

ARTICLE

RECONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL STUDIES¹

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The reconstruction of philosophy, of education, and of social ideals and methods thus go hand in hand.

—John Dewey²

ABSTRACT

As the world grows increasingly contentious, education for citizenship demands greater attention. Yet at this perilous juncture, social studies has neglected to take up the task of preparing citizens in a democratic and global society. Social studies has become increasingly fragmented and isolated by disciplinary foci that fetishize academic pursuits over broadly social purposes, precisely what Dewey warned against and which represent but a small portion of its functions. The academic-only social studies education has created a temporal disconnection that affirms the preparation for future life rather than, as Dewey preferred, the school as life itself. Dewey tasked the school with providing a context for social intelligence, power, and interests. When subject matter, like history and geography, is approached from a social perspective, it is viewed as expressing social life and affecting social development, not only as an academic end unto itself. We draw from Dewey's theory of social learning an intention to reorient social studies education in ways that point to the future, engage diversity toward common goals, and ultimately expand the social power of school subjects so that each is in effect a form of social study.

INTRODUCTION

In society today, we are inundated with reports on climate change, nuclear accidents, sectarian violence, terrorism, school shootings, police brutality, shrill mainstream politics, dire poverty, civil wars, and migration crises. As we observe their proliferation and escalation, it can feel as if we lack not only solutions to these social ills, but, even more fundamentally, ways to communicate about and make sense of their conditions and consequences. Unfortunately, our failure to parse these events will not make them go away. To the contrary, their full impact will be endured for generations to come.

As with other periods of transition and upheaval, this moment presents a ripe pedagogical opportunity. Schools are natural venues for intervention in the course of history: they provide a forum in which to apprise students of the facts of events, involve them in intelligent deliberations about what is fast becoming their social life, and thereby provide them with the analytic resources to effect change. Dewey foresaw this transformative capacity as the very core of the school's potential to create more peaceful and harmonious societies: "When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious."³ Here, Dewey expresses his appreciation for the immense potential of schools to inculcate compassion, a sense of justice, and autonomy among students. These are dispositions he knew to be vital to the project of achieving democratic and global citizenship.

It is no accident that social studies educators, in particular, position themselves and their field as inheritors of Dewey's progressive educational legacy. They have long held that Dewey spoke to them directly, given his emphasis on the fundamentally social nature of learning and the need to orient that learning toward the service of social goods. And indeed, given that Dewey's pedagogy was fundamentally an endeavor in social inquiry, social studies as a discipline seems uniquely suited for the task that Dewey originally assigned to schools generally. A quick look at contemporary research corroborates this affinity, showing established principles that learning is a social act (NCSS, 2010), statements of what constitutes powerful and purposeful social studies (NCSS, 2009), and a plethora of Dewey citations and Dewey-inspired projects.

Despite this historical affinity, social studies education has significantly diverged from what Dewey envisaged for it and the school, as the field has become increasingly isolated and internally fragmented. Our sense is that an academic climate that rewards ever-specializing discourse, be it in historical understanding, citizenship education, multicultural studies, social justice education, global education, or any number of versions and varieties now current under the broad umbrella of social studies education, has driven the field to a breaking point where its very existence has been called into question. Note the fact that the most recent policy initiatives in the United States—No Child Left Behind (2002), Race to the Top (2010), and the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015)—systematically omit social studies from frontline consideration as a field. These policies have precipitated a decline in the amount of time spent on social studies learning across the United States.⁵ Social studies as a K–12 subject area is in retreat from what was arguably an already diminished position vis-à-vis literacy and numeracy among policy makers and the general public. The fracturing and fragmentation of the field can only contribute to its further diminution when there is an existential question about what exactly the field provides young people and society. These conditions suggest a need

to revisit the field's foundations, to which Dewey's thinking is integral, in an effort to revitalize social studies education in schools and the academy. Our plan is thus to imagine what social studies education ought to be in this century, in light of the weighty issues on the near horizon, through a rereading of Dewey.

Dewey argued that all knowledge acquisition in school and society requires an integrative social or cultural education. That there are discrete subjects such as "World Geography" and "U.S. History" indicates that Dewey's intentions for geography and history to serve as the connective tissue of learning about society in all of its temporal and spatial dimensions have been missed or misconstrued. Dewey offers:

The meaning with which activities become charged, concern nature and man. This is an obvious truism, which however gains meaning when translated into educational equivalents. So translated, it signifies that geography and history supply subject matter which gives background and outlook, intellectual perspective, to what might otherwise be narrow personal actions or mere forms of technical skill. With every increase of ability to place our own doings in their time and space connections, our doings gain in significant content.⁶

Thus, we argue that a rereading of Dewey's thinking is in order to show that social studies ought instead to be part and parcel of the general education of all teachers and students, suffused within all curriculum: science, math, language, literature, physical education, art, music, and, indeed, the entirety of schools.

