

A Deweyan Perspective on Communication, Cooperation, and Collaboration Between Elementary and Secondary Educators

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In the field of education, the belief is often expressed among educators and non-educators alike that "elementary teachers teach kids; secondary teachers teach subject matter." This sets up an unspoken dichotomy that elementary teachers do not teach subject matter and that secondary teachers do not teach kids. This presents a problem situation. At the heart of this problem situation is the fact that elementary and secondary educators have little, if any, contact with one another within the public school setting. As a result, one has no idea what the other is doing, and this serves to further perpetuate stereotypes. Communication does not take place from one grade level to the next, and this leads to an undesirable society. "An undesirable society, in other words, is one which internally and externally sets up barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience" (Dewey, 1997, p. 99). Because administrators do not build conjoint inservices into the school calendar, and because teachers get caught up with what is taking place in their own classrooms, to the exclusion of what is taking place in their colleagues' classrooms, barriers exist that prevent educators from engaging in free intercourse and communication of experience. Communication, cooperation, and collaboration are not taking place between elementary and secondary educators, yet there is much to be gained by such an alliance. The result is an undesirable society in America's public schools.

In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey writes, "The problem is to extract the desirable traits of forms of community life which actually exist, and employ them to criticize undesirable features and suggest improvement" (Dewey, 1997, p. 83). Communication, cooperation, and collaboration are desirable traits in a society. Dewey addresses these three characteristics directly in his philosophy.

"Communication is consummatory as well as instrumental. It is a means of establishing cooperation, domination and order. Shared experience is the greatest of human goods" (Dewey, 1994, p. 167).

"The emphasis must be put upon whatever binds people together in cooperative human pursuits and results, apart from geographical limitations" (Dewey, 1997, p. 98).

"Only by engaging in a joint activity, where one person's use of material and tools is consciously referred to the use other persons are making of their capacities and appliances, is a social direction of disposition attained" (Dewey, 1997, p. 39).

Since these three characteristics are not occurring in any widespread, methodical way in public schools today, it would be beneficial to apply a Deweyan perspective in order to examine the undesirable features and to suggest improvement, as a democracy seeks not just to replicate what already exists in society, but to improve what exists in society (Dewey, 1997, p. 81). How would communication, cooperation, and collaboration between elementary and secondary educators improve society in general, and public schools in particular?

Dewey states that communication, shared experience, is "the greatest of human goods" (Dewey, 1994, p. 167). If public schools were to allow for shared experience, teachers would have time to talk with one another. The fourth grade teacher would have an opportunity to communicate with the fifth grade teacher so that a) the fifth grade teacher would know what material was covered in fourth grade, and so that b) the fourth grade teacher would understand what the fifth grade teacher expects her students to know and be able to do. Only good can come from such communication. Instead of closing their doors to one another, teachers should be encouraged to communicate across grade levels, allowing them to fully interact with one another. Dewey adds, "But this same spirit is found wherever one group has interests 'of its own' which shut it out from full interaction with other groups, so that its prevailing purpose is the protection of what it has got, instead of reorganization and progress through wider relationships" (Dewey, 1997, p. 85-86).

These wider relationships are much needed for improvement of public schools in a democratic society. Joan Wesson is an elementary school teacher in a combined fifth and sixth grade class in a midwestern public school. She believes that public schools need to do more to foster communication between grade levels. If teachers do not communicate, she asks,

How can they possibly know what to do next if they don't know what came before? If they don't understand the process of writing and how they got from point A to point B, how do they pick up at point B? And they make incredible assumptions that every kid is at point B, and they're not all at point B. And those who are not at point B need to revisit point A, and if they don't know what point A was, how can they help those students, besides saying, "Try harder." How can they know? (J. Wesson, personal communication, November 8, 1999).

Such comments echo the question Dewey poses as well. Is the education provided by public schools "partial and distorted"? (Dewey, 1997, p. 83). If teachers are not communicating with one another, they are not learning all that they can about their students. Therefore, they cannot fully meet the needs of those students. Such an education is, at the very least, partial, if not distorted, as Wesson points out. Teachers have the power to effect change. If they are encouraged to communicate between grade levels, our public schools could maximize the function of education. "[T]he office of the school medium is, as we have seen, to direct growth through putting powers to the best possible use" (Dewey, 1997, p. 114). What does putting powers to the best possible use entail?

