

## Slavko Gaber

# Dewey, work, school, and democracy

**Abstract:** With his support for manual work (including sewing, spinning, metalwork, and woodwork) in schools, John Dewey appears at first glance to favor the subordination of education to the production process. Contrary to expectations, however, he developed his reflections on school, activity, work, and society in the direction of a broadly conceived education. Both at the time of the lectures published as *The School and Society* (1899) and his best-known work on the theme of education, *Democracy and Education* (1916), he remained faithful to the commitment of an education that will allow students to be citizens that live in a democratic society with the capacity to shape their culture.

**Keywords:** Dewey, work/labor, school, active learning, teaching, democracy, child-centredness

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## Introduction

Dewey, one of the most influential education experts who investigated the relationship between school and society from the nineteenth into the twentieth centuries,<sup>1</sup> was explicit in his views of the connection between school, work, and democracy, stating his position with regard to this relationship on several occasions. In the present paper we shall deal in detail with his conceptualizations of labor, school, and democracy at two moments in time (1899 and 1916) through two of his works: *The School and Society* and *Democracy and Education*.

These works are separated by more than a decade and a half of ripening modern democracy, the *Belle Époque*, the introduction of compulsory schooling in the United States, the boom of Taylorism and Fordism, and the movement towards and outbreak of World War I. Between 1899, when he gave three lectures under the title *The School and Society* in an effort to integrate the laboratory school concept into public perception, and 1916, the year that *Democracy and Education* was published, Dewey arrived at his own relatively definitive views of the relationship between the school and society.

## School, family, and society: the role and importance of labor at the turn of the twentieth century

### *The shift of education to the school*

This article's discussion of school and society at the turn of the twentieth century should be placed during a time of several transitions, both globally and

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<sup>1</sup> Egan – with James, Parker, Thorndike, and Hall – called him a “revolutionary” who was “profoundly influenced by Spencer's work” (Egan 2002, p. 4). Popkewitz, who sees in him even today “a figure whose internationally circulated ideas about pragmatism offered a way to think about a progressive individual associated with modernity” (Popkewitz 2008, p. vii), at the same time defines him as “the international salesman for American pragmatism at a time when mass schooling was institutionalized in diverse cultural and political fields.” (Ibidem, p. 6)

personally for Dewey. Two of them deserve particular mention. First, during this time, the United States transitioned from a predominantly rural society into an urban and industrially-based economy. The middle class was emerging, and its members believed in the power of industrial and other progress. Dewey's reflections were thus "triggered in large measure by his first-hand encounter with the urbanisation of America" (Jackson 2006, p. 56)<sup>2</sup> and the formation of a modern, globally important "America." Second, paralleling the farewell to rural America is Dewey's own farewell to his earlier works as he began his now famous "middle period" (1899–1924). During the years he spent in Chicago (1894–1904) he had established himself both as a philosopher and as a pedagogue. In the context of this paper, he is discussed as an educator.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the fact that Dewey began his first lecture by noting that "we are apt to look at the school from an individualistic standpoint" (Dewey 1959, p. 33), and even proclaims this tendency to be natural and self-evident,<sup>4</sup> it is soon clear that he is criticizing the inadequacy of the individualistic view. When telling his audience that they "rightly" judge the work of the school by an individual child's progress, including his advance in the ability to read, his growth in the knowledge of geography, and improvement in manners to name a few, Dewey is preparing to deliver a potent "however" (ibidem, p. 34). For him, individualistic standpoint is too narrow: "(...) the outlook needs to be enlarged. What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children." (Ibidem) To the individualistic approach he adds, with great conviction, the importance of education for society and democracy. Thus in as early as 1899 we can trace a close connection between democracy, education, and the school. Through the agency of the school, "all that society has accomplished is put (...) at the disposal of its future members." (Ibidem) In his advocacy of education as an opportunity for all, Dewey is full of hope and demands a high standard that society must achieve. "Only by being true to the full growth of all the individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself." (Ibidem) Here "individualism and socialism are at one" (ibidem). Thus whenever it comes to a discussion of "a new movement in education, it is especially necessary to take the broader,

<sup>2</sup> His views of society, on the other hand, were apparently greatly influenced by his first wife Alice and by Jane Addams (cf. Jackson 2006, pp. 56–57).

<sup>3</sup> By leaving to one side the development of his "pragmatism," Jackson's criticism becomes clear, pointing out that the lines along which Dewey established himself as a world-famous name "address two entirely different publics" (Jackson 2006, p. 57). Each of them leaves aside the themes of the other, something which is taken to indicate the persistence of the old gulf between theory and practice. To the extent that it is possible, this paper attempts to transcend this divide. For more on the development of Dewey's line of pragmatism, and in particular instrumentalism, see Margolis (2006, pp. 1–10) and Jackson (2006, pp. 54–66). The complexity of the origins of pragmatism and the contributions of Peirce, who is acknowledged by both James, who coined the term "pragmatism" in 1898 (the year before the lectures with which we begin our discussion) and Dewey as the founder of "American philosophy," is also highlighted in the first chapter of his 1925 work *Experience and Nature*. Dewey writes that "the philosophy here presented may be termed either empirical naturalism or naturalistic empiricism, or (...) naturalistic humanism" (ibidem, p. 59). It is evident that Dewey took great pains to avoid the term pragmatism.

<sup>4</sup> "That which interests us most is naturally the progress made by the individual child of our acquaintance." (Dewey 1959, p. 33)

or social view” (ibidem). His actual thesis is therefore the urgent need to build on individualism. To put it another way, he is informing individualistic America that its individualism is too little. Democracy demands more. All “who can” must get their opportunity within the framework of education. Indirectly, both the individual and society as a whole benefit from this.

But Dewey does not stop here. Society is not only here to ensure the realization of an individual’s potential. Its business is to lead, through the school, along the path of changes. Society (in the narrow sense of the word) and industry together must always determine the changes to the methods and curriculum of the school. Since these changes in society and production were enormous during this period, they are significant in Dewey’s lectures.

