John Dewey's School and Society Revisited

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Source: *The Elementary School Journal*, May, 1998, Vol. 98, No. 5, Special Issue: John Dewey: The Chicago Years (May, 1998), pp. 415-426

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/1002322

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Abstract

Dewey's *School and Society* offers an intriguing view of the relationship between social change and educational requirements. It is, however, not without imperfection. In this article I identify what I call the "partial truths" of Dewey's analysis. The goal is not to show where Dewey went wrong. Rather, it is to build on the legacy of his immense contribution to educational thought.

In April 1899 John Dewey delivered three lectures to a select group of parents, friends, and patrons of what was then called the University Elementary School of the University of Chicago, the school that Dewey had founded 3 years prior. He was 39 years old at the time (and would turn 40 that October) and had been at the University for 5 years. He had another 5 to go before he would leave Chicago and spend the remainder of his academic career at Columbia University in New York City.

Dewey's three lectures were published by the University of Chicago Press in November of that year (though carrying a 1900 copyright date). To them had been added a fourth piece of writing, which was described as the "stenographic report of a talk . . . somewhat revised" (1990, p. 163) that Dewey had given at a meeting of the Parents' Association of the University Elementary School in February 1899, 2 months prior to his April lectures. The small volume containing the four talks was entitled *The School and Society*.

Within months *The School and Society* began to attract a wide audience. By July 1900, less than a year after its publication, the book had gone through three press runs, bringing the total copies in print to 7,500.

The Elementary School Journal
Volume 98, Number 5

0013-5984/98/9805-0003$02.00

That number sold quickly, as have countless printings since then. I have been unable to ascertain the total number printed to date, but by now that figure has to be astronomical.

Dewey brought out a revised edition in 1915 that included a number of his educational writings from his Chicago years that had since gone out of print. In that revision he chose to omit the talk to the Parents' Association that had appeared in the original publication. In 1956 the University of Chicago Press reissued both *The School and Society* and *The Child and the Curriculum* in a single volume, the latter being another of Dewey's early educational treatises that the press had published separately. In 1990 the press issued the latest edition of the combined texts with a new Introduction and with Dewey's talk to the Parents' Association restored. All of the page references that follow are to the 1990 edition.

In this essay I will concentrate exclusively on the three lectures contained in the initial publication, overlooking all of the material that has been added since then, including the earlier talk that Dewey gave before the Parents' Association. I do so because as pieces of rhetorical writing those three 1899 essays outshine the rest. Taken together, they constitute a call to arms, whose effect on its initial audience and its early readers must certainly have been galvanizing. The three talks also fit together structurally to form a whole. In them Dewey lays forth in a coherent manner his vision of what the schools (not just the University Elementary School, but schools throughout the land) might do to improve society. He also spells out in some detail what teachers and others must do to improve the schools. The examples he uses were drawn from his own experimental school, but the principles they were intended to illustrate promised to be applicable anywhere. Small wonder that *School and Society* was a sellout from the start.

Even today those three lectures retain their appeal, as will soon be evident. To that end I first will summarize each of them in some detail, drawing on Dewey's own words where appropriate. By making the summary sufficiently detailed I hope to convey a bit of the spirit as well as the content of what was said on each of the three occasions. After that I will comment on all three lectures, focusing in particular on what I take to be a set of "partial truths" (my own term for them, and not intended as one of opprobrium) that Dewey makes use of here and there and that cause me somewhat greater unease than I would like. My goal in doing so is not to criticize Dewey. I wish instead to preserve the kernels of truth that lie embedded, as it were, within each of the partial truths that I pause to examine.

Lecture 1: The School and Social Progress

Dewey begins by gently chiding both the parents and the teachers in his audience. He tells them that he understands how wrapped up they are in the educational well-being of their own pupils and their own children. But that degree of involvement, he warns, is not enough. They must extend the scope of their concern to include children throughout the city and perhaps even the nation at large. For, as he points out: "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy" (p. 7).

