

The Teacher and Society: John Dewey and the Experience of Teachers

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John Dewey's writing on education and society is voluminous and inclusive of almost all aspects of the relationship of education to society as a whole. His customary comprehensiveness is lacking only on the subject of teachers and their position in this complex interrelation. Dewey's interest, his involvement with teachers' organizations and education and his dedication to the profession stands out, however, in contrast to his apparently minimal writing on the subject. The teacher, in Dewey's world of education, was integral to the process of education and therefore that of democracy. Dewey's view of education and its place in a holistic society is informed by both theory and practice; by his intellectual approach and by his personal experiences with practical issues related to instilling in people a will to change their methods and views. Dewey's experiences influenced his thinking and his activities regarding teaching and teachers, but his fundamental concept of their role in the society remained consistent. If he failed to alter completely the force of hierarchical habit in schools and society it can be said that he acted upon his convictions within the framework of his experience and that he was a pioneer whose progress was hampered by that framework. Dewey's writings, and their historical and ideological contexts, must be examined in relation to one another if an understanding of his view of teacher in society is to be complete.

The conditions of the times, for teachers in general and for Dewey himself, include an array of convergences and conflicts that shaped his experience and, perhaps, tempered his voice on a subject most vital to philosophy. The time in American culture from Dewey's birth to his death (1859 - 1952) was dynamic and turbulent. Advances in science and industry coupled with the social forces of change brought to bear in the Civil War, WWI and WWII, are all part of the story. They were integrated with economic and philosophic stresses world-wide which influenced Dewey and the reception of his ideas in society.

There are three logical divisions into which Dewey's life and work seem to fall. In each are some elements of primary concern to his documented views on teachers and their role in society. His early years at the University of Michigan began his formulation of himself as a teacher and his idea of

what that meant. His experiences in Chicago built upon those formulations and provided an element of practicality to his views. The years in New York broadened his scope still further and placed him in the whirlwind of political and ideological turbulence provoked by world wars and the economic depression. The circumstances that informed this time would continue to influence education and society beyond John Dewey's lifetime. Examination of some of the ideas and experiences he had throughout these periods of his life, and their relation to his thinking about teaching and teachers, provides a fuller understanding of his concept of the teacher in education and, therefore, in the society as a whole.

Michigan: Growth and Development

The role of teachers in Dewey's philosophy seemed, initially at least, an incongruous one; for at the center of a theory of education that proscribed unity of social life with that of children and schools the teacher was held apart. He wrote, in *My Pedagogic Creed*:

I believe, finally, that the teacher is engaged, not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of the proper social life.

I believe that every teacher should realize the dignity of his calling; that he is a social servant set apart for the maintenance of proper social order and the securing of the right social growth.

I believe that in this way the teacher always is the prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God (Dworkin 32).

This was said in 1897, after Dewey accepted an appointment as head of the department of philosophy, psychology and pedagogy at the University of Chicago (1894) and after the founding of the Lab School (1896), which was intended to provide an experimental field for his philosophies. But, to understand this declaration fully it is necessary to look to Dewey's earlier experience and recognize these influences on the man and his thinking. In the spirit of his philosophy it must be accepted that this relationship is contiguous and

evolving. The formation of attitudes, both intellectual and emotional, is, for Dewey, the foundation for learning and the meaning of experience. He uses the term "habit" to describe both these attitudes and the pattern of behavior they evoke. "The basic characteristic of habit is that every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent experience" (Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 26). So, we must look both to his texts and to his life experiences to fully understand his philosophy. This understanding of habit may also provide us with an insight into the world of views and policies that were the sowing fields of Dewey's forming ideas. He would continually encounter the problem of integrating the hierarchical habits of function found in the society he sought to improve with the democratic unity inherent to the democracy he envisioned.

