The Application of John Dewey's Ideas to an Inner City Alternative High School

Meryl Domina
with assistance from Janice Greer

The idea for this paper grew out of a comment Laurel N. Tanner made in her book *Dewey's Laboratory School: Lessons for Today*. Tanner wrote that it isn't enough to read Dewey as his "ideas are not developed fully enough in these major works to serve as guides to practice" (1997, p. xii). She researched the early records of the Laboratory School and brought the workings of Dewey's school to life, showing the "everyday operation" underlying Dewey's principles. In this paper I am going to show how Sullivan House applies Dewey's principles to a contemporary alternative high school serving some of Chicago's most difficult students. I will start with a short rationale for continuing to examine and apply Dewey's educational philosophy to schooling today. I will then discuss the free school Janice Greer began and her application of Dewey's ideas. The final half of the paper will investigate how Sullivan House Alternative High School uses Dewey's ideas today with young people who have a troubled background and a history of school failure. Even though Dewey's experimental Laboratory School was for young children, this paper will show how John Dewey's pedagogy can be applied to meet the needs of adolescents to gain the academic, social, and emotional skills they must obtain to function as productive adults.

According to Tanner, Dewey saw that economic and family patterns were changing. He believed that "schools must compensate educationally for what was being lost in the home" (Tanner, 1997, p. 2) and to do so he proposed "to make the school 'into a vital social institution to a very much greater extent than obtains at present'" (Dewey, 1897a, p. 13) so that children learn to be socially responsible people" (Tanner, p. 3). In spite of a century of concern and many school reform movements, schools today are not serving all youth adequately. In *Hope at last for At-Risk Youth*, Robert D. Barr and William H. Parrett wrote "the essential knowledge & skills needed to participate adequately in contemporary life have expanded far beyond the grasp of a large number of young Americans. . . . Dale Parnell, former president of National Community College Association, argues that "the schools are really serving only that 17% of American youth who will someday graduate from college" (Parnell, 1982)" (Barr & Parrett, 1995, p. 3). They talk about the violence that prevails in many schools and note that even honor-roll students feel alone and alienated (p. 35). Nel Noddings writes that "the traditional organization of schooling is intellectually and morally inadequate for contemporary society" (1992, p. 173) and she recommends that major changes be made. Dewey's Laboratory School and his writings addressed the many issues that are facing us today: the need to prepare youth for a changing world, and the need to help children "learn to be socially responsible people" (Tanner, p. 3), with a strong sense of self-discipline, good work habits, and the ability to use critical thinking. Many of our educational philosophers, such as Nel Noddings, refer to Dewey's work and see his ideas as relevant for today. This case study of how Sullivan House Alternative High School adapted ideas of John Dewey can answer the question posed by Philip W. Jackson in his introduction to the centennial edition of *The School and Society*. Jackson asked of Dewey's work "whether or not the practice can be put to work back home, in a situation that may be quite
Unlike the one in which it was initially demonstrated" (1915, p. xxvii).

Education during Sullivan House's first years was quite exciting, but not many people have the freedom to follow such an approach. However, after these early years, the school's pedagogy settled into routines and practices that can be incorporated by other schools and by individual teachers with their classes. Many of the principles we apply, the daily operation of our classes and the relationships between students and teachers, counselors, and our other staff can be applicable to other schools. Sullivan House classes include daily discussion about what is being learned. Many of our assignments have a purpose beyond the immediate task. Instead of tedious drill on grammar, letters to favorite movie stars are written and proofread. Letters are sent to politicians making connections between the study of government and their lives. Not only do activities such as these increase motivation and effort, but they develop thinking skills and work habits. In his later work *Experience and Education*, Dewey wrote:

Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person only learns the particular thing he is studying at the time. Collateral learning in the way of formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes, may be and often is much more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history that is learned. For these attitudes are fundamentally what count in the future. The most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning. (1938, p. 48)

Sullivan House grew out of the Peace and Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Janice Greer had been an active participant, helping to mobilize Chicago area youth to study and work against war and discrimination. This led to her desire to help young children develop through art-making; a desire which evolved into a free school. When Janice was forming her school she took very seriously the ideas of John Dewey, A. S. Neill of Summerhill, and Herbert Read who wrote on art education. She wanted her school to put into practice Dewey's ideas that there needs to be an "organic connection between education and personal experience" (1938, p. 25) and when "the end in view is the development of a spirit of social cooperation and community life, discipline must grow out of and be relative to such an aim. . . . The only discipline that stands by us, the only training that becomes intuition is that got through life itself" (Dewey, 1915, p.16-17).