The clear implication of Dewey's oft-quoted plea is that the community in his day did *not* want for all of its children what the best and wisest parent wanted for his or her own child. Some children were obviously being inadvertently left out or consciously ignored. Who might they be? Dewey did not bother naming them, but it is easy enough to identify at least a significant portion of them from what he proceeds to say. He points out that vast social changes were currently taking place in so-

ciety—the chief one being the Industrial Revolution and with it the emergence of the factory system. That change alone had already triggered the migration of countless people around the globe, causing tens of thousands of them to be "hurriedly gathered into cities from the ends of the earth" (p. 9). Chicago, as we know, was only one such gathering place; it stood in the forefront of the newly industrialized cities in this country, second only to New York in its influx of new arrivals from both rural America and abroad.

The foreign-born children of these newcomers, along with those born after each family's arrival, constituted a significant portion of those who were being poorly served by the schools and overlooked by the community at large. Many did not attend school at all; others did so only sporadically and for a relatively short time. To convey the magnitude of the problem, Dewey cited the following statistics: Of those children in school at that time, he reports, only 5% reached high school, "while more than half [left] on or before the completion of the fifth . . . grade" (p. 27). The number of children who fit those categories was already alarming and threatened to become even more so.

But the problem did not stop there. And, in fact, Dewey had little more to say about the plight of recent migrants and immigrants to the city. He focused instead on the more general phenomenon, the shift from village life to urban living that virtually *all* city dwellers, whether new arrivals or settled residents, had undergone in the not-too-distant past. He then proceeded to spell out what such a shift entailed in educational terms. He remarked on the gradual loss of community life, the disappearance of role models for city-bred children to emulate, and the absence of any meaningful work for them to perform within the family's economy. He also commented on the remoteness of physical nature for the city child, the lack of plants and animals to observe and to care for, the paucity of firsthand acquaintance with "real things and materials" (p. 11).

Dewey knew that the clock of history could not be turned back. The conditions of village life could never be reinstated in the city, of that he was well aware. He also saw that city living had advantages of its own as well as shortcomings. Among them he paused to mention "the increase in toleration, in breadth of social judgment, 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, contact with greater commercial activities" (p. 12).

The city child, in other words, was far more likely to wind up being socially sophisticated ("streetwise" as we might say today) than was her country cousin.

Yet even if some of the great advantages of village life could never be recaptured, there *were* things that could be done to compensate in part for their loss. Schools in particular, Dewey believed, held the key to a program of remediation. For example, an individual school or classroom might transform itself into "a miniature community, an embryonic society" in which student inhabitants would live and learn conjointly and cooperatively (p. 18). Within such miniaturized and protected environments students would not only discover what it meant to be valued members of a social group, they would also garner skills and knowledge that they could then take back and put to work within the families and larger social community to which they returned when the school day ended.

To give substance to his vision of what was possible, Dewey described how geography was currently being taught in his experimental school. He told how and why the enduring occupations of cooking, weaving, sewing, and carpentry had risen to prominence in the school's curriculum. He then described in some detail the students' study of how cotton and wool fiber is made. In the midst of his description and as a way

of indicating how much the students were learning, he paused to acknowledge that he himself did not know, "until the children told me, that the reason for the late development of the cotton industry as compared with the woolen is that the cotton fiber is so very difficult to free by hand from the seeds" (p. 20). The newly gained knowledge obviously pleased Dewey, but what surprised and pleased him even more was the near magical transformation of spirit and classroom atmosphere that seemed to take place "when occupations [were] made the articulating centers of school life" (p. 15). These words of his convey that surprise: "As one enters a busy kitchen in which a group of children are actively engaged in the preparation of food, the psychological difference, the change from more or less passive and inert recipiency and restraint to one of buoyant outgoing energy, is so obvious as fairly to strike one in the face. Indeed, to those whose image of the school is rigidly set the change is sure to give a shock" (p. 15).