1. Teachers who communicate between grade levels are less likely to replicate material from year to year. Instead of always covering the American Revolution and the Civil War, year after year, one teacher would know that the American Revolution was taught in history class the year before, so she is now free to introduce new material, to expand the experience of her students.
2. Teachers who communicate between grade levels are less likely to over/underestimate the prior knowledge and skill levels of their students. They are then free to meet their students where they are; thus, less instructional time is lost on assessing the individual needs of students.

When teachers communicate between grade levels, they can then put their powers to the best possible use, thus allowing themselves more time and effort to direct growth.

While increased communication, in and of itself, could improve public schools, increased cooperation would help as well. Teacher education programs, as well as public schools, need to foster cooperation between elementary and secondary educators. "Education proceeds ultimately from the patterns furnished by institutions, customs, and laws" (Dewey, 1997, p. 89). If teachers are not taught to cooperate across grade levels in their teacher education programs, it is difficult to learn. Working in isolation becomes a habit. The way that the majority of teacher education programs are set up in the United States today, few, if any, allow opportunities for preservice elementary education students to take classes with preservice secondary education students, and *vice versa*.

Educators are taught from this training that they do not need to cooperate with one another. The unspoken message is that they do not need to know what the other is doing. This is a dangerous message that is then carried out into the public school classrooms by inservice teachers.

While it is true that teachers need to be fully trained in their area(s) of expertise, they also need to be aware of what other teachers are trained to do in their area(s) of expertise. Teachers must be "also interested, and chiefly interested upon the whole, in entering into the activities of others and taking part in conjoint and cooperative doings. Otherwise, no such thing as a community would be possible" (Dewey, 1997, p. 24). Public school districts are referred to as community school districts, but this title is misleading if cooperation is not taking place.

In a community, children share in the customs and behaviors of adults. "For the most part, [citizens of a community] depend upon children learning the customs of the adults, acquiring their emotional set and stock of ideas, by sharing in what the elders are doing" (Dewey, 1997, p. 7). Because of this sharing, adults need to be careful about what customs and behaviors they are modeling for the children in their community. For example, elementary and secondary educators alike encourage cooperation among students. Teachers allow for group work in the classroom so that students learn to work together. This is seen as a social good.

However, as Dewey points out, "At all events, adults too easily assume their own habits and wishes as standards, and regard all deviations of children's impulses as evils to be eliminated" (Dewey, 1997, p. 117). If a student is not working cooperatively within a group setting, he is reprimanded. The teacher wants the child to value working with the other members of his group. The irony in this is that few educators work cooperatively in their own lives. They are not modeling positive group work for their students, and are thus not putting their powers to the best possible use. While they may work on committees within the school community, tasks are often delegated to individuals at an initial meeting. Each teacher goes off and completes her assigned task, usually in isolation, without working directly with another teacher. While the group may reconvene for a final progress report on the committee's work, rarely are the group tasks performed in tandem. Such work is a false model of cooperation.

Likewise, since teachers are not cooperating between grade levels, students are not seeing models of how cooperation is valued in the larger community. If teachers were given the time and the tools to make a conscious effort to work with one another across grade levels, incorporating cooperative learning in the classroom would have more meaning, for students and teachers alike. "What conscious, deliberate teaching can do is at most free the capacities thus formed for fuller exercise, to purge them of some of their grossness, and

to furnish objects which make their activity more productive of meaning" (Dewey, 1997, p. 17).

Education must have meaning for students. They must be able to see how what they are learning in the classroom applies in life-experience. In her groundbreaking work, *In the Middle*, Nancie Atwell quotes Dewey from *School and Society*, first published in 1899: "From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in school comes from his inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside of school in any complete and free way; while, on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning at school" (Atwell, 1987, p. 50). In response to this, Atwell writes,

When a junior high school begins to reflect the nature of its kids, the great waste in our school wanes, and great purpose waxes. School can be good for something. School and life can come to terms in practical, rigorous ways. We make the best of adolescence when we make the junior high classroom the best context we can for the mercurial minds at work and play there (Atwell, 1987, p. 50).

In order to make any classroom—elementary and secondary alike—the best context that we can for the minds at work and play there, teachers need to be aware of what they are modeling. If they want to instill the values of communication, cooperation, and collaboration, they must practice them in their own lives. Only then can school and life come to terms in practical, rigorous ways. Only then can life, mind, and nature correspond.