Dewey's parochial background in Vermont led him into a life of service as a teacher. He was the son of a Congregationalist father and an Evangelical mother who was determined to see to her sons' educations. This meant, for John, eventual study at Johns Hopkins University where he came under the influence of George S. Morris and G. Stanley Hall. Morris was the head of philosophy at University of Michigan, lecturing at Johns Hopkins. His approach was theological and traditional. Hall was head of the newly developed department of psychology at Johns Hopkins. "Morris and Hall exerted diametric pulls on Dewey's beliefs. . . . Morris won out, at first. It wasn't until Morris died that Dewey would cast aside his religious orthodoxy" (Walker).

After Johns Hopkins Dewey accepted a post at University of Michigan. It was also at Michigan that Dewey encountered Alice Chipman, they were married July 28, 1886 and had three children. "The Deweys' belief in the innate goodness of children, their encouragement of their children's experimental forays into the world, and their determination to provide as much freedom as they could for those forays, shaped John Dewey's philosophical speculations. He found parallels between a philosopher's search for truth and a child's curiosity" (Walker). Dewey, like Piaget after him, would carefully observe the activities of his children in an effort to understand their development. He then generalized that understanding to others.

Dewey's religious attitudes were also being influenced by his newly developing empiricism and by his relationship with Alice. She had been reared by an unusual man, whose independent nature had led him to work with the Hudson Bay Company and to join the Chipewa Indian tribe. He had contributed money to many churches but belonged to none. Jane Dewey would later write of her parents, that Alice "had a deeply religious nature but had never accepted any church dogma" and "her husband acquired from her the belief that a

religious attitude was indigenous in natural experience, and that theology and ecclesiastic institutions had benumbed rather than promoted it" (Walker).

It was there, too, that he first embarked on the practice of theories he would later seek to test at the Lab School in Chicago. He was apparently allowed the autonomy to conduct experiments with democratic construction of educational environments. Drawing upon his ideas about how people learn, Dewey experimented with his department's teaching methods. . . . In 1891, he tried something revolutionary in one of his courses: he allowed free discussion. So bemused was the University community that the *Michigan Daily*, which began publishing in 1890, reported on the "new plan" for the course Introduction to Philosophy: "No lectures are given, the subject being developed entirely by discussion among members of the class, stimulated occasionally by questions from the Professor" (Walker).

This meeting of the individual mind with a fertile and hospitable environment served productive and expanding ends. Although still a religious man, Dewey came to recognize the need for free thought and democratic action. "In an 1892 address to the Students' Christian Association on 'Christianity and Democracy,' Dewey argued that democracy freed truth by breaking down class interests and encouraging both the science and technology needed for distributing facts. He called Christianity the 'continuously unfolding, never-ceasing discovery of the meaning of life,' and democracy the 'means by which the revelation of truth is carried on.' His talk affirmed that 'man is so one with the truth thus revealed, that it is not so much revealed to him as in him; he is its incarnation'" (Walker).

The University of Michigan had provided the young Dewey with a rare opportunity for personal growth. It is from the somewhat idyllic setting of the University of Michigan, and this spiritual and intellectual foundation that John Dewey prepared his thinking about pragmatism, education and democracy. This, among many other influences and experiences began the formation of his pedagogy. If his statements about teachers in *My Pedagogic Creed* ring of the evangelical and speak to the sanctity of the profession it seems likely that it is because Dewey, himself a young and religiously minded teacher, lacked the experience of teaching in the environments of restriction and drudgery common to a majority of teachers at that time. That he learned from his experience at Michigan to espouse egalitarianism and respect the rights and needs of women we know. He advocated for their inclusion in university functions and engaged in study to prove their effectiveness and value in intellectual environments. It seems that the spirit of the time and place was not as politically charged and contentious as the world outside and in such a climate it seems likely that the idealism which developed overlooked the possibility of unreasonable reactions to reasonable expectations. Chicago would begin to bridge that gap between the

ideal and the real, between theory and practice, and Dewey's approach would further develop in accordance with his experiences there.

