tendencies determined the child's preference for one or more modes of artistic expression: plastic, musical or gestural. Researchers at the start of the twentieth century had already observed the relationship between the natural growth of children at that age and their spontaneous artistic activity; however, they were more interested in the process itself, which correlated perfectly with the process of growth, than in the results of

creative activity. Debesse rightly stressed the difference between professional artistic activity leading to a completed work and spontaneous creative activity, corresponding to the clear distinction to be found in several languages between the word “creation”, meaning an activity giving rise to a finished product, in the field of art or elsewhere, and the word “creativity”, referring to processes which are essentially characteristic of children’s activity. In the twentieth century children’s creativity has been the subject of investigation by researchers in various countries (Guilford, Lowenfeld and Eisner in the United States, Richardson and Read in England, Cizek in Austria, Freinet, Goton and Clero in France) and, thanks to them, creativity has been recognized as a universal faculty within every individual, often repressed by society and education. Influenced by Bergson’s *L’Evolution créatrice* and *Données immédiates de la conscience* (translated into English as “Creative Evolution” and “Time and Free Will: an essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness”), Debesse analysed children’s creative activities including drawing and music, in which he was particularly interested. Children’s musical creativity was seen by him as a “personal improvisation” which was to be encouraged. Analysing the educational aspects of children’s creativity, Debesse described the child’s gradual development, beginning with spontaneous vocal, gestural or graphic activity and moving towards externally-stimulated activity and encounters with the mysteries of “high” art, through listening to music, contemplating images, participation in shows and so on. He thus emphasized the importance of education through the creative and contemplative dimensions of the arts. Aware of the need to foster an aesthetic culture in young people, Debesse emphasized its essentially human qualities, the fulfilment of the aesthetic, emotional, intellectual and creative aspects of the personality. He believed that the experience and the practice of the arts could counterbalance the dangerous dehumanization of modern civilization, a view shared by international movements in favour of education through art. It was Debesse who introduced the concept of “creativity” in France. His writings and views in this context contributed to or stimulated educational change, such as the introduction of an art option in the French baccalaureate. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was felt that changes were needed in the

traditional approach to education, which was regarded as too passive and intellectualist, and this led to the development of “early learning” based on creative activities and the stimulation of curiosity in all its forms. The literature, debate and practical experience also brought to the fore an important aspect of creativity, often emphasized by Debesse, whose views linked up with the conclusions of psychoeducational research at the beginning of the twentieth century: creativity was not the exclusive province of gifted individuals or those belonging to an elite; it existed in embryo as a potential in all individuals and required for its growth a favourable environment, the right medium and appropriate teaching. Teaching creativity thus became an increasingly important aspect of education, similar to what was already being done at the preschool level. It was not surprising, therefore, that Debesse developed a keen interest in and appreciation for the innovative approach to preschool education developed by Pauline Kergomard, whose works he had studied. Until that time, the focus had been on children who were suffering. Kergomard’s personality and writings can be compared with the work of Froebel, the methods of Maria Montessori and the revolution of the New Education movement. Debesse reflected that same spirit in his study entitled *Une école sans obligation ni sanction* in which he developed the idea of a spontaneous morality and a philosophy founded on the vital forces of the individual. By emphasizing the doubly negative nature of traditional preschool education – obligations and sanctions –, he demonstrated the advantages of an approach in keeping with the natural development of young children, which stimulated their creativity in an atmosphere of freedom. In that regard, he recalled his own practical experiments in curative pedagogy: without being overly permissive in the classroom, the educator places his full trust in the child and the child’s own forces of growth.

Unlike the first generation of New Education teachers, Debesse was interested in the social aspects of preschool education which, he believed, should help ensure equal opportunities for the full development of their potential for children from all social backgrounds, including the most disadvantaged.

DUTIES AND LIMITS OF EDUCATION

Parallel to his interest in the principles of growth, Debesse was deeply concerned to emphasize the importance of moral values, a point he made in his article on *Conditionnement et armature dans l'éducation morale*. He stressed the interaction between the social and the cultural conditioning of children, which played a fundamental role in the development of habits in keeping with the values transmitted by society. Such conditioning, which provided the foundation for a moral code applicable to everyday life, could be beneficial or harmful, depending on its nature. A harmful conditioning could end up destroying the subject's personal freedom, the most striking example being certain processes used to instill obedience. Somewhere between reflex behaviour and personal autonomy lay the realm of free choice and it was here that moral training took on the greatest importance. Resigned in some degree to the inevitability and the dangers of conditioning, Debesse sought the answer to effective moral training in the development of a "moral armature" which would enable the individual to behave properly and provide a firm and stable structure for the individual personality. It was really a defence against immorality, particularly valuable to young people growing up in a modern society where basic values such as honesty, justice and fraternity were not always respected.

Debesse analysed the phenomenon of adolescent "originality" above all in relation to the individual process of growth. He noted, for example, that some of the young militants who had participated in the events of May 1968 in France had displayed an absence of moral principles and a failure to respect social values, leading them to adopt a nihilistic attitude. They lacked what he called a "moral armature". He therefore restated some basic moral guidelines which might be an effective response to its absence and then undertook a pertinent and critical analysis of various possible solutions: (1) religious practice and dogma; (2) Kantian morality founded on the categorical imperative; (3) a sociological perspective in which moral values change as society changes; (4) the philosophy of Bergson based on "two sources", one corresponding to a sociological response and the other to a free choice among admired role models; (5) the principles of existential

philosophy, and the contributions of psychoanalysis, in particular the interaction between the superego and the instincts.