[T]he genuine correspondence of life and mind with nature is like the correspondence of two persons who 'correspond' in order to learn each one of the acts, ideas and intents the other one, in such ways as to modify one's own intents, ideas and acts, and to substitute partaking in a common and inclusive situation for separate and independent performances (Dewey, 1994, p. 231).

When two or more teachers collaborate, they can then "correspond" so as to modify their own intents, ideas, and acts. All too often teachers see their own method of teaching as the only method of teaching because they never get the opportunity to collaborate, to correspond, with other teachers. A teacher who has a student who has difficulty reading at grade level might automatically refer that student to a resource teacher for additional help, per school policy. By talking with that student's teacher from the previous year, however, this year's teacher might learn that the student had success the previous year when he read with a partner. Reading with a partner would allow the student to stay in the classroom, to remain a part of the classroom community, instead of sending him to a resource teacher, removing him from the classroom community for a significant amount of time each day. Which option is more desirable? Allowing the student

to remain a part of the classroom community is the most desirable option, but that option is only fully available if this year's teacher collaborates with the previous year's teacher.

This is why reflection is important in education. Elementary and secondary teachers need to be constantly asking themselves, "What is best for my students? What will affect their growth in the most positive way?" "Most persons are quite unaware of the distinguishing peculiarities of their own mental habit. They take their own mental operations for granted, and unconsciously make them the standard for judging the mental processes of others" (Dewey, 1991, p. 48). Through the process of collaboration, teachers are afforded the opportunity to take a look at their own mental habits in relationship to other educators. The desired result is reflection on one's own practice, so that a teacher can ensure that she is aware of what is truly best for her students. "Reflection is turning a topic over in various aspects and in various lights so that nothing significant about it shall be overlooked" (Dewey, 1991, p. 57).

If elementary and secondary teachers were allowed an opportunity to reflect on their practice together, they would see that collaboration between grade levels can help to give a fuller picture of what is truly best for students. If a secondary teacher has a student who is having difficulty with formulating sentences, she might collaborate with an elementary teacher to develop some strategies for conveying the complexities of sentence structure. Perhaps the elementary teacher has some valuable materials on what a subject and predicate are, while the secondary teacher has valuable materials on how a subject and predicate work together to form a sentence. If the two teachers collaborate, they could put their minds and their materials together to help the student learn to formulate sentences.

If teachers work in isolation, without collaborating with one another, there is no common intent in behavior. This leaves it to chance that students will be receiving the best possible education available.

But if each views the consequences of his own acts as having a bearing upon what others are doing and takes into account the consequences of their behavior upon himself, then there is a common mind; a common intent in behavior. There is an understanding set up between the different contributors; and this common understanding controls the action of each (Dewey, 1997, p. 30).

Dewey points out that there is a more methodical alternative that would minimize the chances of a student getting a less than effective education. It involves teachers seeing and understanding that their teaching affects and is affected by the teaching of others. If elementary and secondary teachers collaborate with one another, they can develop a common mind, which will in turn help their students to grow and to

learn the customs and behaviors valued by the community. In turn, not only will the students grow, but the teachers will grow as well. "Power to grow depends upon need for others and plasticity" (Dewey, 1997, p. 52).

Public schools need to adhere to standards, but they also need to allow opportunities for communication, cooperation, and collaboration between elementary and secondary educators. "[S]ocial institutions as they exist can be bettered only through the deliberate interventions of those who free their minds from the standards of the order which obtains" (Dewey, 1994, p. 179). Those who free their minds must include educators, administrators, and society as a whole.

In his own reflection on the theory of the Chicago experiment (the laboratory school), John Dewey writes, "In the theory of the school, the first factor in bringing about the desired coordination was the establishment of the school as a form of community life" (Mayhew and Edwards, 1936, p. 466). Today's public schools share the same desire for community life. "It was thought that education could prepare the young for future social life only when the school itself was a cooperative society on a small scale" (Mayhew and Edwards, 1936, p. 466). Today's public schools could develop this same cooperative society by encouraging and allowing communication, cooperation, and collaboration between educators.

