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Teaching in the Now: John Dewey on the Educational Present

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TEACHING IN THE NOW

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JOHN DEWEY ON THE EDUCATIONAL PRESENT

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PREFACE

Thinking With Dewey

This book is motivated by the belief that John Dewey's thinking continues to matter, and by a fear that Dewey's power to unsettle habituated modes of thinking and inspire creative responses to prevalent antidemocratic tendencies in our time has been greatly reduced, because—and despite Dewey's own warnings—it has been cast into a noun, Deweyan thought, instead of a verb, Dewey thinking. Dewey wants us to think *with* him, in our present moment. He does not want to be blindly accepted, let alone revered, and this book is intended to be a retrieval of the dynamism of Dewey's thinking for teaching and learning in our time.

Specifically, I worry that Dewey's wonderful little book *Experience and Education*, though widely assigned in teacher education and foundations of education courses and heavily cited in student papers and educational research literature, can come to be revered and not mobilized as something we can continue to think with as we make the attempt to address the problems that matter most to us, now, in our present moment. To put the point another way, I see my book as something like an invitation to think with Dewey again, or to think anew with Dewey. For students reading *Experience and Education* for the first time, I see this book as a companionable introduction, helping students see why Dewey's thinking continues to matter. For educators in schools of

education, I hope this book—especially in the ways it uses generous selections from *Experience and Education* and Dewey's other writings on education—can help reanimate our appreciation of Dewey's thinking while suggesting new ways of making his work come alive for your students: future teachers, teacher educators, and lifelong students of education who will have a voice in the quality of the present our next generations experience.

As I will discuss in brief detail in the introduction, this book draws on Dewey scholarship and my own background as a philosopher of education, but the book's primary aim is not to contribute to philosophical discussions of Dewey. Rather, as someone with a background in philosophy of education but who is a teacher educator routinely teaching foundations courses and teacher education courses, I am most interested in highlighting some of the ways that Dewey's thinking can help us reanimate and reconstruct our lives as educators.¹ The tone will, at times, be personal, even impassioned. This is not because I aim to convince you that you should feel as I feel or think as I think. Instead, it is meant to remind us that Dewey's words can still move us to see our current work, and the world we live in now, anew. And, given the deep threats to democracy that seem to appear with each passing day, that ability to kindle democratic hope, if not create democratic practices, is something I am deeply grateful for.

It is in this spirit of gratitude that I welcome you to think with Dewey as you consider the educational problems that are on your mind and engage your attention and care. I call this work a pedagogical exercise, because I believe that the process of reading Dewey discloses new possibilities for democracy and education that make us better teachers and frees our students for growth that they may have never thought they were capable of.

INTRODUCTION

Waiting

For many the experience of schooling might be best summed up by the Rolling Stones' song "I am Waiting."¹ As Philip Jackson (1968/1990) strikingly demonstrates in *Life in Classrooms*, students spend much of their time in school waiting. They are quite literally waiting—waiting a turn, waiting for peers to complete work, waiting for the bell, waiting for the announcements to be over, and so on—but, equally important, the habit of waiting instilled and enforced in school forms character. Here is the way Jackson describes it:

We have already seen that many features of classroom life call for patience, at best, and resignation, at worst. As he learns to live in school our student learns to subjugate his own desires to the will of the teacher and to subdue his own actions in the interest of the common good. He learns to be passive and to acquiesce to the network of rules, regulations, and routines in which he is embedded. He learns to tolerate petty frustrations and accept the plans and policies of higher authorities, even when their rationale is unexplained and their meaning unclear. Like the inhabitants of most other institutions, he learns how to shrug and say, "That's the way the ball bounces." (p. 36)

Though Jackson's work was originally published in 1968, as Martinez and McGrath (2014) argue, his analysis is sadly—but maybe not surprisingly given how powerful the grammar of schooling is (Tyack & Cuban, 1995)—still an accurate description of many schools in the United States. The type of *character* our schools create is one that we need to consider. Though explicit questions related to character education often get more attention,² Jackson's analysis remains important because these louder questions often hold us captive, keeping us from seeing that character is always already being taught in schools. In a classroom where students make their own rules and are given a great deal of trust to make their own choices, one form of character is taught; in a classroom that strongly adheres to zero tolerance discipline, quite a different form of character is taught. The very choices we make as teachers when it comes to the countless daily decisions we are called to make creates a culture in our class that helps form the character of the students in that class.³ It is this hidden curriculum of character education that needs to be exposed and examined because it has a far greater influence than we think, often because we don't give it thought at all.⁴

For Jackson, the passivity taught in schools is antithetical to creative and intellectual work. Creative and intellectual work can be fostered in an environment of compliance, but is this the best we can do? The character of the creative person and the intellectual is often very different from the character of the individual resigned to the status quo. Schools that teach resignation and waiting aren't cultivating the character we claim to want in graduates. In addition, Debbie Meier (1995/2002) makes a strong and all too relevant (especially given the political climate surrounding America's 2016 election and renewed calls to arm teachers) connection between the hidden curriculum of schools and politics. It is a long quote, but worth considering in full:

We see our schools as lawless Western towns, in need of a tall man in the saddle.