“The change that comes first to mind, the one that overshadows and even controls all others, is the industrial one (...). [G]reat inventions (...): a world-wide market as the object of production, of vast manufacturing centers (...),” (ibidem, p. 35) – all this has brought inconceivable changes to the way people live and coexist. Population is “hurriedly gathered into cities from the ends of the earth; habits of living are altered with startling abruptness and thoroughness.” (Ibidem) The changes have profoundly affected even the deepest-lying things in our nature, which are thus the most conservative: our “moral and religious ideas and interests” (ibidem, pp. 35–36). “That this revolution should not affect education (...) is inconceivable.” (Ibidem, p. 36)

So what happened? A look back at history shows us that, for example, in the case of clothing, not only was the item itself made in the house, but the entire industrial process, from the production on the farm of the raw materials until the finished article was actually put to use, happened in one location. “Not only this, but practically every member of the household had his own share in the work.” (Ibidem) Notably, “[t]he children, as they gained in strength and capacity, were gradually initiated into the mysteries of the several processes.” (Ibidem) Alongside gaining insight and skills were the factors of “discipline and (...) character-building: training in habits of order and of industry, and in the idea of responsibility, of obligation to do something, to produce something, in the world.” (Ibidem, p. 36) Perhaps most significantly, everything took place in cooperation with others and with a sense of responsibility towards others. It was this old world of an interconnected life in a community of production and character-building that the great revolution tested. Not only that: it needed to be constructed afresh.

Lasch appears to be expressing Dewey’s logic when he describes the age he lives in and, following Marx, warns that the survival “of any form of human society depends on the production of the necessities of life and the reproduction of the labour force itself.” (Lasch 1979, p. 267) He is also utterly “Deweyan” when he reflects on the connection or the separation of production and reproduction. In the nineteenth century he first observes the “socialization of production” with the rise of the factory system. The factory effectively divides up the process of production as described by Dewey and transfers it from the family to the factory. The family thus lost its function as a production unit. The factory system “left the other functions of the family intact. The socialization of production, however,

proved to be the prelude to the socialization of reproduction itself.” (Ibidem) And here Lasch echoes Dewey: with the transfer/transition/takeover of the production function and, subsequently, the reproduction function previously held by the family disappearing, the need for a public education system arose. The old “education” was not up to the challenge, and Dewey’s “new education” answered this need.

It appears, then, that the school was given the task of both substituting and building on the earlier family education with social education. No wonder, then, that Dewey imposes on the school the *role of a training ground for life (work) in society*: the role of a “miniature community,” or, perhaps, a miniature factory.

But let us not jump ahead. The lecturer tries to convince his listeners of the importance of concrete experiences for education. He makes his famous claim that no lesson that aims to give information can hope to substitute “acquaintance with the plants and animals of the farm and garden, acquired through actual living among them and caring for them” (Dewey 1959, p. 37). It is true, says Dewey, that “verbal memory can be trained in committing tasks, [and] a certain discipline of the reasoning powers can be acquired through lessons in science and mathematics.” (Ibidem) Yet these subjects are merely a shadow of what we can achieve through the training of “attention and of judgement that is acquired in having to do things with a real motive behind and a real outcome ahead.” (Ibidem) Unfortunately, however, the “concentration of industry and division of labor have practically eliminated household and neighborhood occupations – at least for educational purposes.” (Ibidem) The world today (1899) is no longer limited to the place where you are born. We have lost the depth of knowledge of the direct world around us, but we have gained “the increase in toleration, in breadth of social judgement, the larger acquaintance with human nature, the sharpened alertness in reading signs of character and interpreting social situations, greater accuracy of adaptation to differing personalities.” (Ibidem, pp. 37–38)

Have we, then, jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire, so to speak? That would appear to be exactly what has happened. But Dewey, who is convinced that “the education people embrace makes all the difference for the way of life they will end up leading” (Hansen 2006, p. 185), does not give up. He wants both approaches, and he has already identified them both in embryonic form in the American schools of the day. He enthusiastically states that in schools he observes “tendencies (...) toward the introduction of so-called manual training, shop-work, and the household arts – sewing and cooking” (Dewey 1959, p. 38). This is therefore positive. Yet still indicates the new is not enough for him. As a progressive with perhaps a Spencerian stamp (cf. Egan 2002), he is troubled by the fact that consciousness “of its real import is still so weak that the work is often done in a half-hearted, confused and unrelated way.” (Dewey 1959, p. 38)

From here to the notion that it is necessary for schools to carry out more consistently and coherently the early preparation of young people for the performance of their later occupations is but a step. Dewey seemed likely to shift the starting point to the beginning of schooling for more consistent and coherent early preparation for future occupations and to observe that “since the child must be prepared for the function he will one day serve, education and instruction – at

least from a certain age – cannot remain the same for all subjects.” (Durkheim 2009, p. 54) The point of specialization, says Durkheim, “is being established at an ever-earlier age” (ibidem).<sup>5</sup>

Our expectations, however, are confounded. On the contrary, though, Dewey is unhappy that manual work in schools, this *learning through work* is viewed as early *preparation of young people for an occupation*. Naturally, he says, it is wrong to underestimate the worth of general preparation for a future vocation, but the work in school that is described here involves much more than simply the occupations of young people who are supposed to be preparing themselves for manual work. Education is not solely about gaining “better technical skill as cooks, seamstresses, or carpenters” (Dewey 1959, p. 42). Where chambers of commerce, crafts, and trades in Slovenia and the European Union as a whole would see salvation, Dewey sees a problem.