Chicago: Experiment and Experience

When he was ultimately drawn to the University of Chicago it was no doubt both a financial decision and a desire to broaden professional interests. He had colleagues who had already moved to the New University of Chicago and the salary offered was more than double that at U of M. Chicago was also promoted in a way that must have made it seem perfect for a man of Dewey's ideals. It was billed as an innovative and egalitarian school and must have seemed perfect for him. Chicago offered a unique opportunity to John Dewey. It was there that he and Alice founded the Lab School. It provided the opportunity to create and observe the workings of democratically based principles in education for the young. This manifestation of theory into practice was not without its difficulties, however. Funding was scarce and the social climate less than balmy. Dewey was compelled to explain the principles and workings of the school in its defense against allegations of subversiveness as early as 1899 (Dworkin, 33). In *The School and Society* he explained his theory in such a way as to make it understandable and acceptable to a community engulfed in another form of education reconstruction. "A society is a number of people held together because they are working along common lines, in a common spirit, and with reference to common aims," he said. And, "The common needs and aims demand a growing interchange of thought and growing unity of sympathetic feeling. The radical reason that the present school cannot organize itself as a natural social unit is because just this element of common and productive ability is absent" (Dworkin, 39). This new emphasis on unity would remain a common thread in later work. He would also find need for restatement of this guiding principle repeatedly throughout the rest of his life. His contention that the artificial segregation of learners, teachers and administrators resulted in discontinuity in the schools and society and held that a respect for work and the products of work was necessary to shape the future of democracy.

During this time Dewey had begun a collaboration with Ella Flagg Young, a veteran teacher of the Chicago system. She was a staunch teacher advocate who, in protest of their disenfranchisement by Chicago superintendent of schools E. Benjamin Andrews, resigned her post as district superintendent of schools in 1899. His determination to "centralize control of the curriculum" had left Young "in discord" with her superiors and led to her withdrawal from the system (Lagemann 174). In fact, Young's post as district superintendent of schools was held during the implementation of the Loeb rules, which enabled the Chicago school system to deny

employment to members of the Chicago Teachers Federation as long as it was affiliated with labor unions. "Teachers were required to state in writing that they would not be members of any prohibited organization during their employment in the Chicago public Schools. Young later said that because of lack of support for teachers they had been "compelled to go in with those who felt the oppression and grind of the power of the rich. That is why they went into the Federation of Labor" (Young in Taft, 16). Her sympathies with teachers, at a time of increasing pressure on them, was no doubt an element of the "discord" she encountered.

Flagg was eminently practical and her collaboration with Dewey, as student and colleague from 1895 to 1904, marked the beginning of his own more practical considerations of teachers in their professional environment. His remark that, "the reorganization of the laboratory school after certain weaknesses in its original scheme of administration had become apparent (due largely to my inexperience in administrative matters)" and that Young's "influence with that of Mrs. Dewey were controlling factors" (Lagemann, 176) in its improvement, makes this clear. Before Young's involvement, Dewey had initiated a system of teacher's meeting that were intended to bring teachers into the cycle of democratic and educative process that he hoped to further. He had found that they centered primarily around the practical issues of supplies and logistics. Young along with Dewey's wife, Alice, introduced into this system an order and guidance that it had previously lacked. It "also provided a kind of cooperation on questions of educational theory and practice that Dewey was searching for and proved to him, he said later, that freedom combined with intellectual cooperation provided a better way to ensure effective teaching than 'supervision, critic and technical training'" (Lagemann, 177).

The unity of theory and practice was hampered, however by more mundane issues such as politics and financing. By 1902 Dewey had begun to run into difficulty in these areas. In *The Child and the Curriculum* he articulated the role of teacher as being one of guidance. But, he defined that term carefully. Guidance is not external imposition. "*It is freeing the life-process for its own most adequate fulfillment*" (Dworkin, 101). He might as easily be instructing policy makers as constructing a defined role for teachers. He goes on to describe the basis for that guidance in terms that could also be taken as instruction to authorities. "But save as the teacher knows, knows wisely and thoroughly, the race-experience which is embodied in that thing we call the Curriculum, the teacher knows neither what the present power, capacity, or attitude is, not yet how it is to be asserted, exercised and realized" (Dworkin, 111). The teacher must, in other words, be the mediator of the curriculum, not its delegate.