Dewey strove to make clear that he was not advocating the introduction of manual training, shopwork, and the household arts just to keep children active and alert or to prepare them for vocations or for the practical duties of later life—though in passing he did acknowledge the worth of all of those reasons. Instead, he insisted, such activities must be introduced "as methods of living and learning, not as distinct studies" (p. 15). For Dewey this meant making the students aware of the social significance of what they were doing, helping them to see the connections between their classroom activities and what was going on in the world outside the school.

Toward the close of his first lecture Dewey returns to the theme he introduced at its beginning. The Industrial Revolution, he points out, has been accompanied by an intellectual revolution as well. With the invention of printing and of rapid means of communication and travel, literacy is no longer the exclusive possession of a privileged class. "Learning," as Dewey puts it, "has been put into circulation." "Knowledge," he says, employing a metaphor of distinctive power, "is no longer an immobile solid; it has been liquified. It is actively moving in all the currents of society itself" (p. 25).

Moreover, what counts as knowledge in the world at large is no longer restricted to the manipulation of symbols, as it once was and as it still tended to be in the schools of Dewey's day. That way of thinking, says Dewey, constitutes a "medieval" conception of learning. It needs to be replaced by something more modern and up-to-date. Educators must recognize that today "stimuli of an intellectual sort pour in upon us in all kinds of ways," not just in the form of symbols (p. 25). But old habits are slow to change. Schools, for the most part, still appeal solely "to the intellectual aspects of our natures, our desire to learn, to accumulate information, and to get control of the symbols of learning" (p. 26). They leave unaddressed "our impulses and tendencies to make, to do, to create, to produce, whether in the form of utility or of art" (p. 26).

At this point, barely a page or two before the close of his remarks, Dewey introduces a psychological dichotomy of dubious validity, yet one that countless educators have made use of in one way or another both before and since. His reason for introducing it may in part have been rhetorical. It brings his argument full circle, allowing him to conclude his lecture with a sentence that echoes his opening plea that we come to wish for all children what "the best and wisest parent wants for his own child." Yet from what is known of Dewey's sober-mindedness, I feel fairly certain that he meant what he was saying and was not just seeking a way to end his remarks with a flourish.

Dewey distinguishes between human beings for whom a "distinctively intellectual interest" is "dominant" and those for whom that is not so (p. 27). The latter, he says, constitute "the great majority of hu-

man beings" (p. 27). Instead of a dominant intellectual interest, most people have "the so-called practical impulse and disposition" (p. 27). This means that they far more enjoy "making and doing" than trafficking in matters that have to do with "the symbolic and formal." Those same proclivities among school-age youth help to explain why "by far the larger number of pupils leave school as soon as they have acquired the rudiments of learning, as soon as they have enough of the symbols of reading, writing, and calculating to be of practical use to them in getting a living" (pp. 27–28).

Here, then, is not just yet another reason for introducing carpentry, sewing, and so forth, into the curriculum. It is in many ways *the ultimate rationale* for their introduction. For as Dewey points out, "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" (p. 28). All of this prepares the way for Dewey's final, triumphant sentence: "When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guaranty of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious" (p. 29). The applause that followed may not have been deafening, but it had to have been enthusiastic.

Lecture 2: The School and the Life of the Child

The tone of Dewey's second lecture is far more intimate and relaxed than the first. His talk brims with examples and anecdotes drawn from his work at the University Elementary School. It even contains "visual aids," which consist of four drawings done by three of the school's students. It also proffers a psychological portrait of the young child that comports well with much that had been said in the first lecture.

Dewey continues to hammer away at the difference between the "old" education and the "new." In doing so he also clarifies what he had meant in the first lecture when he spoke of what the best parent wants for his child. Here, as Dewey sees it, is what we would find to be going on should we chance to visit such "an ideal home":

> We find the child learning through the social converse and constitution of the family. There are certain points of interest and value to him in the conversation carried on: statements are made, inquiries arise, topics are discussed, and the child continually learns. He states his experiences, his misconceptions are corrected. Again the child participates in the household occupations, and thereby 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. Participation in these household tasks becomes an opportunity for gaining knowledge. The ideal home would naturally have a workshop where the child could work out his constructive instincts. It would have a miniature laboratory in which his inquires could be directed. 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 would open to him. (Pp. 34–35)

For those who have read Rousseau's *Emile*, the description must sound somewhat familiar. Dewey's ideal parent is no Jean-Jacques, true enough, but he or she comes close in many respects.