Janice Greer began working out of a small store front. She had some books, a set of encyclopedias, and a van. She decided that each student should focus on creating a scrapbook of pictures, writings, newspaper clippings, photographs, and drawings based on some subject that attracted the student. Some of these students (all boys at that time) were much more excited by their topics than the others, but everyone willingly spent time daily looking for material to add to their scrapbooks. After a morning of reading, math, and work on these projects, the group took off on a field trip for further research on one of the student's projects. Janice Greer recently reminisced: "When kids had a strong interest we really pursued it and the whole class was involved in the field trips to do research and to take photographs. Our stress was to have a goal—each day the boys were to add to their scrapbooks. There was problem-solving involved. What should we write next? What should we photograph next? Research in our encyclopedia and library books usually provided some suggestions. This was followed by looking in the telephone book which led to locations for our field trips." She saw this as an example of using Dewey who wrote "Unless a given experience leads out into a field
previously unfamiliar no problems arise, while problems are the stimulus to thinking. That the conditions found in present experience should be used as sources of problems is a characteristic which differentiates education based upon experience” (1938, p. 79).

“We first built on Benji’s interest in dogs and Kenny’s interest in sports cars.” At first they photographed the dogs in their neighborhood. Then they needed to find additional species of dogs. They looked up “dogs” in the phone books and learned they had to look under “kennels,” “pet stores,” and “veterinarians.” They realized there was merit in learning alphabetical order. They learned to call first to find out if the trip might be worth the effort, and the hours the place was open. Once they settled on a destination they had to find out how to go there. That taught them map skills and led to their becoming familiar with the city. Janice had them determine what they wanted to learn and write out questions. They learned to ask their questions politely and write down the important information. They met, and learned to feel comfortable with all sorts of people: old, young, professionals, laborers, white, and black. They became familiar with neighborhoods they never knew existed and the variety of jobs and employment situations available in a large metropolitan area. They visited many businesses, the zoos, museums, libraries.

The whole class was involved in the field trips. They all learned something. Their questions led to tangents and started some of the kids in undertaking new projects. Everyone learned to participate in discussions, enlarge their vocabularies, assimilate new information; they all read, drew, and wrote. As Dewey suggested, they learned to work out problems the way it is done in a household or in an employment situation: Here is what we need to do. How do we accomplish it? They learned to get along, to contribute to the group effort, and so they became a community.

Janice bought a camera and had the students take photographs for their scrapbooks. This led to real excitement. She had a darkroom set-up and taught these students how to develop their own film and print their own photographs. This was the solution to one problem Dewey foresaw: “When external control is rejected the problem becomes that of finding the factors of control that are inherent within experience” (1938, p. 21). They learned about reading directions carefully and gained the discipline needed to time the photographic processes correctly.

Dewey wrote in School and Society that children have four impulses that schools can build on. First, there is the social instinct which involves them in conversation and communication. Then there is the constructive impulse for making things and shaping materials. The third instinct of investigation grows out of the first two impulses. Children “like to do things and watch to see what will happen” (1915, p. 43). Finally there is the expressive impulse to tell and represent through art. Children also have a “dominant desire to talk, particularly about folks and of things in relation to folks” (p. 48). “When the language instinct is appealed to in a social way, there is continual contact with reality. The result is that the child always has something in his mind to talk about, he has something to say; he has a thought to express” (p. 56). Janice Greer was able to build on these innate impulses to engage her students in writing for their scrapbooks, in using books, maps, people, museum exhibits, and library books to find out more about the subject. As part of this process the children learned to find satisfaction in their intellectual development and in their work. By letting her students explore subjects they were interested in, she was able to lead them on ‘to large fields of investigation and to the intellectual discipline that is the accompaniment of such research’” (p. 58).

A student’s nickname led to the study of science. One of the boys shared the information that his uncle called him “Penguin,” as the uncle
said he walked like a penguin. The students wondered how a penguin walked. So they went to the zoo and the aquarium to find out. One of their docents mentioned predators and prey. That sounded intriguing—predators and prey. And they were off on another learning adventure. Their interest in learning about the natural world led to weekly trips to the Indiana Dunes as they studied the unique environment created here by a lake shore and a forest. Through field trips, art, and photography, the small school fulfilled Dewey’s words:

But if the end in view is the development of a spirit of social co-operation and community life, discipline must grow out of and be relative to such an aim. There is little of one sort of order where things are in process of construction; there is a certain disorder in any busy workshop; there is not silence; persons are not engaged in maintaining certain fixed physical postures; their arms are not folded; they are not holding their books thus and so. They are doing a variety of things, and there is the confusion, the bustle, that results from activity. But out of the occupation, out of doing things that are to produce results, and out of doing these in a social and co-operative way, there is born a discipline of its own kind and type. Our whole conception of school discipline changes when we get this point of view. In critical moments we all realize that the only discipline that stands by us, the only training that becomes intuition, is that got through life itself” (1915, p.16-17).