In his view, each solution had its advantages and disadvantages but remained general and formal. The primary function of education, on the other hand, was to provide the materials for a conditioned structure which was then transformed progressively into an individualized “armature” by using creativity as a counterweight to conditioning throughout the growth process. The constitution of this moral framework would then contribute to the development of the personality and to what might be called “poetics of the self”, meaning a creative and individualized personal effort inspired by the choice of values, the goal being not only self-knowledge but also integration into a social community. A moral education based on the principle of the “moral armature” had therefore to incorporate the transformations taking place in modern society, avoid moralizing and didactics, foster dynamic and open-minded attitudes, make use of the obvious social factors and especially the creativity of young people, and promote self-expression as a means of personal fulfilment.

Studies on personal development, in particular during the crucial period of adolescence, had confirmed Debesse’s scepticism with regard to the possibility of transforming the individual through education. That was what led him to “curative pedagogy”, which used practical activities, methods of promoting integration into society and school life and improved educational relations (teacher-pupil-family) to create new bases for emotional relations, to inspire confidence and to individualize the educational process, thus demonstrating the interest of educators in children and their problems. Debesse spent years developing the concrete methodology of curative pedagogy at the psychoeducational centre he ran in Strasbourg.

Professor Debesse ended his university career in 1973. The events of 1968 – which had such an impact on French education – brought back memories of his early studies on the adolescent identity crisis; he saw in those events the negative effects of an overly strict education and the need to develop the creative possibilities in each individual. He believed that education was a process

influenced by many factors and that, at a certain point, it resisted the domination of traditional methods and required new approaches that found a place for contemporary problems. He showed how a new theory and practice of education had come into being. A combination of an education for the “transmission” of knowledge and an education for “creativity” was, in his view, essential for the twenty-first century, a process calling both for innovative and concrete solutions to teaching problems and for a renewal of theoretical conceptions. He therefore returned willingly to his earlier observations, highlighting the increasingly marked differences among human beings, especially during adolescence, and stressing the need for an individualized education based on an amicable relationship which did not hesitate to make use, when necessary, of therapeutic tools.

In the work published towards the end of his life, Debesse expressed his conviction that the increasingly complex problems of education required a pluridisciplinary approach. Recalling his own studies in history and geography, he stressed the importance of the history of education and of research into what he called the “geography of education”, a concept that anticipated the development of comparative education. Still deeply convinced of the importance of research on the stages of child development, he placed more and more emphasis on the contributions of psychoanalysis and sociology to the study of personality development. Agreeing with Durkheim that pedagogy was a “practical theory”, he stressed the need to analyse the universe of values and, consequently, the philosophy of education, which should provide in practice a kind of “ethical framework” for the practice of teaching. He clearly perceived both the possibilities and the limits of education.

As honorary President of the sixth Congress of the World Association for Educational Research, held in Paris in September 1973 on the theme “The contribution of basic science to education sciences”, Debesse delivered an address entitled “What are the challenges for the education sciences?”. In this, one of his last texts and of particular interest, Debesse criticized the widespread use of the word “pedagogy”, considering it too vague, too ambiguous and too often limited in its meaning to early childhood education. Drawing on current trends in research, he

preferred the broader term “education sciences”, which he included among the human sciences. He highlighted the great range of research within each of the education sciences and their relationship with the basic sciences. He insisted that the scope of research should not be limited to formal classroom teaching and identified the enormous problems for education arising from the challenges of a modern world in constant movement and crisis. Alluding to the unknowns of the future and “forecasts without dates”, he observed that “the sciences of education, like science itself, are not enough to meet the challenge: only the individual worth of people and of educators can help us confront an uncertain future”. His speech ended: “Allow me, as one of the oldest participants in this Congress, to conclude by urging the younger generation who will replace us to respond to the challenges facing the education sciences by placing their confidence in humankind – I mean, in the humanity of human beings”.

In his work on education, Debesse underlined the growing significance of the future. Sensitive to our changing world, he wondered, slightly concerned, what the future held for this civilization entangled in its contradictions, what would be the final destiny of humankind which was both its source and its victim. He paid careful attention to the emergence of new ideas about teaching, such as those in the well-known UNESCO report *Learning: the Treasure Within* and the ideas about forecasting inspired by Gaston Berger, sharing Berger’s view on the role of the human factor in the shaping of future events. Always ready to return to the classic texts of the past, he looked for ways of integrating their suggestions into the construction of the future.

Debesse’s studies of the adolescent identity crisis coincide, in a surprising way, with the development in the 1970s of research into the role of chaos and crises in the destiny of civilization. Witness to the Second World War and to the succession of rapid transformations of the modern world, Debesse was part of the effort to save the values of a humanity in danger by seeking in education a solution to the world’s problems. His educational message is summed up neatly with these words: “Shaped by their genetic inheritance and by the multiple traits imposed by their environment, students are capable, if their inherent vitality is given support, of adding something

new to what is the norm for human beings. Education does not create individuals, it helps individuals to create themselves”.

Note

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