In the first lecture Dewey spoke of the Industrial Revolution and of the intellectual revolution that followed in its wake. In this one he speaks of yet a third revolution. He likens it to the Copernican revolution in which the astronomical center shifted from earth to sun. But in this case, Dewey tells us, "the child becomes the sun about which the appliances of education revolve; he is

the center about which they are organized" (p. 34).

What does it mean to have a child-centered school? Does it mean letting children do as they please, which is sort of what it sounds like to some? If so, what about the acquisition of knowledge? How are pupils to get the necessary discipline and information? These are among the questions and the misgivings that Dewey attempts to address in his second lecture. He assures his audience that in the long run the students in such a school wind up with "the same results, and far more, of technical information and discipline that have been the ideals of education in the past" (p. 59). To buttress that claim he offers example after example of student work gathered from the classrooms of the University Elementary School.

The psychological premise on which Dewey's educational theory rests portrays children as possessing a small number of "native tendencies," "instincts," "impulses," or "interests" (call them what you will, Dewey seems to be saying, for he uses the terms almost interchangeably), which it is the teacher's job to direct toward worthwhile (i.e., educative) ends. Dewey names four such natural proclivities. They are "the social instinct" (i.e., the wish to communicate with others), "the constructive impulse" (i.e., the wish to make things), "the instinct of investigation" (i.e., the wish to find out about things), and "the expressive impulse" (i.e., the wish to create things). These constitute, for Dewey, the psychological raw materials with which the teacher must work. Her job is not to humor and indulge those native tendencies. Rather, it is to discover how each might be used to lead students toward greater knowledge and more disciplined skills.

Toward the close of his second lecture Dewey's rhetoric once more begins to soar. This time his allusions are distinctly biblical. "If we seek the kingdom of heaven, educationally," he begins, "all other things shall be added unto us—which, being interpreted, is that if we identify ourselves with the real instincts and needs of childhood, and ask only after its fullest assertion and growth, the discipline and information and culture of adult life shall all come in their due season" (p. 60).

How can parents be assured that their children will reap such benefits? Dewey does not answer that question directly, but he implicitly acknowledges that it must be on the minds of some within his audience. To address such lingering doubts his closing argument takes an odd turn. He asks his audience to envision the child's inner life as well as its outward expression. The impulses and instincts that he has just been speaking of, Dewey says, refer only to the "outside of the child's activity" (p. 60). Inwardly, the "real" child "lives in the world of imaginative values and ideas" (p. 60). This may sound as though Dewey is referring to the child's delight in myth and make-believe. But that is not what he means at all. The imaginative world he is speaking of has little to do with idle fancy. It is, instead, "the medium in which the child lives" (p. 61).

When we fully appreciate the imaginative richness of the child's world we come to see that "to him there is everywhere and in everything which occupies his mind and activity at all a surplusage of value and significance" (p. 61). Dewey cannot seem to understand why so many people, educators among them, fail to attain that appreciation. "Why are we so hard of heart and so slow to believe?" he asks, again borrowing a biblical phrase. Were we not, he implies, it would be apparent to us all that, "if we once believe in life and in the life of the child, then will all occupations and uses spoken of, 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" (p. 61).

Whether that high-sounding declaration sufficed to quell whatever doubts might have been lingering in the minds of his audience is a question that we obviously can-

not answer. How convincing that same rhetoric sounds to us today we *can* say something about, however. It is a matter to which I will return.