As these students mastered learning and began to feel more capable, we followed Dewey’s suggestion that children’s studies of the family would naturally lead to learning about the community and then spread to the world. We suggested that students take the camera home to photograph their grandparents. This led to discussions of history and to genetics. We had them ask their grandparents if they were born in Chicago or, if not, where they did come from and why they came to Chicago. A number of the students found out that their grandparents came from the same state down South. This naturally led into the economic and political reasons families came up North looking for better opportunities and also into the importance of the rail transportation on which they made the journey. At the same time the photographs of family members moved naturally into interest in heredity and the science of genetics. As part of our investigation with DNA and chromosomes, the students tried to figure out what their future children might look like.

Dewey felt it was important to include learning about the past:

The achievements of the past provide the only means at command for understanding the present. Just as the individual has to draw in memory upon his own past to understand the conditions in which he individually finds himself, so the issues and problems of present social life are in such intimate and direct connection with the past that present experience is stretched, as it were backward. It can expand into the future only as it is also enlarged to take in the past (1938, p. 77).

Dewey also discussed the education children used to acquire when they lived as part of a homestead which provided the food, the clothes, and the other items needed to survive daily life. He said we cannot–and do not want—to bring those days back, but we do need to change education to capture some of the real motives and real challenges of solving problems with needed outcomes. “Manual training in shop and household arts takes hold of kids. These are methods of living and learning” (1915, p. 13).
So we acquired shop equipment and had students build tool boxes, book cases, and other real objects to be used in their homes. They had to work on their math skills so they could measure accurately before cutting the lumber and to know which size drill bit to use. From the start our students were involved in preparing breakfast and lunch for themselves, their classmates, and the school’s staff, in participating in the office work needed in the school, and in maintaining our physical space.

During the mid 1970s the school began to serve special education students who were considered behaviorally or emotionally disordered and to hire additional teachers. Soon Sullivan House grew into a welfare agency larger than the school as it began to operate a group home for wards of the state. The Sullivan House Child Welfare Agency continued to expand by providing community resources to serve the needs of local children and youth. Ms. Greer served as executive director, providing a humanistic and progressive framework for the agency’s programs. In the late 1970s the school acquired a small building—a remodeled grocery—and added a principal. At this time the school served state wards who were living in Sullivan House’s group home and the special education students. The school, which was now serving high school age students, continued to enroll approximately twenty students. The new building included a wood workshop, an art room, a kitchen, and a library as well as three classrooms.

The author joined Sullivan House in 1986 when grants were received under the Jobs Training and Partnership Act and the Illinois Secretary of State Literacy Office. These were to offer programs which helped young adults improve their reading and math in order for them to develop employment skills. However, all the young people we talked with were more interested in working towards their high school diploma than in just improving their academic skills (and many didn’t see the connection when they first enrolled with us). We put the two goals together and organized the new program as a branch of the Sullivan House School which now was approved by the Illinois State Board of Education. This branch first worked out of two store fronts and later was housed in a vacant office building. The two branches were joined together in a remodeled factory warehouse building in 1995. The author served first as teacher and principal of the branch, but in 1992 became principal of both the branch and the original school. The author continued as principal through the end of the 1999 school year.

Throughout its growth and development, Sullivan House Alternative High School continued to draw upon Dewey’s ideas. Dewey proposed that schools structure themselves as miniature communities which offer opportunities for each student to “feel that they are actors, not just onlookers in the saga of human development” (Tanner, 1997, p. 34). Dewey felt this encourages both moral and academic development and assists students in becoming “socially responsible people” (p. 3). The school’s curriculum has always been based on multiple learning activities for the purpose of teaching students to think and to problem solve; discipline based on interest and attention; and a school structure that accepts flexibility and change and offers freedom to the teachers in developing their own curriculum based on students’ needs and interests. Tanner posits six ways in which Dewey’s school “sought growth of character” (1997, p.35). These six tenets are based on organizing the school as a small learning community. The first is to help students see themselves as valued members of the community. Next is offering teachers adequate time to feel and show concern for their students. The third and fourth are to engage students in working out real problems which will develop the habits of mind necessary for real learning and constructive work. The fifth is to have an emphasis on creative activity. The final
tenet is to encourage adults and students to interact with much informal conversation and class discussion.