“We must conceive of work in wood and metal, of weaving, sewing, and cooking, as methods of life not as distinct studies.” (Ibidem, p. 39) *Significantly more important than the mastery of concrete skills* in this type of instruction is “*their social significance, as types of the processes by which society keeps itself going*” (ibidem, emphasis added). For Dewey, the processes of work replace the disappearing process of socialization of the child, who in the family, through work and through life, almost incidentally formed the habits, behaviors, knowledge, and connections that the community needed for its survival. Consequently, school must fill this role. Activities like sewing, spinning, and woodworking are, says Dewey, a mechanism, a way to acquaint children with the selected “necessities of community life” (ibidem). The America of his day needs not only individualism, but the feeling created by “a busy kitchen in which a group of children are actively engaged in the preparation of food.” (Ibidem, p. 39) If the mere absorption of facts and truths is “so exclusively individual an affair that it tends very naturally to pass into selfishness” (ibidem, p. 40), “where active work is going on all this is changed” (ibidem). The school gains the chance to affiliate itself with life, to “become the child’s habitat,” (ibidem, p. 41) an environment in which the child “learns through directed living; instead of being only a place to learn lessons having an abstract and remote reference to some possible living to be done in the future.” (Ibidem)

In this way Dewey posits the school as “a miniature community, an embryonic society” through “active occupation” (ibidem). In 1899 Dewey thus places work as the foundation of the “New Education.” Not, as in Durkheim for example, above all as preparation of the individual for an occupation (although even in Durkheim it is never merely a matter of vocational education in its present sense), for Dewey school operates *as a medium, as a process of socialization*, as the environment in which young people become socialized. Here they learn that which can no longer be expected from the family, to which the process of accustoming children to com-

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<sup>5</sup> Comparisons of the ideas of Dewey and his French contemporary Émile Durkheim will also appear at other points in the text. By drawing attention to possible comparisons, we are pointing to the possibility of further paralleling the conceptualizations of the relationship between work, school, and democracy in two countries, on two continents, and in two outstanding authors dealing with the social dimension of education.

munity life through spinning, cooking, work in wood and metal, etc., bade farewell when the process of production moved definitively from the home to the factory.

This work is not, however, just any activity. We can actually *only talk indirectly about work as an activity which obtains resources for life*. In the case of the occupations followed in the school, “the aim is not the economic value of the products, but the development of social power and insight.” (Ibidem, p. 42) “It is this liberation from narrow utilities,” says Dewey, that allows the school to make these practical activities “allies of art and centers of science and history” (ibidem).

When we see boys and girls aged 10 to 13 engaged in sewing and weaving and look at this activity from the standpoint of preparation for a vocation which the majority of them will never actually hold, it makes little sense, but if we look at it from another side we find that these activities give children the chance to “follow the progress of mankind in history” (ibidem, p. 43). For example, weaving offers students a wealth of opportunities to learn about materials (chemistry and biology), possible ways to work them and subsequent means of processing (physics, mechanics, and technology), and actual processing methods; they experience the logic and logistics of the process and the relations within the production group through history and in different parts of the world. With this *shift of intent*, Dewey develops – as he had done earlier in *My Pedagogic Creed* – the principle of passing from what is familiar to the child (such as activities that are part of his or her environment) to the level of “more formal subjects” (Dewey 1897, Article Three). In general, activities in the child’s school are a springboard for entry into conceptual reflections connected to experience. Cooking is related to chemistry, all the way down to molecules and atoms, while on the other hand botany does not treat plants “simply as food, but [reveals] all their adaptations to the social life of man.” (Dewey 1959, p. 83) In short, in an environment where the field of activities is not required to achieve norms in the production of useful value and also bring profit, work *transforms into a subject of insight*, study, and common learning or socialization.

In light of these views, it would appear that Dewey would not have approved of the conceptualization of the school as an activity to support production (and, by extension, unlikely to support such initiatives as the Europe 2020 strategy). Although at first glance it seems to us that his connecting of education to work will lead to agreement with the conception whereby discussion of the future is subordinate to the logic of “more jobs and better lives” (Europe ... 2010, p. 3), and that the way to achieve this is through smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (ibidem), a repeated reading shows that Dewey is not going in this direction.

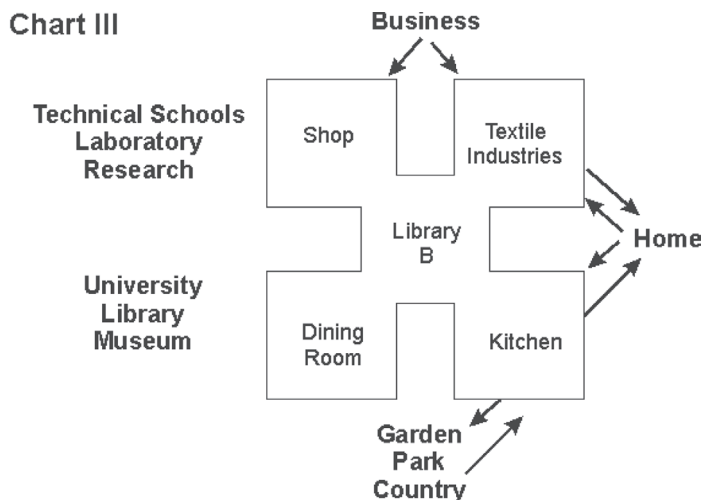


Figure 1: Chart III (Dewey 1959, p. 81)

In the centre of the school, which he is determined to connect to the home, he places the library.

In this configuration, the library connects the school to the world around it. Work in the textile room and the wood and metal shops are brought together with the kitchen and the dining room, gaining “meaning and liberal value” (Dewey 1959, pp. 81–82). Dewey clearly does not support simple justifications of vocational education and education for work. Indeed, Dewey himself concludes “if the four corners represent practice, the interior represents the theory of the practical activities.” (Ibidem, p. 82) How could it be otherwise, wonder the advocates of the vocationally oriented school. They would claim that this is precisely what they themselves are defending. But not for long. Dewey ceases to be an argument for them and instead becomes a problem as soon as the next step in his thinking is revealed: “In other words, the object of these forms of practice in the school is not found chiefly in themselves, or in the technical skill of cooks, seamstresses, carpenters and masons, but in their connection, on the social side, with the life without.” (Ibidem)

We may thus provisionally conclude that *Dewey’s resting of the school on work is oriented more towards pedagogy than to production*. Moreover, he explicitly sidelines production within the physical structure of the school. He is interested in the integrative role of the school – its incorporation into a life that modern children would not otherwise receive – are losing sight because of the shift of production from the home to the factory – and a shift away from the traditional role of school as a passive institution.



*Active learning as a journey not a destination*

On this point he is inflexible. At the level of pedagogy, education must break from its tradition that demands the child to “leave his mind behind, because there is no way to use it in the school.” (Ibidem, p. 82) When education limits itself to the old Jesuit approach to teaching and learning, it lapses behind times that are pragmatic and interested in the concrete. In his principles, Dewey represents the rationality of the new age, the pragmatic rationality of an America that calls for the establishment of schools that will manage children's time and potentials effectively. Here he coincides with the position of the emerging middle class, which expects a school that will be permeated with the interests that establish the points of the new hegemony.