Lecture 3: Waste in Education

In his third and final lecture Dewey switches to diagrams for his visual aids. He is now talking about schools as organizations: a topic far better suited to ruled boxes with arrows connecting them than to the fuzzy though charming outlines of children's drawings. In the first of his diagrams Dewey presents an overview of how the various units of schooling, from kindergartens to professional schools, developed over time. His central point is that the school system of his day was a hodgepodge of separate units, "all of which arose historically at different times, having different ideals in view, and consequently different methods" (p. 70). As a result of those differences, which contribute to the relative isolation of the various educational units, waste occurs. The current system lacks cohesion and unity of outlook. "The greatest problem in education on the administrative side," says Dewey, "is how to unite those different parts" (p. 70). He uses the remaining three charts to show how that problem might be solved.

Dewey's remedy is to connect the schools to their surroundings or, as he prefers, "to unite each to life" (p. 72). He proposes to do this by linking the school system as a whole with the home, with nature, with the forces of industry and business, and with the university and its collection of laboratories, museums, and professional schools. Those connections will be manifest in the architecture of the school building itself, which Dewey depicts surrounded by gardens and fields and which has within it on the first floor a dining room and kitchen, wood and metal shops, a textile room for weaving, and a library. On the "symbolic upper story" of this ideal school will be found physical and chemical laboratories, a biological laboratory, studios for art and music, and an industrial museum that will house "samples of materials in various stages of manufacture and the implements . . . used in dealing with them" (p. 90), a collection of pictures and photographs showing where the materials came from, samples of textile work from different parts of the world, and more.

Dewey's vision of his ideal school was certainly bold for its day. So, too, were his ideas about connecting the school with the university and with the surrounding community. Even today such ideas would be considered innovative in most school districts. To most of today's educators Dewey's call for an intimate connection between the university and the lower school likely sounds just as utopian as it must have sounded to all but perhaps his local audience at the turn of the century.

Dewey closes his third lecture on a much more sober note than either of the other two. He takes up an objection that he had heard raised about the methods used at the University Elementary School. A visiting teacher had been overheard to say, "You know that this is an experimental school. They do not work under the same conditions that we are subject to" (p. 93). Dewey finds himself somewhat stymied by that objection.

On the one hand, he has to acknowledge that his school is favored, to say the least. After all, not every school has a pupil/teacher ratio of nine or ten to one and the resources of a great university within easy walking distance. At the same time he feels called on to defend the necessity of those favorable conditions. He points out that laboratories everywhere have "to work unhampered, with all the needed resources at command" (p. 94). Only under such conditions are they capable of discovering the laws and principles that govern ordinary affairs.

On the other hand, he also wants to argue that those favorable conditions do not prevent the University Elementary School from demonstrating what *can* and even

must work elsewhere. There is a difference, he points out, "between working out and testing a new truth," which is what a laboratory is for, "and applying it on a wide scale, making it available for the mass of men, making it commercial" (p. 94). He then says this: "We do not expect to have other schools literally imitate what we do. A working model is not something to be copied; it is to afford a demonstration of the feasibility of the principle, and of the methods which make it feasible" (p. 94).

He closes his lecture by returning to its opening theme: the problem of unifying the disparate elements of the school system. At the University Elementary School, he reports, he and his staff are trying to solve that problem by relating the organization of the school "so intimately to life as to demonstrate the possibility and necessity of such organization for all education" (p. 94). On that optimistic note he brings his series of three lectures to an end. The applause, we well might imagine, was surely more than polite.

Commentary

And here we are, a century later, pondering Dewey's words at yet another fin de siècle or very close to it. What shall we make of them from such a distance? My own perspective yields a mixed reaction. I find buried within Dewey's words an odd assortment of truths and partial truths. I have chosen the term "partial truth" at some risk, for I do not wish to accuse Dewey of being at all deceptive in his presentation. He certainly was not trying to pull the wool over anyone's eyes. What I mean by "partial truths" are particular statements or sometimes two or three of them taken together that contain their share of truth without question but that likewise call (rather insistently, I would say) for the kind of qualification that would encumber them perhaps but also make their truth more apparent. Dewey's three lectures contain a number of such statements, I find, as would almost have to be the case, given the mixed audience before whom he spoke and the brevity of each of his presentations. I certainly have no wish to criticize Dewey for not saying all that he might have said about each of the topics he introduces. On the contrary, I remain admiring of his capacity to say so much in such brief compass. I wish only to call attention to a small number of notions the lectures contain (five of them, to be exact) that seem to me to stand in need of greater qualification than Dewey chose to give them at those now historic gatherings in Chicago's Hyde Park in the spring of 1899. The matters to which those five "partial truths" pertain are also of contemporary significance, or so I believe.