Tanner applied these tenets to Dewey’s Laboratory School. She wrote: “First, the school was organized as an informal community in which each child felt that she had a share and her own work to do” (p.35). Sullivan House students make breakfast and lunch, participate in the work of the school office and the on-site daycare center, and serve as school custodians. In their classes they create and display art and academic projects. The school’s curricular theme is organized around concern for students’ futures.

Many of our students enter needing to learn good socialization skills and work habits as well as the academics. Students who are unable to concentrate in class were often asked to help in the school office or to go on an errand or to a meeting with school staff. “Basing education upon personal experience may mean more multiplied and more intimate contacts between the mature and the immature” (Dewey, 1938, p. 21). Through this type of activity they saw adults fulfill their responsibilities in a dependable and polite manner. They learned the appropriate way to answer the telephone and to address clerks in stores when seeking assistance. They made a true contribution when they helped to carry boxes of food and school materials in from the van. Sometimes they were called upon to offer their knowledge as when they directed a staff driver to an address in an unfamiliar neighborhood. Our reluctant students learned that often adults had to sit through boring meetings just as they were expected to sit through classes that were not always fun or exciting.

The opportunity to accompany counselors and administrators as they work and to go on many field trips allow students to see different types of employment. Teachers address work-related issues in their classes; they explain how skills students are learning are used in various jobs and the connections between current events and employment. The teachers and counselors help students reflect on their strengths and interests in order to consider possible careers. We take all our students to local colleges and vocational schools and to campus events. This practice helps them develop an image of someone who continues on to post-secondary education. The school invites many speakers each year to discuss work issues such as jobs in fields related to their subjects, expected on-the-job behavior and the handling of employment interviews. This constant focus on careers helps students recognize that we know they will complete high school and become productive adults—a very important message for these students who have a history of academic failure and other problems in their backgrounds.

As our school is now larger and needs to be more formal, students are given internships for credit to assist with food preparation in our commercial kitchen, to participate in the school’s office work and to work with the infants and toddlers in our on-site daycare program. Earning credit through hands-on work as well as through academic courses gives dignity to their work and the skills they are learning. Students are able to earn carfare or a salary by taking on the cleaning and maintenance of the school.

“Second, the spirit of the school was one in which teachers were there to help if a child had a problem, and so they modeled concern of one person for another” (Tanner, 1997, p. 35). Because of their students’ difficulties, Sullivan House keeps classes at eight to twelve students per teacher. Teachers are expected to be active in the classroom, drawing out slow learners and shy students, offering enrichment to bright students, maintaining a comfortable and safe atmosphere, leading discussions, helping each student with the assignment to ensure mastery of the material, and correcting mistakes as they go along. Sullivan House teachers go out of their way to help students feel comfortable so they will succeed and learn. Teachers socialize and
eat lunch with the students. Teachers have assisted students in raising money for Prom, lent then Prom clothes, and have taken students to medical appointments, shopping malls, and cultural events. They mentor students and see themselves as part of the students' extended families. We take very seriously Dewey's statement "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" (1915, p. 7).

It is also important that our teachers are well educated themselves on the subjects they are teaching and are willing to model good scholarship. This allows the teachers to build into their lessons material that will interest the individuals in each class and to follow tangents students bring up. It is the teacher's business, Dewey wrote, "to be on the alert to see what attitudes and habitual tendencies are being created. In this direction he must . . . be able to judge what attitudes are actually conducive to continued growth and what are detrimental. He must, in addition, have that sympathetic understanding of individuals as individuals which gives him an idea of what is actually going on in the minds of those who are learning" (1938, p 39).

Rather than reading one text through, our teachers pick out those aspects of the subject they are teaching and are willing to model good scholarship. This allows the teachers to build into their lessons material that will interest the individuals in each class and to follow tangents students bring up. It is the teacher's business, Dewey wrote, "to be on the alert to see what attitudes and habitual tendencies are being created. In this direction he must . . . be able to judge what attitudes are actually conducive to continued growth and what are detrimental. He must, in addition, have that sympathetic understanding of individuals as individuals which gives him an idea of what is actually going on in the minds of those who are learning" (1938, p 39).