Similarly to Durkheim (cf. Durkheim 2009, pp. 169–184), Dewey draws attention to the importance of science, which is trying to obtain a suitable place in the school curriculum. “Under present conditions, all activity, to be successful, has to be directed somewhere and somehow by the scientific expert – it is case of applied science.” (Dewey 1959, p. 45) Science is not limited to the production of things; rather, scientific insights should become “indispensable instrument[s] of free and active participation in modern life” (ibidem).

To this end, Dewey believes the school should shape opportunities for the scientific management of the individual and social trajectories, encouraging a more insular focus. The activity of the individual must have “meaning to himself” (ibidem); only this action enables a democratic society. For example, a few centuries before, learning was monopolized and quite literally a “class matter” (ibidem, p. 46). Today, however, as a direct result of the industrial revolution, this has changed. Printing made books and newspapers readily available, the locomotive enabled travel that shrank the world. “Learning has been put into circulation (...), knowledge is no longer an immobile solid; it has been liquefied.” (Ibidem, pp. 46–47) Society has finally gone beyond the world in which some are born to know and others are born to use the knowledge of the former and turn it into life. Through the industrial revolution, knowledge is “actively moving in all the currents of society itself” (ibidem, p. 47).

Such a change in view, however, also required a change in the attitude towards education. Those who deprecate the introduction of practical training, or training through work, on the grounds that it tends towards the “production of specialists” (ibidem) are mistaken. Dewey argues the opposite; he felt that education at his time was “highly specialized, one-sided and narrow (...) an education almost entirely dominated by the mediaeval conception of learning. It is something which appeals for the most part simply to the intellectual aspect of our natures, our desire to learn, to accumulate information, and to get control of the symbols of learning; not to our impulses and tendencies to make, to do, to create, to produce, whether in the form of utility or of art.” (Ibidem) Such simplified approach to education also divided society into “cultured people and workers” (ibidem). While training for the profession of learning is regarded as a “type of culture, as a liberal education, that of a mechanic, a musician, a lawyer, a doctor, a farmer, a merchant, or

a railroad manager is regarded as purely technical and professional.” (Ibidem, p. 48) By persisting in this way, the school consolidates labeling, stigmatizing, and dividing people in a society in which, for “the great majority of human beings[,] the distinctively intellectual interest is not dominant.” (Ibidem)

Like Durkheim, Dewey is convinced that the majority of people have “the so-called practical impulse and disposition” (ibidem). Here, his observations and reflections coincide with the prevailing educational views of his time.

But only for a moment. While sharing their conviction that the majority regard the school above all as “a practical tool with which to get bread and butter enough to eke out a restricted life” (ibidem), he points out that it is the task of the school to address this population. “If we were to conceive our educational end and aim in a less exclusive way, if we were to introduce into educational processes the activities which appeal to those whose dominant interest is to do and to make, we should find the hold of the school upon its members to be more vital, more prolonged, containing more of culture.” (Ibidem)

In this way Dewey challenges the then fashionable dismissal of difficult questions about the relationship between school and society (including the economy) with the label of neoliberal anti-intellectualism and the subordination of the school to the undemanding mental operations of industrial societies and the consumerism related to it.

A condemnation of his pragmatism would only serve for a polemic. For the purposes of a discussion,<sup>6</sup> on the other hand, it would be entirely unproductive and would not achieve the concept that the author develops in the context of his reflections on pragmatism. Jackson points out that it is no coincidence that Dewey establishes a difference between pragmatism and practicality. Practicality requires that every doctrine and theory prove its validity by verifying “consequences of any proposition (...) , provided, of course, that those consequences are not just imagined but are the result of action taken in accordance with the proposition itself.” (Jackson 2004, p. 59) The truth of assumptions, their actuality, will thus always only be verifiable by their future realization. Concrete events will show whether conceptualizations and activities performed on their basis have contributed for the “betterment of humankind in general and of the individual in particular” (ibidem, p. 60).

Dewey's principled commitment to his conceptualization of education – the connection of the school to contemporary life and the demands to adapt schools to contemporary life – reveals that it is simply not possible to reduce his ideas to the pejorative treatment of the school stigmatized by instrumentalism and utili-

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<sup>6</sup> For the difference between a polemic and a debate or discussion, see *Polemics, Politics and Problematisations* – the interview given by Foucault to Rabinow in 1984. “It's true that I don't like to get involved in polemics. If I open a book and see that the author is accusing an adversary of “infantile leftism” I shut it again right away. That's not my way of doing things; I don't belong to the world of people who do things that way. I insist on this difference as something essential: a whole morality is at stake, the one that concerns the search for truth and the relation to the other. [...] In the serious play of questions and answers, in the work of reciprocal elucidation, the rights of each person are in some sense immanent in the discussion. [...] The polemicist , on the other hand, [...] relies on a legitimacy that his adversary is by definition denied.” (Foucault in Rabinow 1984)

tarianism. Although he is convinced that a child's inability "to utilize the experiences he gets outside the school" within the school itself and "to apply in daily life what he is learning at school" (Dewey 1959, p. 78) reveals the great weakness of the school, he points out that though there should be "*an organic connection between the school and business life, it is not meant that the school is to prepare the child for any particular business.*" (Ibidem, emphasis added) Thus, just as his first lecture pointed out the essentially different natures of typical activities of sewing, weaving, metalworking, woodworking, etc., in the processes of production and education, in the third lecture he surprisingly defends a particular type of connection between school and business life. To Dewey, the school should enable a "natural connection of the everyday life of the child with the business environment about him" (ibidem). Understanding "the bank as a factor in modern life... what it does, and how it does it" (ibidem, p. 79) is logical and necessary. It is only in this context, in his opinion, that "relevant arithmetical processes would have some meaning – quite in contradistinction to the time-absorbing and mind-killing examples in percentage, partial payments, etc." (Ibidem) The school must therefore be capable of incorporating into its curriculum contents which, while they are not the subject of a direct production process, nevertheless enable understanding, the logic of the course of individual lives, and the structuring of the social as a whole. They enable us to understand and to live in the present and reduce the need to remain with particular remnants of the past. Persevering with them, which experts in individual subjects favor as an element of "preserving mental discipline" in the young population, evidently troubles him.<sup>7</sup>

Analyzing some elements of Dewey's 1899 concept reveals that he did not belong among those who felt that education needed to be directly involved in preparation for production. His requirement for the interweaving of school into daily life and, with it, occupations, is less simple. Connecting Dewey's conceptualizations to their time often leads us too rapidly to the conclusion that we are dealing with a simplified economic progressivism aimed only at "knowledge for work," or even merely work as a source of knowledge.