The decision was made to merge the Lab school with a more traditional school and although Alice Dewey was hired to manage it her position only lasted a year.

It seems likely that Dewey learned through his experiences with Young, something of the struggle of teachers in the real world. It is clear that he had some first hand experience with the difficulties of negotiating from the weaker position of the employed rather than the employer when he wrote in *The School and Society*, "While the training for the profession of learning is regarded as a type of culture, as a liberal education, that of a mechanic, a musician, a lawyer, a doctor, a farmer, a merchant, or a railroad manager is regarded as purely technical and profession. The result is that which we see about us everywhere—the division into 'cultured' people and 'workers,' the separation of theory and practice" (Dworkin 48).

In 1916 Dewey published *Democracy in Education*, in which he criticized the current system for failing to provide teachers with autonomy and participation in the processes of education. A practical understanding of the difficulties of the teachers placement in a construct he believed to be undemocratic is suggested. In these statements he is notably instructing, not the body of teachers, but the administrators of the system. His belief in democracy as a corrective measure for the problems inherent in the school system is revealed in the following statements.

But, until the public school system is organized in such a way that every teacher has some regular and representative way in which he or she can register judgment upon matters of educational importance, with the assurance that this judgment will somehow affect the school system, the assertion that the present system is not, from the internal standpoint, democratic seems to be justified (Dewey, *Democracy in Education*, 64).

The remedy is not to have one expert dictating educational methods and subject-matter to a body of passive, recipient teachers, but the adoption of intellectual initiative, discussion, and decision throughout the entire school corps (Dewey, 65).

What does democracy mean save that the individual is to have a share in determining the conditions and the aims of his own work; and that, upon the whole, through the free and mutual harmonizing of different individuals, the work of the world is better done than when planned, arranged, and directed by a few, no matter how wise or of how good intent that few (Dewey, 65)?

In response to the contention that teachers were not competent to participate in the making of policy and curriculum Dewey wrote:

"The best minds are not especially likely to be drawn where there is danger that they may have to submit to conditions which no self-respecting intelligence likes to put up with; and where

their time and energy are likely to be occupied with details of external conformity for free and full play of their own vigor (Dewey, 67).

But as long as a school organization which is undemocratic in principle tends to repel from all but the higher portions of the school system those of independent force, of intellectual initiative, and of inventive ability, or tends to hamper them in their work after they find their way into the school room, so long all other reforms are compromised at their source and postponed indefinitely for fruition (Dewey, 68).

It was, after all, the political maneuvering of a hierarchical system which brought Dewey's relationship with the Laboratory School, and his collaboration with Young, to an end. The school was merged with another in 1903, and although Alice Dewey was appointed principal the appointment lasted only one year, in deference to the concerns of the more traditional school. In 1904 Dewey accepted a post at Columbia University and moved his family to New York.

Chicago was the seedbed of Dewey's more practical approach to the profession of teaching. He had experienced the problems of supporting his theories in an unreceptive climate and had worked with teachers closely in an experimental setting that gave him insight into both the problems and possibilities for teaching. His exposure to Young must have educated him by bridging the gap between his own experience and that of the teachers who would, presumably, man the helms of his progressive schools.

Dewey's experiences with Young and his need to continue to advocate with the University for financial support for the Lab School Placed him in the midst of political mechanisms that were not anticipated or accommodated in his principals. The political manipulations that ultimately resulted in his departure from Chicago stand out in practical relief against his idealism. The idea of the unified whole of a school had fallen to the hierarchy, and the teacher as social servant and prophet had been reduced to his appropriate and fixed place in that hierarchy. From the experience, and from Young, Dewey came away with a new perspective on teachers. One that included the practical issues involved in their role as mediator of social purpose and of the political problems inherent to administering that role within a fixed hierarchical system. Dewey's move to Columbia University and New York City would broaden his perspectives still further and pull him further into the great society that he hoped through his ideals to unify.