Rather than reading one text through, our teachers pick out those aspects of the subject that will grab students' attention and those aspects that are relevant to their lives and experiences. For an example, I will discuss one general science course that I taught. As the students varied in their reading levels and did not have much science background, I started with a sixth grade text they all could handle. We began by reading together and discussing the chapter on scientific method. We then began a unit on cells and heredity. After the students understood the material and vocabulary in their text, I had them read sections on cells and hereditary from a high school level textbook. We discussed the material as we read, drew cells, and filled out hereditary diagrams for various traits. I connected the material to their lives by having my students figure the chance of their children developing sickle cell anemia if both they and their sweetheart were carriers of the sickle cell anemia gene. They then had to write an essay justifying why this knowledge would or would not affect their decision to marry that person. This assignment helped them relate the science to their own lives and to integrate writing. We then read three other pieces. One was a magazine article on new research on cells. The second was an article that used cells as a metaphor as I wanted to point out that one does not have to be a scientist to need this information in adult life. We finished up the unit by reading the "Introduction" to Dawkins' The Selfish Gene. We then moved on to the next unit and followed the same procedure of starting with the sixth grade book but then tackling more challenging high school and adult readings.

"Third, emphasis was placed on how to work out problems" (Tanner, 1997, p. 35). This takes place daily at Sullivan House, in the school internships, through the types of assignments in our classes, in how we solve interpersonal problems, and through many other opportunities we offer students. One example would be our Nonviolent Approach to Living Component (NVAL). A major focus of this program was to teach and use mediation skills. Most of our students went through a training which included learning how important it is to meet each human's needs; the meaning of conflict; good communication skills; and the steps involved in peer mediation. Counselors and students who went through an additional training served as mediators when there were problems between students, between students and teachers, or between two staff. Students often shared how they were using these skills at home, and we sometimes saw students conduct informal mediations.

Two of the grants we sought to fund the NVAL Component required youth involvement.
This reinforced Sullivan House's efforts to involve students in many aspects of the school's functioning, emphasizing "the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process" (Dewey, 1938, p. 67). The Youth Creates grant from the Alternative Schools Network required that students had to be involved in the writing of the grant. They also needed to present their case before the Network staff. Funding from the Association of Community Based Education involved including students in travel to youth conferences and to other alternative schools. We included the youth in planning the trips and in being responsible for handling many of the travel details. We always pointed out connections between these opportunities and adult life and work. Graduates have come back to tell us that these trips led to the career path they followed.

"Fourth, the school sought to develop the kind of habits that lead children to act in certain ways. ... Practice in working out problems, accepting responsibility, meeting new situations, cooperating with others, and engaging in real and practical work" (Tanner, 1997, p.36). Teachers improvise and create curriculum material that is relevant to the students' lives, to career planning, and to functional living skills. Topics are related to the students so they understand where they are in the world geographically and historically and offer an emphasis on their culture. Sullivan House teachers give many hands-on projects which incorporate the different learning styles. Assignments include the making of art, graphic, and computer displays, time lines, scrapbooks, photo journals, school newspapers, dramatic presentations, and debates. We continually take students on field trips to augment their studies. Because of our small classes, teachers serve as facilitators who engage the students in exploration and inquiry-based learning.

The semester that students researched and put together a resource guide shows this in practice. One summer a class of students was asked to help update our resource list for services offered by local nonprofit and government agencies. The teacher suggested they contact the city's department of human services to ask for agencies which provided services for students needing assistance with health, disabilities, and recreation. Our students did this, but they also added sections we hadn't anticipated such as information on obtaining free and reduced-cost food and a directory of local colleges and vocational programs. The students went to a number of the agencies, local colleges, and vocational schools to learn what each had to offer and to ask for suggestions of additional agencies providing services. Some of the students were better at asking the questions, while others took on writing up the responses. Students with a spatial orientation excelled at planning the bus routes to their interviews. The teacher helped them work on their writing and editing skills as information sheets and thank you letters were prepared. She helped them all learn to read city maps and bus route schedules. Math was involved in figuring how much money was needed for the week's transportation. They talked about the role of government in their community, the reasons for each type of taxes, and the responsibilities of citizenship. The group decided to publish the information in a directory. This entailed additional learning and problem-solving such as how to lay out and type up their information, how to determine costs, and how to obtain the needed funds. They then learned how to write and apply for a Youth Creates grant. When the brochure was completed, it was distributed to administrators and local politicians who were familiar with the school. The students were thrilled when they received thank you letters and requests for additional copies. Projects like this one allow the student to gain "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" (Dewey, 1915, p. 35) of the group.