At the level of fundamental conceptualizations (less at the level of the conceptualization of concrete strategies), the author is significantly closer to Durkheim's preoccupation with developing an adequate connection of school to society as a whole. He also favors establishing rationality in education that will contribute to bringing the affirmed entitlement of individuals to personal choices closer to actual choices. Below we shall present selected elements of his conception of the contemporary school.

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<sup>7</sup> For the entry of contents in schools, see Miłosz (1997) and Gaber (2000).

*On listening, uniformity, and the center of activities*

In his second lecture, while discussing the relationship between school and the life of the child, Dewey introduces what appear to be his two best-known theses of his pedagogical “doctrine”. He develops them in an environment that for us is barely comprehensible: a society marked by industrial progress and the last days of a vanishing non-capitalist world. In this context, the “old” is represented by the school, which is changing from an institution for the chosen few into a school that is genuinely universal and obligatory. The old type of school, which has its roots in the colleges of the Jesuits and is oriented towards listening, must change into a school in which the child is active – this is the first thesis. The second thesis concerns the issue of the centre of gravity of teaching. The “old education” locates the centre of activities in the school “outside the child.”

Dewey admits that in the course of his presentation of the old type of school he may have “exaggerated somewhat in order to make plain the typical points of the old education.” (Dewey 1959, p. 52) Describing his method as “exaggeration” is still an understatement. Even in terms of architecture and organization, he presents the old school as a place in which “there shall be as little moving room as possible” in the classrooms; classrooms are full of “desks almost all of the same size, with just space enough to hold books, pencils and paper.” (Ibidem, pp. 50–51) As such, classrooms do not allow anything other than “listening” and, through their very layout, they prevent children from “working,” or more accurately, being active (cf. *ibidem*). When we are dealing with a concept of the school in which “the workshop, the laboratory, the materials, the tools with which the child may construct, create and actively inquire (...) have been for the most part lacking” (*ibidem*, p. 51), *the school is transformed into an institution for controlling the masses*. The new school would have to do quite the opposite. When children are allowed to be active, “they individualise themselves; they cease to be a mass, and become the intensely distinctive beings that we are acquainted with out of school.” (*Ibidem*, p. 50)

For Dewey, the new school must be organized so *learning is not merely abstract* and unconnected to the everyday reality of the child. The “ideal school” should generalise what would ordinarily happen in a family in which “the parent is intelligent enough” (*ibidem*, p. 53). The child should learn through “the social converse and constitution of the family” (*ibidem*). In the course of conversation “statements are made, inquiries arise, topics are discussed, and the child continually learns” (*ibidem*). The child participates in family activities and “gets habits of industry, order and regard for the rights and ideas of others and the fundamental habit of subordinating his activities to the general interest of the household.” (*Ibidem*) Alongside these engagements, “the life of the child would extend out of doors to the garden, surrounding fields and forests. He would have his excursions, his walks and talks, in which the larger world out of doors will open to him” (*ibidem*). Education through work and with work, with life, was in Dewey’s view the best school.

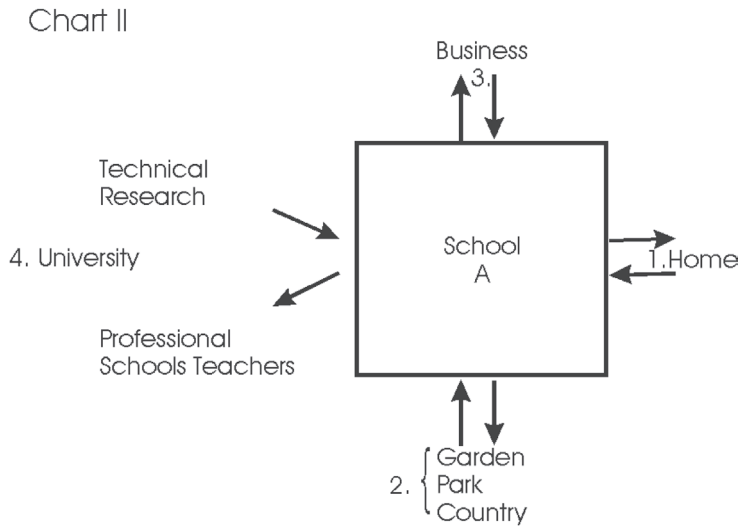


Figure 2: Chart II (Dewey 1959, p. 77)

*The child at the center, experience at the centre, democracy as a goal?*

The problem, however, was that such a family no longer existed, or more accurately, it is no longer possible to count on “ideal homes” providing all of the above. School could fill that void, though, by doing what the ideal family naturally did. “Now, if we organize and generalize all of this, we have the ideal school. There is no mystery about it, no wonderful discovery of pedagogy or educational theory.” (Ibidem) Nothing, nothing at all, says Dewey. How anxious he is to conserve, to replicate the conditions of the former community even at a time of an explosion of the social dimension, is evident from his insistence that the school should be an “enlarged ideal home” (ibidem, p. 53).

During this process, the school should prepare for or build on interdependent yet distinct entities such as home, job, university, and environment (nature).

This line also incorporates the notion of the child-centred school, his most notorious pedagogical concept and, frequently, the point at which people depart from Dewey’s line of thinking.<sup>8</sup> There is a tendency to forget that the author makes this choice when he seeks a basis to serve as the starting point of the school.