The integration of the individual and society is impossible except when the individual lives in close association with others in the constant and free give and take of experiences and finds his happiness and growth in the process of sharing with them (Mayhew and Edwards, 1936, p. 466).

Such integration requires effective modeling on the part of teachers, administrators, and society as a whole. If we want students to learn the value of the constant free give and take of experiences, adults in the society must demonstrate and embody such values. This cannot be accomplished when teachers go into their classrooms, shut their doors, and do not communicate, cooperate, nor collaborate with their colleagues.

This is no easy task, as Dewey reiterates.

Education is a difficult process, one demanding all the moral and intellectual resources that are available at any time, precisely because it is so extremely difficult to achieve an effective coordination of the factors which proceed from the make-up, the psychological constitution, of human beings with the demands and opportunities of the social environment (Mayhew and Edwards, 1936, p. 465).

Education is, indeed, a difficult and complex process. In light of this, how would communication, cooperation, and collaboration between elementary and secondary educators

improve society in general, and public schools in particular? In his reflection on the Chicago experiment, Dewey makes reference to a questionnaire sent out by the Illinois Society for Child Study in 1895. The question posed was, "What principles, methods, or devices for teaching, not now in common use, should in your opinion be taken as fundamental and authoritative, and be applied in school work?" (Mayhew and Edwards, 1936, p. 474). The question might receive the same response today as it did over 100 years ago:

The fundamental principle is that the child is always a being, with activities of his own, which are present and urgent, and do not require to be "induced," "drawn out," "developed," etc.; that the work of the educator, whether parent or teacher, consists solely in ascertaining, and in connecting with, these activities, furnishing them appropriate opportunities and conditions (Mayhew and Edwards, 1936, p. 475).

Communication between elementary and secondary educators would help to establish appropriate opportunities and conditions for ascertaining and connecting with students' needs because teachers would be more aware of what those needs are. By communicating with one another freely, teachers would have a better understanding of the special needs of individual students. They would know which students respond better to large group work and which students respond better to small group work. They would know which students have difficulty reading, and which students serve as able peers for their classmates.

Cooperation between elementary and secondary educators would help to establish appropriate opportunities and conditions for ascertaining and connecting with students' needs because teachers would be working together to meet those needs. Teachers could share instructional materials and strategies to help meet the needs of all students. If a teacher would like seven copies of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, seven copies of *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, and seven copies of *The Giving Tree* for a unit on social justice, she can contact her colleagues to see who has copies of which titles, and she can find out how they were utilized in that those teachers' classrooms. This allows students to experience literature in new ways, without repeating what has been done before.

Collaboration between elementary and secondary educators would help to establish appropriate opportunities and conditions for ascertaining and connecting with students' needs because they would share a common mind. If all of the teachers, across grade levels, work together to instill in their students that group work is valued by the community, all of the teachers, across grade levels, would want to establish instructional activities in their classrooms—and beyond their classrooms—that reflect the value of group work. The ninth grade language arts instructor might work with her students to write storybooks about animals and evolution, a

concept they are studying in their ninth grade science class. The ninth grade teacher might then invite her students to read their stories to the third grade students, who have been studying animals in their classroom as well. Group work is being encouraged, and group work is being modeled, by teachers and students alike. It is not haphazard. The third grade teacher shared her instructional objectives with the ninth grade teacher, who then incorporated her instructional goals with the ninth grade science teacher and the third grade teacher. Because teachers have collaborated with one another, it becomes a methodical approach to instilling the importance of group work.

At the heart of this problem situation in public schools today is the fact that elementary and secondary educators have little, if any, contact with one another within the public school setting. They are not offered opportunities to communicate, to cooperate, and to collaborate with colleagues from other grade levels. The solution is for administrators to make the time, and for teachers to take the time, to talk, to learn, and to grow. Learning is a form of communication, and "[c]ommunication is a process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession" (Dewey, 1997, p. 9). Learning needs to be seen as a common possession—and a common—responsibility of administrators, teachers, and society as a whole. As a society, we are too used to working in isolation, without communication, without cooperation, without collaboration. "Our deepest-seated habits are precisely those of which we have the least awareness" (Dewey, 1994, p. 253). These deepest-seated habits are the ones that are the most dangerous. They keep us from opening our doors to learning from those around us. If we want to have a desirable society, we must remove the barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience; we must open our doors—and our minds—to the world around us.

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