But it's important to remember that even at best these heroes are usually charismatic bullies (it's not surprising that they're rarely women), and that they sometimes confuse "law and order" with a disrespect for any law besides themselves. They revel in their aloneness

and we are generally aware of an aura of violence that they bring with them. The violence of the young is quelled by counter-violence. The problem is not merely that there aren't enough such "leaders" to go around, but that these are not images of adulthood that encourage youngsters or teachers to use their minds well, to work collaboratively, or to respect the views of others. Models of such machismo have an impact. Their latent political consequences for a democratic society are dangerous. (pp. 127–128)

Although Richard Rorty (1998) is being heralded as prophetically announcing the election of Donald Trump, I see something similarly prescient in Meier's warning here.⁵ If school puts the ends of compliance as paramount, then we get into a position where using our minds well, collaborating, and respecting others and their views—in short, living democratically—become subsumed to law and order, no excuses, zero tolerance, and other authoritarian-leaning policies. The threat to democracy and education becomes very real as these policies are lauded and enacted in schools, and yet we divert our attention away from the antidemocratic practices that are hidden in plain sight and to disputes that generate tremendous amounts of sound and fury—the Common Core being a major one⁶—and so we often don't turn our attention to the very real threat to democracy that is within our control as teachers to change. We need to focus on creating schools where democratic dispositions are cultivated, where children are appropriately challenged, and where authoritarianism in all its forms is called out and rooted out. Instead, we have wishful thinking: If only the Common Core were repealed, if only technology were used more (or less) in schools, if only we could fire teachers or pay teachers more, if only, if only. . . . It will be then, in that future, that everything will be okay. We keep waiting—for a cowboy, for a superhero, for the silver bullet (Kirp, 2015)—and this spirit of waiting can cause us to ignore and desecrate the great wells of democracy (Marble, 2003) just waiting to give us life, if we were willing to put in the work. Now.

But, we give ourselves over to waiting—and its related, if ordinary (Shklar, 1984), vices of nostalgia and ungrounded optimism or magical thinking—and lose the present. The goal of this book is to bring our

attention back to the educational present, reminding us that we can take control of our educational present now; and that taking this control now is the only way to bring our desired future into being. Our classrooms, each day, are opportunities to exercise democracy or to excise it. The ways we interact with children and adolescents, the ways we provide feedback to students and solicit feedback from students, the ways we interact with colleagues: Though outside policies offer very real constraints on these, such constraints are not our fate. By setting democratic ideals and working toward them, we enact the future we want to see in our present interactions. This is certainly an ideal, but it isn't idealistic in the pejorative usage. Though Jackson's descriptions of school are complexly and fascinatingly true, to say that a better future is unrealistic—one where democracy is realized in every interaction—says more about our lack of will and creativity than it does about the state of nature or human potential. We are adaptable; given one environment we will more easily grow into fascists; given another, we will more easily grow into a living democracy. We don't find these environments written into the fabric of the world; we need to found them, building—through hard, collaborative, creative work—the conditions that will allow the future we desire to come into being.

The ideas expressed in the foregoing paragraph are certainly not new ones; they form the heart of John Dewey's thinking on democracy and education. To say they are not new is not to say that they've been tried and found wanting; rather, my goal in returning to them is twofold. First, I aim to bring our attention to an aspect of John Dewey's educational thought that has not received the attention it deserves.⁷ Surprisingly, Dewey has written about the importance of the present as it relates to education at every stage of his writing career,⁸ and it forms—in many ways, and as I hope to demonstrate—key elements of his two most important works on education, *Democracy and Education* and *Experience and Education*. Yet very little has been written on the specifically educational importance of taking Dewey's thinking on the present seriously. I think it is a mistake not to focus on the importance of the present when we think about the significance of Dewey's educational thought, and a goal of this book is to discover what Dewey

aims to teach us about education by focusing on the present. Second, I hope to make a compelling case that John Dewey's ideal of creating the fullest present moment as the only way to create the future we hope for is an ideal worth getting behind and working to realize in our present. I will make this case both through close readings of John Dewey's work and examples drawn from classrooms and lived experience. In the end, I hope making this argument will build our conceptual resources while also suggesting practices that are worth experimenting with and further developing.

To close, and as I suggest above, the stakes of not living democratically in the present are high; we need to stop waiting and hoping and begin the difficult process of building an educational present that will become the future embodied by our ideals.⁹ We cannot wait to get our classrooms in order through traditional forms of discipline as a means to creating the democratic classroom we desire. We need to experiment with democracy right now as a means to deepening those nascent democratic practices in our future. We cannot wait for "the basics" to be covered before we can immerse ourselves in meaningful learning experiences: the best ground for meaningful learning experiences in the future is meaningful learning in the present. Again, this may seem pejoratively idealistic, but to assume so is to concede defeat prematurely. It takes creativity and work to realize our ideals in the present, and to write these ideals off as unrealistic before sufficient experimentation is not to be tough minded; to echo William James (1907/1998), it is to shirk our responsibility to the possible. As Langston Hughes (1951) provokes us to respond to the question "What happens to a dream deferred?" in his poem "Harlem," I think we can ask this question with similar troubling results in a poem called "School" with the same first line. What happens to all the deferring that takes place in schools? What becomes of our deference to what we take to be the "reality" of school as circumscribed by limited imaginations and lack of ideals? How much potential is squandered as we wait for the future that we imagine but aren't yet working to create? Dropout rates, school violence, lack of civic engagement don't even begin to tell the story of all this lost potential: we need to revive a hope that individuals, and our

democracy, can be so much better—now—by creating a present, or working with others actively involved in creating a present, worthy of the name educative.¹⁰