The child comes to school from a family that can no longer provide a coherent process of socialization, but the physical home itself, with its kitchen, living room, and what remains of its workshops, still represents the child’s experience and offers a possible beginning for inclusion in a reflection on the present. The reflection should move between the directly experienced materiality of the present and, gradually, its temporally and spatially removed moments. It is clear from Dewey’s

<sup>8</sup> Contemporary discussions tend to ignore that “the famous centring of education on the child is not an end in itself and should only be used in specific circumstances.” (Blais et al. 2008, p. 227)

Chart III (*figure 1*, see above) that the school should, above all, be concerned with socialization in a new society where, with the transfer of work outside the family, the father must abandon the latter for long periods in order to earn a living.

The need for the fundamental elements of socialization (familiarization with the basic elements of the world) goes hand in hand with the growing demand for preparation that will enable individuals to understand the complexity and abstractness of the world of industry and production, an increasingly accessible outward environment thanks to increased mobility, and, above all, the different social structures that appeared against a background of movements from the village to the town and emerged from the concentration of labour in industrial centres. *The child-centered focus of Dewey's pedagogical approach* should, above all, be understood as *an attempt to enter the process of mass instruction at a point that offers a greater possibility of success.*

The effectiveness of the school was greatly limited because, in the space of a few decades, it had to convert a mass of differences that for individuals, including teachers, was difficult to comprehend into a “new commonality.” How to approach an infinite mass of people who are, furthermore, very different (in terms of ethnic origin, religion, language, culture) and convinced of the rightness of their view, which at the same time is the only one that they have truly experienced? To begin with the individual, the special, would be inconceivable for the system, precisely because of the dizzying number of differences. Conversion, or, in a sense, normalization, of the “singularity of the local, the particular, the familial” was, in the opinion of the school, and in line with the policies of that time, most easily achieved through subordination of all “to the common” – to the same for all. Just as in France the *petites patries* were becoming the *grande patrie*, the United States was becoming a “melting pot” (cf. Chanet 1996).

Dewey, despite his commitment to the individual, was not against the formation of the common. He accepted it as a necessity. He did, however, object to the methods used to reach a sense of commonality. In his view, achieving common habits, values, and knowledge should occur through seizing the particular rather than imposing abstract ideas. Dewey found that the United States had gained a school in which there was “a certain amount – a fixed quantity – of ready-made results and accomplishments to be acquired by all children alike in a given time.” (Dewey 1959, p. 52) To this end, national curricula were developed, setting out educational content and desired academic milestones from elementary school to college. Here, in Dewey's opinion, the curriculum designers modeled France's bad example too closely, where the educational authorities boasted that they had achieved such a level of coordination in the process of ensuring uniformity that “thousands of children were studying at a given hour (...) just such a lesson in geography.” (Ibidem)

By contrast, instead of blindly making uniform lesson plans, Dewey felt it was necessary to accept that when a child enters school, he is already “intensely active, and the question of education is the question of taking hold of his activities, of giving them direction.” (Ibidem, p. 54)

Dewey has no illusions about this. He addressed the adage “if you begin with the child's ideas, impulses and interests, all so crude, so random and scattering, so little refined or spiritualized, how is he going to get the necessary discipline, culture and information” (ibidem) by encouraging direction for students. Like Durkheim, who rejects Tolstoy's belief that children can simply be left to their impulses, interests, and ideas, Dewey suggests that it is possible to “direct the child's activities, giving them exercise along certain lines, and can thus lead *up to the goal which logically stands at the end of the path followed.*” (Ibidem, emphasis added) “Education (...) must in fact take place as supervised socialisation, animated by the intellectual vitality of the child, who is placed at the centre of the curriculum and channelled towards the specific goals of society.” (Bulle 2000, p. 192)

Logically, a child's path to reaching a goal presupposes “running up against obstacles, becoming acquainted with materials, exercising ingenuity, patience, persistence, [and] alertness, [this process] of necessity involves discipline – ordering of power – and supplies knowledge.” (Dewey 1959, pp. 54–55) The above takes place in a spectrum that goes from experiments, via observation, recording (memory), to imagination. With a belief in life and in “the life of the child (...) then will all history and science become instruments of appeal and materials of culture to his imagination, and through that to the richness and orderliness of his life.” (Ibidem, p. 70) In short, nature and society must be let into the schoolroom, and culture shall be the “*democratic password*” (ibidem, emphasis added).

## Work, school, and democracy fifteen years later?

### *We can no longer manage without school in complex societies*

Dewey also deals with the questions of work and the school over fifteen years later in *Democracy and Education*, “which represents Dewey's most important work in the field of the philosophy of education” (Bulle 2000, p. 193). According to Hansen, this work is “many books in one” (Hansen 2006, p. 184). It is neither a series of lectures nor a polemic over the affirmation of the concept of “new education” in his experimental school, therefore making it less controversial. Limiting inquiry to Hansen's notion of many books in one, we shall limit ourselves here, despite the fact that the question of activity, experience and education appears in the more or less all the 'books of this book', to four chapters in particular.<sup>9</sup> Even in these, we shall merely verify whether the author's views with regard to the work/school relationship have changed since 1899. We are particularly interested in the following chapters: “Education As a Social Function” (2), “Play and Work in the Curriculum” (15), “Labor and Leisure” (19), and “Vocational Aspects of Education” (23).

Human beings, like all living creatures, must renew their own physical existences. In the case of human beings, however, “with the renewal of physical

<sup>9</sup> The work is divided into twenty-six chapters.

existence goes (...) the recreation of beliefs, ideals, hopes, happiness, misery and practices.” (Dewey 1968, p. 2) The latter takes place through education, which “in its broadest sense, is the means of this social continuity of life” (ibidem).

Society has two roles here. It enables the continuation of individual life while simultaneously, through education, it also continues and preserves itself. Society, just like biological life, has to reproduce itself. In the case of society, reproduction takes place through “communication of habits of doing, thinking and feeling from the older to the younger” (ibidem, p. 3). In fact, human young are “so immature that if they were left to themselves, without the guidance and succor of others, they could not acquire the rudimentary abilities necessary for physical existence.” (Ibidem, p. 4) This radically Kantian statement places the social constitution of the human being far ahead of his nature, yet it is also necessary recognize the references – frequent in Dewey – to the nature of the human being and the child. Sooner or later, if he remains faithful to his statements on the importance of education and society, he may have an entirely different (social) nature of nature in mind.