New York: Into the Vortex

New York represented a new and enlarged arena in which Dewey's interest in teachers would play out. He became a member of American Federation of Teachers through Local

#5 and was involved in Union politics on the smaller, internal scale, and on the larger, national and international scale. The political climate of this time was hot with discord about the value of the democracy itself and ripe for contention about the best ways to initiate improvement through education. In addition to the pressures of reformers whose intentions were to strengthen the democracy, often through the implementation of traditional and hierarchical formulas, there were the radical reformers, bent on using the education system as a method of undercutting it. Dewey was caught up in the tornado of influences and activities. His dedication to the profession of teachers was evidenced by his attempts, through The Union, to improve their working conditions. But, the concerns of wages and basic working conditions, combined with the mechanisms of politics would overshadow the larger, more philosophical goal. Conflicts, both internal and external to The Union, would leave little room for the practical application of a democratically cogent system of education. By the 1950's the paranoia of the Red Scare would make progress in these areas virtually impossible.

The conditions and standards that teachers were held to when Dewey moved to New York were, if anything, worse than those of Chicago. The onslaught of WWI created a general aura of repression and the leaders in education tightened the hold on teachers. They were required to sign loyalty oaths and to undergo unwarranted scrutiny of their private lives. Associate Superintendent of Schools John L. Tildsley was involved in the questioning and subsequent dismissal of teachers. One such incident, was reviewed by Dewey and the evidence and circumstances described as "absolutely nothing but charges about the private views and private opinions; and these views were not expressed within any school, but were brought out, taking at their worst, taking it at Mr. Tildsley's . . . statements, in a purely private and personal hearing. I don't know what this is called in 1917, but it used to be called the Inquisition" (Dewey in Taft, 20).

Teachers' unions struggled for survival, as conditions for teachers' worsened affiliation with trade unions was their most likely means of success. Policy makers and school authorities attempted divisive measures, as had been done in Chicago, emphasizing that affiliation with "manual" labor would undermine teachers "professional" status. This may have been true. Given the entrenched attitudes (or hierarchical habits) of the society, it seems likely that the them-and-us division of management and labor has precluded the kind of democratic influence of teachers and administrators on education that was imagined by Dewey. The affiliation was, nonetheless, necessary to the improvement of basic conditions for teachers and the possibility for a more collaborative relationship within the school system as a whole seemed possible only through the venue of teachers' organization and affiliation with Labor. The rise of Communism would undermine this function further as communist ideologues

determined that infiltration of the schools was the best method of furthering their own political aims. Communist influences exercised a variety of tactics to gain control of the unions. They spread rumor and introduced factional elements. "By 1925, factional infighting in the New York City Teachers Union was sufficiently serious for a group of members to complain that the work of the organization was 'menaced' by four members of the executive board who had become members of the Workers' Party (the legal arm of the Communist Party) and who used 'disruptive, defeatist, and vituperative tactics to delay the work of the union and to pervert it for purposes alien to the ideals of the union and the American Labor Movement'" (Taft, 28).

Dewey found himself involved in internal union disputes over the disruptive tactics of communist members. His involvement in one such committee dispute entailed chairing a committee to review and pass judgment on the case. He "reported that the members of his group did not find service on the committee to be a pleasant task. He nevertheless said he believed that it was important to ventilate publicly the causes of dissention and disruption that had gripped the union for the last several years" (Taft, 32). Dewey remained active in the American Federation of Teachers. The AFT organized College locals and formed a special committee on college teachers in 1935 of which Dewey was a member. The Progressive Education Association that claimed Dewey progenitor, became, however, driven by reconstructionists. In 1932 George Counts wrote *Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order*, in which he called for the active cooperation of teachers in assuming the role of top-down influence over children and, therefore, the society as a whole. This was his manifesto for *imposing* a new social order, and in direct opposition to Dewey's idea of progressivism. Teachers' alignment with labor was to become part of a political process which would split it from the educative and societal process that Dewey had envisioned. His views on Communism would be overlooked as his philosophy became identified with its purposes. He said: "one of the reasons I am not a Communist is that the emotional tone and methods of discussion and dispute which seem to accompany Communism at present are extremely repugnant to me. Fairplay, elementary honesty in the representation of facts and especially of the opinions of others, are something more than 'bourgeois virtues.' They are traits that have been won only after long struggle. They are not deep-seated in human nature even now—witness the methods that brought Hitlerism to power" (Eaton, 89).