Before turning to them, however, I must say a very brief word about the many truths contained in Dewey's small book. They are so numerous and so evident that hardly more than a brief word is required.

The "Truths" of *School and Society*

The truths are of two basic kinds. Some are continuing truths, those that held true in Dewey's day and remain so today. Others, which I call discontinued truths, were probably true when Dewey aired them but are no longer so. Both kinds contain a combination of empirical, conceptual, and moral claims.

Among the continuing truths, some refer to conditions that have remained the same over the century, such as the fact that large numbers of people "from the ends of the earth" still congregate in cities and still present an educational challenge of national significance. Others are more like logical truths or even tautologies, such as the assertion that if schools are not to be isolated from each other and from the community at large they must be connected to those other units. How else, one might ask, could isolation be eliminated? Others have the force of moral imperatives. They sound as though they *must* be true today as always, even though there is no way to prove them so in any empirical or logical way. As an example, consider the moral dictum that

says that *not* to wish for every child what the best and wisest parent wants for his child is narrow and unlovely. Who would dispute that assertion? No one, I would guess.

On a much more trivial level, I also have no reason to doubt any of the anecdotes Dewey relates. I am quite willing to believe what he tells his readers about what the students were doing in the University Elementary School or about what visitors to the school were overheard to say.

Among the discontinued truths, as I call them, are the many facts about schooling in America that Dewey cites: the statistics he offers, for example, about school-dropout rates or his claim that in most schools of his day the recitation method predominates. These I am quite willing to accept as having been true at the time, though I know that such statistics no longer hold and that such practices have since become almost obsolete. These discontinued truths, along with the continuing ones, I take as being beyond dispute. I realize, of course, that truths of both kinds *could* be called into question by someone suffering from radical doubt of a Cartesian variety. It is conceivable, for example, that Dewey *made up* the enrollment figures that he reports. It is also possible that the schools' isolation, both then and now, might best be eliminated by doing away with schools entirely. But to entertain such possibilities is either to challenge Dewey's sincerity or to abandon common sense. I choose to do neither. I therefore will leave all such assertions uncontested.

The "Partial Truths" in *School and Society*

I discern, however, as I have already said, a number of "partial truths" in Dewey's three lectures. These include statements with which I agree in the main but not completely. They also include aspects of Dewey's argument that arouse somewhat stronger reservations. To the former I find myself saying, "Yes, but . . ."; to the latter my response becomes, "Well, maybe . . ." To stay within my allotted page limits I shall comment very briefly on but five of these partial truths. I will present each one in the form of a statement or a set of statements with which I take issue (at least in part). To do so I am forced to pry each idea from its setting and in two or three of the instances to rephrase it in a way that Dewey might have found objectionable. Because of constraints already mentioned I am also forced to state my reservations with respect to each notion far more briefly and therefore more pointedly than I otherwise might have done.

Partial truth no. 1. *Our social life has undergone a thorough and radical change over the years; our educational system must undergo an equally complete transformation.*

This is the partial truth about which I have the weakest reservations. Yet I do have some. "Of course our schools must respond to much that is going on in the world at large," I want to say, "but respond in what way? To which of the many changes that we readily witness must we respond?" Dewey obviously felt that the loss of community life among city dwellers was the great social deficit that somehow needed to be repaired in his day. Do we feel the same today? I am not sure, but I doubt it. Some say that the "computer revolution" is the industrial revolution of our time. It is that revolution, therefore, that today's schools need attend to with greatest urgency. Others underscore the importance of having the curriculum of schools respond to the social diversity of today's society, causing multiculturalism to be uppermost in the minds of many educators. Though sympathetic with both of those claims, I am not sure that either is correct.