If human beings are to form a community or society – actually not something they do of their own nature – what they must share are “aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge – a common understanding – like-mindedness as the sociologists say” (ibidem).

The unambiguous social nature of the human being as a human being is readily reflected in *Democracy and Education*’s opening. For the humanization of generation after generation, however, education is of extraordinary importance. Without it, the human being would not exist, and even the species would disappear in the quicksand of nature. Education is therefore, in the first place, the transfer of the “achievements” of previous generations to new generations. But in what way; through what media and with what purpose?

Dewey asserts that “any social arrangement that remains vitally social, or vitally shared, is educative.” (Ibidem, p. 6) Thus not only is a society dependent on education, all life that is social also forms people; it educates them. *For the child, where he is born and in what kind of community he grows up is of extraordinary importance.* “The way our group or class does things tends to determine the proper objects of attention.” (Ibidem, p. 17) A family of musicians will awaken and encourage entirely specific impulses in a child – because “some kinds of participation in the life of those with whom the individual is connected are inevitable.” (Ibidem, p. 16)

And yet, *it is evident that in complex societies there is a need for schools*, “a more formal kind of education – that of direct tuition or schooling” (ibidem, p. 7). Only “undeveloped social groups” have little formal teaching and training. Therefore, school has many crucial tasks:

1. It has to “provide a simplified environment. It selects the features which are fairly fundamental and capable of being responded to by the young.” (Ibidem, p. 20) The young are supposed to familiarize themselves progressively with these features so that the level of insight already attained is a means of gaining insight into what is more complicated.



2. In determining what features the school will transmit, not only is there a process of selection according to the criterion of what is fundamental, but it is the business of the school environment to “*eliminate, so far as possible, the unworthy features of the existing environment from influence upon mental habitudes.*” (Ibidem, emphasis added)
3. In this way, it is the school's job “to see to it that each individual gets the opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which he was born, and to come into living contact with a broader environment.” (Ibidem)

A rapid glance at the functions of the school is enough to show that, *just as at the turn of the century, even during World War I, its function is normalization.* Dewey, like Durkheim, believes that the school will be capable of distinguishing, *neutrally – positively*, the important from the unimportant, and the good from the bad, and will thus offer all who come from groups with limited cultural capital the chance to enter the world of a better future. Or, as he himself puts it, “[a]ny education given by a group tends to socialize its members, but the quality and value of the socialization depends upon the habits and aims of the group.” (Ibidem, p. 83) Here Dewey, unlike Durkheim, sees school as an institution that forms a broad spectrum of values that are common to citizens. For the formation of values that are actually common, it is very important that “all the members of the group (...) have an equable opportunity to receive and to take from others. There must be a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences. Otherwise, the *influences which educates some into masters, educate others into slaves.*” (Ibidem, p. 84, emphasis added) Even without “formal” slavery, the division of labor that is demanded by efficiency reduces work to a “mechanical routine.” It does this because it does not ensure that workers see the “technical, intellectual and social relationships involved in what they do.” (Ibidem, p. 85)

Dewey's view of the division of labor concurs with Plato's conviction that each individual should engage in those activities “for which he has a natural equipment,” and the task of the school is to “discover this equipment to its possessor and train him for its effective use.” (Ibidem, p. 90) At the same time, however, he also points out – and this is of key importance for our discussion – that Plato artificially divided “individuals and their original powers into a few sharply marked-off classes” (ibidem). To Dewey, it was clear that “original capacities are indefinitely numerous and variable.” The degree of a society's democratization is the extent to which “social organization means utilization of the specific and variable qualities of individuals, not stratification by classes.” (Ibidem, p. 90–91) The task of school and of society, particularly of democratic society, is to “retain all the youth under educational influences until they are equipped to be masters of their own economic and social careers” (ibidem, p. 98), thus permanently linking school and democracy together.

As Chaniel points out, Dewey “is actually defending a well-structured theory of the coextensiveness of the fields of education and democracy.” (Chaniel 2006, p. 207) The connection between education and democracy is just as developed in

*Democracy and Education* as it was over 15 years earlier, even with reference to the same author. On this occasion, too, there are of course some caveats. When education becomes mass education, there is also a risk that formal instruction can become “remote and dead – abstract and bookish” (Dewey 1968, p. 8). To Dewey, democracy does not in fact need education simply as an instrument to provide, particularly at a time when the principle of “external authority” has been substituted by “voluntary disposition and interest” (ibidem, p. 87), or the necessary insights into and understanding of events in society as a political entity. Rather, a “deeper explanation” exists for the connection and the concern for the quality and reach of education. “A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.” (Ibidem) Accordingly, education is a type of a gift, from society to the individual, and will free “individual capacity in a progressive growth directed to social aims” (ibidem, p. 98). In this way, education enables a gift from the individual to society, consistent with Dewey’s 1916 formulation of the relationship between education and school as “a reciprocal gift, an alliance between the individual and society.” (Chanial 2006, p. 208)

#### *What about preparation for employment and work?*

Judging from the conclusion to the chapter that deals with aims in the field of education, Dewey’s positions have not changed significantly on this point either. If anything, Dewey merely sharpened his orientation. For example, he felt that, in education, externally imposed aims are “responsible for the emphasis put upon the notion of preparation for a remote future and for rendering the work of both teacher and pupil mechanical and slavish.” (Dewey 1968, p. 110) To this end, the highest aim of education is education itself; Dewey wrote that “*education is literally and all the time its own reward*” (ibidem, emphasis added), meaning that “no alleged study or discipline is educative unless it is worthwhile in its own immediate having.” (Ibidem, p. 109) We may conclude from the above that Dewey remained faithful to his commitment to a more than merely instrumental orientation of education. He advocated a broad education – even in the case of an occupation such as that of a farmer. For example, when he discusses the different opportunities of people in different occupations, he uses the farmer to show that an individual with a more general education “will see a greater number of possible starting places, and a greater number of ways of getting at what he wants to do.” (Ibidem)