Even small differences between our
classes and those of traditional schools encouraged major changes in our students’ behavior and attitudes. Dewey complained that school furniture and space are designed only for “for listening” (Dewey, 1915, p. 31). Instead of small desks set in rows our students sit around a large table which allowed for the face-to-face interaction needed for lively class discussions. Our room arrangements also allowed students to spread out when they were involved in creative projects. Our field trips often involved walking to a business, institution, or resource person in the local community. Dewey thought teachers “should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile. . . . the teacher should become intimately acquainted with the conditions of the local community, physical, historical, economic, occupational, etc. in order to utilize them as educational resources” (1938, p. 40).

“Fifth, there was an emphasis on creative activity” (Tanner, 1997, p. 35). In The School and Society, Dewey wrote “students would stay in school longer if we had activities to make and to do” (1915, p. 28). We found this so true as we are able to retrieve many students who had dropped out of regular schools. They find our use of art and discussion in classes, our art and wood shop, and internship opportunities to better meet their needs and learning styles.

We follow Dewey’s ideas on discipline. We always have a number of new students whose reading and math skills are so low they will not even participate in remedial classes. First they need to feel a valued part of the school. To achieve this we build on Dewey’s understanding of the psychology of occupations:

The fundamental point in the psychology of an occupation is that it maintains a balance between the intellectual and the practical phases of experience. As an occupation it is active or motor; it finds expression through the physical organs—the eyes, hands, etc. But it also involves continual observation of materials, and continual planning and reflection, in order that the practical or executive side may be successfully carried on. . . . This enables us to interpret the stress laid (a) upon personal experimenting, planning, and reinventing in connection with the [textile] work, and (b) its parallelism with lines of historical development (1915, p.133-134).

At Sullivan House the food service program, art, and wood shop classes meet Dewey’s criteria of occupations as our discouraged students find satisfaction in making lunch, art and wood objects. They develop experience, attitudes, and habits which will carry over to their academic learning when they are ready. They do not have to act out to avoid academic work. The Art and Food Service teachers help their students set goals for themselves and evaluate their attainment; teach them to problem solve, plan, implement, and finish their projects; instruct them in the use and care of their tools; and instill in students the need to clean-up and put away tools and materials. As students work on their projects, they begin to cooperate with others and to communicate. As Dewey wrote, when “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” (Dewey, 1915, p. 15). Life skills, their futures, and history repeatedly come up in their daily discussions. The students find they need to understand fractions in order to measure their ingredients, calculate costs of different menus, improve their reading to better understand the sanitation manual. They learn why one needs to follow directions and gradually they accept limits imposed by the oven temperature and the clock,
and eventually, limits suggested by teachers.

Our classroom work involves projects and extends to completed displays or presentations. The study of poetry leads to a poetry reading given in front of another class of students. Students participate in the creation of their own worksheets in math and English courses. As part of each unit in math, students write word problems using the skills and procedures being learned. Their problems are put together and photocopied for use by the class the next day, and often are used in following semesters. They learn that work has meaning and people are involved in the making of textbooks. Students' writings are compiled and become a class magazine or a school newspaper. Involving the students in discussions and using writing to communicate with other people means that teachers do not have to spend time on drill because the student "who has a variety of materials and facts wants to talk about them, and his language becomes more refined and full, because it is controlled and informed by realities" (Dewey, 1915, p. 56).

"Finally, in Dewey’s miniature community adults and children really talked with one another. The point is crucial for today's schools because it has become increasingly clear that mechanical instruction--even by humans--does not feed the human spirit. The result may be that children also lack humanity" (Tanner, 1997, p. 35). Sullivan House students and adults do a lot of talking and laughing. They talk about movies and TV shows, about the difficulties students experience, and grapple with the hard issues concerning their community. The teachers and counselors make an effort to learn students' interests and skills and to help guide them towards a career they will enjoy. These adults share their own expectations and plans so students learn about the lives grown-ups lead. Graduates keep in touch with their favorite teachers. Often we felt our being role models and mentors was even more important than the teaching of academic skills.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate that to best meet our students' educational needs, schools should address and meet the four natural impulses Dewey discussed (1915) and the six ways Tanner found that Dewey’s school “sought growth of character” (Tanner, 1997, p. 35). This paper showed how Sullivan House incorporated the philosophy of John Dewey into the school’s curriculum, discipline, and the relationship between teachers and students, first as a small school with much freedom and later as a more structured high school. Indeed it is imperative to actually practice Dewey’s principles, not just to read and study his ideas.

References