Perhaps schools have a role to play not in going along with whatever changes are taking place within the society at large but in actively resisting some of them. Perhaps they should be more of a stabilizing and conservative force in a rapidly changing society. Whichever conclusion we come to, the question of how the schools should re-

spond to what is going on in the society at large is certainly crucial and needs to be thought through carefully for each succeeding generation. We cannot just assume, as Dewey almost seems to do, that vast social change calls for vast educational change.

Partial truth no. 2. *If, for every child in the community, we seek anything less than what the best and wisest parent wants for his or her child, our democracy stands in danger of being destroyed.*

Here, too, I find myself emotionally aligned with the sentiment, yet I cannot help wondering if the assertion is really true. After all, for more than 200 years there has existed within our own country the unequal treatment (in educational terms) of children from different social strata of society and even from different geographical regions. Indeed, there is no country in the world, no matter how democratic or undemocratic, in which similar differences have not emerged. I am by no means trying to defend those differences. On the contrary, I would very much like to see them disappear. But I am not sure that the future of our democratic way of life depends on their disappearance. If it did, it would seem that by now such an effect would be evident. I suppose the present low level of participation in national elections could be taken as a sign of the gradual erosion of the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy, but to blame that phenomenon on the inequalities of schooling seems to me to call for a much greater inferential leap than the data warrant.

How essential is it for the maintenance of a democracy that we try to do the same, educationally speaking, for every child in the community? I lack the answer to that question, but I suspect the proper answer may be: Less essential than Dewey thinks. The persuasive grounding for the equality of educational experience strikes me as far more moral than political. We should wish to treat students as educational equals because they are equals as humans, not because our doing so will contribute to the maintenance of a particular political arrangement. Of course the two are inseparable. Democracy entails political equality. But the political arrangement does not, it seems to me, depend on the maintenance of educational equality, if by that we mean assuring the same quality of education for everyone.

Partial truth no. 3. *The children currently being overlooked or poorly served by our schools are psychologically different from those who our schools have traditionally served reasonably well. The former therefore need a quite different* kind *of education, one that puts a greater emphasis on making and doing than on the recitation method and the mastery of written or spoken symbols.*

Dewey does not come right out and make this claim, but he does come very close to doing so when he talks about how the inclusion of more activities in the school is going to make schools more attractive to youth not currently enrolled. His position makes me very uncomfortable. For it seems to me to come close to implying that children of the poor need one kind of education and children of the rich (or at least the economically advantaged) need another. Are the differences really that great and that clear-cut? I want to say no, and I would like to believe Dewey would too. Even if we assume that many children of the poor are going to wind up in dead-end jobs (if they get jobs at all!)—hustling hamburgers at McDonald's or parking cars in a city parking lot—we have to ask whether education should ready them for that prospect or whether, on the contrary, it should make them feel discontent and unfulfilled if that becomes their fate. Should not the schools help to make all students unhappy with anything less than the best they can do? Perhaps, as Dewey suggests, there are, by nature, some students who are predominantly makers and doers and others who are manipulators of symbol systems. But I have difficulty believing that those differences are dictated by race or ethnicity or social class or by place of birth or any other de-

mographic variable one might choose to name. I know Dewey does not say they are dictated in that manner, but his vagueness on that point makes me nervous.

What I would have preferred Dewey to have said, but it was generations too early for that to happen, I suppose, was that his school was going to recruit students from all over the city in order to demonstrate to one and all that students of all kinds need to make and do as much as they need to learn how to manipulate the symbol systems that provide entry into a literate society.

