

On Schooling and Democracy: Thoughts on the Relevance of John Dewey

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There are no doubt many issues and problems with which contemporary American education has to grapple, but it may be that none of them are as significant, because of its extensive ramifications, as the problem of the relation between schooling and the requirements of a genuinely democratic society. ¹ Many of the central concerns with which the problem of the relation of schooling to democracy deals have been dealt with many times: the “requirements” which a democratic society has of its schools; the historical background of the development of the common school and its place in democratic life; the tension existing in contemporary struggles over the character of schooling and education; the appropriate curriculum of a course in a democratic “civics”; the relation of schools to their communities; the problems of race and ethnicity in schools; the place of vocations and vocational training in schooling; the relation of the interests of private business to democratic schooling; and, finally, the possibility of schools being a source of democratic social change. I will not try to rehearse the ways these many thorny problems have been handled. I will instead focus on a couple of the questions which concern the nature of democratic culture, and consider the problem of schools in relation to it.

It would be appropriate to begin by saying that contemporary schooling fails to do what democracy requires of it, and that the contemporary rhetoric about education does not understand this failure to develop a democratic education. Actually, to ascribe the inaccuracies of the current rhetoric to a simple failure to understand is probably too generous a reading, since it is far more likely that those in leadership positions do not see the problem because they do not want to see the problem, or that they see it perfectly well, but have become adept at obscuring it. We probably need to say something to the effect that the demands of a genuine democracy differ so extensively

from our current circumstances, in society generally and in education in particular, that any useful and forward looking approach to the issue will have to be a fairly radical one. Perhaps the most profound American figure to have argued persistently for a radically democratic conception of education and society as a whole is John Dewey. I often think that many of us who appreciate Dewey's work fail to see just how radical his ideas are. This is not to say that Dewey is the only or in all respects the best place to look for a democratic treatment of education in modern times. Other names come to mind, the most outstanding of which is Paulo Freire. A comparison of Freire's and Dewey's ideas can make for very interesting reading, and there is a good deal in both of them that speaks to contemporary problems of education and democracy . I know of no one, for example, who has given such extended treatment of the question of what a democratically structured education might look like than has Freire. The entire dialogical process of arriving at generative themes and examining them to bring into focus pedagogically relevant material represents a kind of radically democratic education that few if any of us have even dared attempt.

However, despite the fact that the problem of schooling and democracy can and ultimately should lead us to consider Freire and others, for the purposes of this paper I will focus our discussion a bit closer to home, speaking in national terms anyway. Dewey may or may not be the most significant thinker to have concerned himself with democracy and schooling, but he is certainly at the very least one of the most important of them, and I would like to take the next few minutes to point to some of the features of Dewey's ideas about education and democracy in order to give that claim some substance.

We might begin with the observation that the criticism of contemporary education as insufficiently democratic may be moot depending on which conception of democracy and of education we are inclined to endorse. For example, if one regards democracy primarily as the legally provided opportunity to choose occasionally between candidates for political office from two or more organized par-

ties, then one might respond critics of contemporary American democracy that since American society provides such an opportunity, the criticism of the *system* as insufficiently democratic is off the mark. On this view, if there is insufficient democracy, it is simply because people do not care enough to participate, but then on this view that is their “democratic” right too, so in the end there really is no problem at all. If people want to participate they can, and if not, it is their choice. That response to the critics seems to me to be unanswerable *if* one accepts the conception of democracy on which it rests. Thus we are pushed necessarily to consider what we mean by “democracy,” or better, what we ought to mean by it. It is on just this question that I think Dewey makes one of his most important contributions.

It has become fairly commonplace among critics of American public life to refer to it as in some ways thin or “anemic,” a term which nicely captures its insubstantial and ineffectual nature. A conception of democracy wherein it means simply voting occasionally for a democrat, republican or “independent” is equally anemic in that it is completely devoid of the character of a more full blooded democracy, and is therefore unable to play the role in individual and public life which a richer conception might. Dewey thought so too, so he looked to construct a more valuable notion of what democracy might mean, and one of the places in which he does this most directly is *Democracy and Education*. First, he makes the point that democracy is not simply a political mechanism, but more importantly it is a way of life, a characteristic of social life in general, and ideally a characteristic of the individual members of that society. A democratic society is a society organized around certain principles, expectations and aspirations, and a democratic individual is a person who not only accepts those same values but is also predisposed to act on them. In his own distinctive way of speaking, Dewey says that “A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.”²

This definition already points to the traits of democracy which

distinguish it from other forms of society and ways of life. In good pragmatist fashion, Dewey does not want a conception which is simply drawn from his imagination, so to develop his idea he looks to societies to see if there are traits from which we could construct a workable notion. In any social group at all, he says, "we find some interest held in common, and we find a certain amount of interaction and cooperative intercourse with other groups. From these two traits we derive our standard."³ Every social group, in other words, requires shared interests and communicative interaction. These are necessary conditions of a society that hangs together, of a community, and Dewey defines democracy on the basis of these necessary traits. A democratic society is one which takes as its basic values the necessary conditions of social life, and which acts to deepen and promote those values. Specifically, a democracy requires and promotes "more numerous and more varied points of shared common interest...[and] freer interaction between social groups..."⁴ To put the point positively, a democracy purposefully encourages shared interests and increasingly extensive interaction and communication among individuals and groups in and beyond the society, while a democratic individual embodies and lives on the basis of those same traits. Put negatively, this conception of democracy means that any factors which tend to inhibit shared interests or communicative interaction are to that degree undemocratic.