In 1937 The Radical List named Dewey and Counts among others as communist affiliates. It was a blacklist of sorts, found in *The Red Notebook*, by Elizabeth Dilling, and by 1940 Local 5 was under investigation. "It was claimed that the local was Communist controlled and as such was recognized by members of the college faculties at Hunter and

Queens as not being an important college teachers' organization" (Eaton, 119). In 1941 Local #5 was revoked as a member of AFT.

Dewey's views on teachers and their proper/rightful social position, and the practical use of unions to achieve it was undermined by the politicization of the labor unions in the early 20th century. Dewey found himself allied with individuals such as George Counts, who carried the label "Progressive" with them outside of the realm of its original meaning and into the realm of radicalism and communism. His affirmation of his ideals and opinions would place him in the line of fire between political factions and his attempts at temperate management of such factions failed, leaving him, and his philosophic approach to education in a position of vulnerability to opposing factions.

After the Storm

Dewey remained active throughout the rest of his life. Included in his experiences was the opportunity to work with Eleanor Roosevelt, the condemnation of Dwight D. Eisenhower, and the opportunity to address the Teachers of Peru. His position on democracy and education, however clarified and reiterated, remained an enigma to most people. Perhaps this explains the relative scarcity of his writing on the teacher in society. Perhaps too, it explains the current climate in which teachers work towards greater influence in the schools. The hierarchical administration of schools persists. The union of teachers has allowed for a negotiation of improved circumstances for teachers and, at the same time conceded to requirements for high standards of education, testing and experience for teachers in the name of their professionalism. The hierarchy continues to determine the nature and value of those requirements and to provide little opportunity for the voice of the teacher to be heard in budget and policy making. If his discussion of teachers was minimal in relation to the other significant subjects of his concern, it should also be noted that the nature of that role precluded his direction of, or to, members of the profession not in a position to exchange views with him. His inherent respect for their intelligence and position was implied, in this regard, by what he did not say. It should also be noted that respect was manifest in his actions and affiliations.

The tendency to think of John Dewey's philosophy in isolation, as "text," may contribute to the impression of his writing about teachers as minimal or inadequate. It is important to remember that experience is the foundation of education in his view, and that his own experiences inform every aspect of his writing. Where teachers and their position in the society and in education are concerned, it is especially important to understand his work in this context. His early thinking about teachers underwent enormous development and evolved in ways pertinent to the time and place he experi-

enced. The spiritual emphasis of his idea of teachers gives way to a more practical and active approach to their position, yet, the essential importance of the teacher's role as guide "in the formation of a proper social life" (Dworkin, 32) through which the unified function of a democracy can be maintained is only clarified and concretized in his later work. His belief in the dignity of the teacher's work and the sanctity of the profession became manifest in his advocacy and affiliation as his own understanding and experience broadened.

We have yet to realize the closely-knit relationship of teachers to their society that was envisioned by John Dewey. It remains to be seen whether the hierarchical construction of society is ingrained, through some inherent grammar of organization which functions in the human brain or whether, as Dewey imagined, a true democracy can evolve out of the habits of past experience. The evolution of a democratically structured school system, and the equalized investment of students, teachers and administrators would surely be necessary to that evolutionary process. Teachers, then, as Dewey envisioned them, would be the axis upon which such a democracy revolved.

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