Partial truth no. 4. *In an activity-oriented school students will learn just as much in the way of subject-matter knowledge and the skills of literacy as they would in a school in which more traditional methods (such as those of drill and recitation) predominated.*

This claim has been sounded by progressive educators throughout the century and possibly long before. They all have wanted to show that no intellectual sacrifice need be made by students attending their schools. Dewey was no exception. He too sought to convince the parents attending his lectures that their children would wind up just as knowledgeable as they themselves had become in more conventional schools. He even went so far as to accuse those who believed otherwise of lacking faith in the natural proclivities of children. That lack of faith, he claimed, overlooks the eagerness of children to explore the world and to absorb whatever knowledge they might come upon.

To drive his point home Dewey offered several examples and illustrations of student work done at the University Elementary School. These made obvious, or so his audience was prompted to believe, just how subtle and sophisticated students could become in a school whose teachers had faith in their students' abilities.

I do not find Dewey's examples and illustrations very compelling. Attractive as they are, they do not seem to me to dispel the misgivings that some parents must surely have felt about how well their children would do when measured against students in more conventional schools. Of course in those days there were no "measures" to speak of. Standardized testing had yet to be invented, and the public interest in comparisons between and among schools was still years away.

But even if all of that resided far in the future, we still need to acknowledge that Dewey at the turn of the century had a major point. He wanted his audience (later his readers) to understand that learning to learn was more important than what one learned. The spirit and the methods of inquiry were what transformed the student as sponge into the student as active learner. Even though this, too, is but another partial truth, I wish he had emphasized it more strongly.

Partial truth no. 5. *Having one or more schools serve as a "laboratory" in which educational principles might be discovered and distilled is a very good idea, even though such a school would of necessity have to command unusual resources and operate under very favorable conditions, making visitors in search of new ideas not only a bit jealous as they passed through but also somewhat dubious about the universality of whatever "findings" might emerge from such endeavors.*

This, in essence, is the proposition that Dewey puts forth and defends at the close of his third lecture. It is easy to understand why the comparison between what was going on in the sciences and what might go on in education had such force in Dewey's day. The application of science to all facets of living was all the rage. Once again, however, Dewey's defense seems to me weak. He does not really answer the visitor who worries about the atypicality of the University Elementary School. The history of the rapid emergence and ultimate disappearance of laboratory schools around the country by no means proves that the idea was a bad one, but it does suggest that the payoff of such institutions to schools in general was not nearly as great as was initially envi-

sioned. Somehow, something went wrong somewhere along the way.

In my own view, the idea of a laboratory school contains two serious flaws. It assumes that educational principles and their enactment in specific settings can somehow be pulled apart and kept separate. That is fine when the principles are about "the nature of children" or something of that order of abstraction but not when they are about educational practice. It further assumes that there are a sufficient number of discoverable principles about practice to warrant the high costs and the continued operation of such an institution. Is the derivation of such principles really like the discovery of physical and biological laws? Why are we given to believe so?

Leaving aside the notion of a "laboratory," the history of demonstration and training schools has also shown that the only way to make such institutions credible to either real or would-be practitioners is by making them more and more "realistic," which means more and more like schools in general and less and less like "laboratories" in the usual sense of the term. Recently the model of "training hospitals" has been substituted for the model of a "laboratory," but ultimately, I would predict, the difficulties and the conundrums will prove to be the same as the ones Dewey faced.

In the final analysis, the task that Dewey's *School and Society* presents to us all is that of trying to figure out for our own time how close we can come to providing the best of education for all of our nation's children. Dewey helped us to understand that the schools must be responsive to surrounding social conditions. He taught us that students have characteristics of their own that must be respected and taken into account in our educational planning. He enabled us to see that the task of schooling goes far beyond the goals of literacy and numeracy—the teaching of the three R's—as vital as the latter have been historically and remain today. He urged us to throw open the doors of the school, allowing easy commerce with the competing worlds of home, nature, and industry. Those are important lessons. Each contains more than one partial truth whose core of veracity remains to be more fully explored.

Reference

Dewey, J. (1990). *The school and society and The child and the curriculum*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.