This of course does not mean that he has renounced his views on the importance of activity and starting with experience in the process of education. It would be wrong to conclude from the above statements that Dewey now favours teaching which is separate from life and the presence of the child. In *Democracy and Education* he evaluates the success of the demand for “child-centeredness,” finding that experience has shown that “when children have a chance at physical activities which bring their natural impulses into play, going to school is a joy, management is less of a burden, and learning is easier.” (Ibidem, p. 194) School is a place in which “play and work correspond, point for point,” (ibidem, p. 195)

and it should “set up an environment in which play and work shall be conducted with reference to facilitating desirable mental and moral growth.” (Ibidem, p. 196) Accordingly, Dewey champions both the inner purpose of education and *active learning*, talking explicitly about the importance of play in educating generations of students to maintain a system of democratic education. If it was once possible to direct education to books, in a time of mass education (the socialization of reproduction), it is necessary to understand that “the older type of book work is far from having the force it used to possess” (ibidem, p. 196). The purpose of play and work in the school is again underlined, with an ultimate aim towards “desirable mental and moral growth” (ibidem). Dewey takes this interconnection and the commitment to it as a device with a precisely defined aim. For him, the introduction of games and manual work is “not enough”; “[e]verything depends upon the way in which they are employed.” (Ibidem) The task of the teacher is not, then, to use play to ensure that the child is not overburdened too early. The artfulness of the teaching profession is, by beginning with the known and the desirable, to lead as many children as possible to “intellectual results and the forming of a socialized disposition” (ibidem, p. 197). Just as he had done fifteen years previously, Dewey announced that in the case of learning through play and work, factors such as manual skill, technical efficiency, and immediate satisfaction, “together with preparation for future usefulness (...) shall be subordinated to education” (ibidem) for more demanding intellectual results and socialized dispositions. At first glance this claim seems almost incredible. At a time of frenzied industrialization, the introduction of Taylorism, and the successes of big industry, Dewey ostensibly states that education is supposed to disregard usefulness?

A commitment to education which must offer satisfaction in itself, find sense in itself, is only understandable when we understand Dewey's concept of the vocation. A vocation is not reduced to the activities that people perform in order to earn a living, nor is it limited to the performance of physical work with a low level of prestige. A vocation means “nothing but such a direction of life activities as renders them perceptibly significant to a person, because of the consequences they accomplish, and also useful to his associates.” (Ibidem, p. 307, emphasis added) A vocation is connected neither to a career nor to leisure, but denotes a *mode of active life*. Vocation should not be limited to “the occupations where immediately tangible commodities are produced, but also [include] the notion that vocations are distributed in an exclusive way, one and only one to each person.” (Ibidem) Individual occupations are thus not limited to the sphere of the production of goods or things. Human vocations extend into the field of concern for his fellow-man and concern for the public good. Plato, says Dewey, is right when he asserts that it is the business of education to discover “*what each person is good for, and to train him to mastery of that mode of excellence.*” (Ibidem, p. 309, emphasis added) He (Plato) is however wrong that “the scope of vocations [is] socially needed” (ibidem). By limiting the needs of society and the range of occupations available to the individual, he overlooks “the infinite variety of capacities found in different individuals” (ibidem).

Education, then, must overcome the old, historically conditioned dualism of education for “culture” and education for “usefulness” – for the performance of the useful tasks that are generally necessary for life. The task of the school – in part because by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it is already possible to observe the incredible fragmentation of labour in the context of Taylorism, and in part because the importance of machines for the performance of vital mechanical work is already becoming evident – is thus not to prepare some for “knowledge for the sake of knowledge” and others for “mechanical occupations”.

The problem faced by “education in a democratic society is to do away with the dualism [of education for culture and for mechanical work – S. G.] and to construct a course of studies which makes thought a guide of free practice for all and which makes leisure a reward of accepting responsibility for service, rather than a state of exemption from it.” (Ibidem, p. 261) In accordance with the conception of education and, within it, vocational education, Dewey also consistently opposed the introduction of special vocational schools in the United States. . “He feared, above all, that the kind of vocational education favored by businessmen (...) was a form of class education which would make the schools a more efficient agency for the reproduction of an undemocratic society.” (Westbrook 1993, p. 175)

## Conclusion

With his support for manual work (including sewing, spinning, metalwork and woodwork) in schools, Dewey appears at first glance to favor the subordination of education to labor. Contrary to expectations, however, he structures his reflections on school, activity, work, and society in the opposite direction.

Both at the time of the lectures published as *The School and Society* (1899) and at the time of the publication of his best-known work on the theme of education, *Democracy and Education* (1916), he remains faithful to his commitment to a broad conception of education that will develop in all who receive it the capacity to live in and to shape a democratic society. Dewey’s school begins with the direct experience of the child and incorporates into the learning process the experience of relatively simple operations (sewing, weaving, metalwork, woodwork, etc.). Here – very explicitly in 1916 – he advocates the *inclusion of play and work* in the learning process. His goal is clear; *it is the task of school to prepare the greatest number of pupils, irrespective of their social origins, for understanding the working process on the one hand and for active inclusion in the democratic life of society on the other.* Both are necessary for a life in which “thought [is] a guide of free practice” and leisure is “a reward of accepting responsibility for service, rather than a state of exemption from it.” (Dewey 1968, p. 261)

In 1913, in the midst of debates on public support for vocational education and the introduction of special *vocational colleges*, Dewey *strongly opposed their foundation.* “And some employers of labor would doubtless rejoice to have schools supported by public taxation supply them with additional food for their mills.” (Dewey 1979, p. 102) Everyone should oppose the separation of “training of em-

ployees from training for citizenship, training of intelligence and character from training for narrow industrial efficiency.” (Ibidem)

Dewey was explicit and clear; he disfavored specific vocational education because it disproportionately affected citizens from lower socioeconomic groups, he placed education for life in a democratic society – which should also include education that enables an individual to perform an occupation. The 1917 *National Vocational Education Act* (commonly known as the Smith-Hughes Act) tipped the scale in favor of special vocational education. The Federal Government supported this form of education in the name of the drive for greater efficiency in the US economy.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For more on the debate surrounding the introduction of vocational colleges, which were soon to include 32% of the American student population, and on Dewey's discussions with Snedden, see Westbrook 1993, pp. 174–176.

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