The statement of the conception of democracy in negative terms can help us see why certain features of a society are obstacles to democracy. Dewey argued, for example, that class distinctions and divisions in a society are undemocratic precisely because they abort the pursuit of shared interests, and the same is true of racial and ethnic divisions. Whatever differences there may be in it, a democratic society will make an ongoing attempt to forge interests among individuals and groups that will bring them together rather than push them apart, that will serve to promote interaction and communication rather than impede it. Where the distinctions are necessary and in their own ways valuable, for example racial, ethnic or cultural distinctions, the democratic spirit will look for points of commonal-

ity; where the differences are not necessary, such as class differences, democracy must look to overcome them since they obstruct shared interests and communication.

A democratic community so understood, Dewey said, is “more interested than other communities have cause to be in deliberate and systematic education.”⁵ Whether such a democracy is really “more interested” than other social forms in education is not so clear, but it should be clear that such a democracy requires education of certain kinds and toward certain ends. A society that genuinely encourages shared interests and communication requires citizens who embody the same commitments. In turn, such a person requires character traits and intellectual dispositions which are conducive to such ends. A democratic individual must be able not only to want shared interests, for example, but he must also be intellectually capable both of recognizing obstacles to shared interests and of figuring out how those obstacles might be overcome. These traits require certain values as well as fairly well developed intellectual abilities, and these it is in part the role of education and schooling to develop.

This last point raises the question of the role of education in the pursuit of a more democratic society. Dewey sometimes said that it is unrealistic to expect schools to be the main agency of social change, given the many and complex factors which contribute to social difficulties. He has a point here, but it did not prevent him from saying in other places that in the long run it *is* the schools where the most systematic responses to challenges to democracy can be confronted. The reason is simply that the schools are the place where the democratic individual can be developed, possibly even in a society in which the other influential structures mitigate against democracy. That Dewey would think this is not surprising; every great theoretician of education has thought so! Plato thought that the virtuous society required an education which could produce the virtuous citizen. That is why his *Republic* is a book about education as much as anything else. Rousseau too thought that justice required an education which could produce a certain kind of person. The only way the General

Will is not oppressive is when the individual will freely accords with it, and the only sort of person for whom the individual will can accord with the General, is the natural person. Rousseau's society, in other words, can only be a society of Emiles. Along the same lines, then, Dewey's democracy, the pursuit of shared interests and ever broadening interaction and communication, requires an education which can produce individuals disposed to and capable of living a democratic life. In the end, whatever specific traits a democratic schooling must have, they will be determined by the ends which this conception of democracy establishes. Civics education, then, is not a specific part of a democratic curriculum, but instead is the end in a teleological sense; it is the theme and the purpose which binds a democratic curriculum together.

This discussion could easily go on indefinitely, so I will end by pointing to two features of our current social situation which seem to me to be among the most serious obstructions to democratic development. I take them both from Dewey. One of those social factors is the problem of class. As long as the control of the productive property of the society is concentrated in relatively few hands, and the distribution of wealth is correspondingly disparate, the shared interests and communicative interaction which democracy requires will elude us. Furthermore, as Westbrook pointed out, and as Dewey had said nearly a century ago, we can expect that those whose class interests are threatened by democratic education will try to prevent it. Dewey put it plainly enough when he said that our "ideal has to contend not only with the inertia of existing educational traditions, but also with the opposition of those who are entrenched in command of the industrial machinery, and who realize that such an educational system if made general would threaten their ability to use others for their own ends."⁶

The second general problem democratic education faces is the problem posed by nationalism and national interests. Dewey had thought that there might be a contradiction here. "Is it possible," he wondered, "for an educational system to be conducted by a national

state and yet the full social ends of the educative process not be restricted, constrained, and corrupted?" The problem, more precisely, is "with the reconciliation of national loyalty, of patriotism, with superior devotion to the things which unite men in common ends, irrespective of national political boundaries."⁷ In the end this tension will have to be resolved somehow, because we cannot do without either term of this relation. A public education which is not democratic is conducive to fascism, and a democratic education which is not public is a contradiction in terms. The narrow, parochial, and in the end stultifying limits of national, religious, racial, ethnic and gender boundaries can only be overcome when the public is committed to a social development which values the common interests and aspirations which define a democratic community.

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ENDNOTES

1. These remarks were originally given as comments on Robert Westbrook's "Public Schooling and American Democracy" at the annual meeting of the New York State Foundations of Education Association, SUNY-Cortland, April, 1995. The text has been changed somewhat to stand on its own, but some of the issues remain those which Westbrook had addressed in his paper.
2. John Dewey, Democracy and Education, The Later Works of John Dewey (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 93.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 328-329.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 104