Dewey was famously skeptical of claims to expertise, an argument he developed in *The Public and Its Problems* as part of an ongoing debate with Walter Lippmann about the nature of democratic society. His argument was not intended to downplay the value of highly knowledgeable individuals or the accumulation of their learning; indeed, he recognized that the ever-increasing complexity of modernity required such forms of expertise. Still, he remained faithful to the notion that an education befitting modernity is one that draws out a method of intelligence through reflective experience, and so he preferred a generalized orientation toward knowledge—one might say in democratized fashion—to allegiance to experts, a preoccupation with expertise, and the knowledge-action that issued from both.⁷

Dewey insists that terms such as "science," "politics," and "religion" refer to aspects, emphases, or trends exhibited by experience, not discrete realms of knowledge. He cautions his readers not to separate and institutionalize these trends. Dewey writes:

Narrowness, superficiality, stagnation follow from lack of nourishment which can be supplied only by generous and wide interactions. Goods isolated as professionalism and institutionalization isolate them, petrify; and in a moving world solidification is always dangerous. . . . Over-

specialization and division of interests, occupations and goods create the need for a generalized medium of intercommunication, of mutual criticisms through all-around translation from one separated region of experience into another. Thus philosophy as a critical organ becomes in effect a messenger, a liaison officer, making reciprocally intelligible voices speaking provincial tongues, and thereby enlarging as well as rectifying the meanings with which they are charged.⁸

For Dewey, reciprocal intelligibility across regions of experience is essential, since ultimately the point of any knowledge for a pragmatist is the work it can do. Merely amassing expert knowledge, or contributing to a tributary of that expertise, is insufficient by Dewey's standards; the knowledge must be intelligible or translatable in a social context.

We argue that the field of social studies has become fragmented and isolated in the very ways that Dewey warned against, and that his philosophy should be used to reconstruct social studies education, which began with such promise in the early twentieth century. We argue that Dewey provides a model for how to reimagine social studies such that *all* educators would conceive of themselves as teachers of social study. Indeed, the very presence of "social studies educators" illustrates the problem that we highlight herein: the isolation of a social outlook to a single field, and its consequent removal from all others. We have divided our argument into three sections. In the first section we provide a brief and limited overview of social studies discourse today, with a focus on the trend toward specialization. In the second section, we interpret Dewey's writings on philosophy and education to show that he shared our concern that social intelligence, social power, and social interests be infused throughout the curriculum and school. In the third and final section of the paper, we return to contemporary social studies with a view to making concrete recommendations for how it might be reconstructed in light of our criticisms.

SOCIAL STUDIES TODAY

There has always been a natural affinity between social studies as a scholastic field and the academic disciplines to which it is most closely related. The National Council for the Social Studies, for example, defines the field as oriented toward citizenship through coordinated, systematic study, drawing upon "such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology."⁹ The field of social studies has sought to establish its legitimacy as an academic discipline in its own right. In doing so, however, it erred by substituting the aims of an academic discipline for those of a school-based subject that addresses social needs. The tension between social studies as a set of academic disciplines and social studies as a school-based subject has been an ongoing dynamic in the field's development.¹⁰ We are particularly interested,

however, in the way that specialization, or one might say the disciplinary and academic nature of social studies, manifests in the present situation.

The tendency to construe social studies as a set of academic disciplines is well illustrated in the recent line of work around thinking like a historian¹¹ or the need for political science discourse to orient citizenship education.¹² Students are introduced to the domains of thought proper to the discipline. In the former, students are exposed to historical-thinking skills such as corroboration, contextualization, reading, and sourcing, based on the assumption that such a focus will permeate novel situations where these skills are needed. In the case of the latter, students develop a critical and analytic “inside politics” viewpoint through examination of strategy, rhetoric, and electoral processes—attributes that permit a sophisticated understanding of citizenship. These educational movements are not problematic in and of themselves, as learning to think like a historian or conceiving civic space from the vantage point of a political scientist has real merit. The problem arises when these modes of thought are reified as skills whose acquisition supplants the larger aim of social studies: to develop thoughtful, socially responsible beings.

This reification occurs when particular ways of thinking come to be seen as “of the essence” of a single discipline, even though they are manifest in myriad other situations and locales. We see the tendency to overdetermine and cordon off “a way of thinking” when social studies is viewed as a field of amalgamated disciplines—simply a composite of other fields of knowledge—rather than a thing unto itself. One example of this would be the emphasis on historical thinking in social studies education, especially insofar as it is defined by the skills it entails:

Sourcing, or the act of considering the source of the document when determining its evidentiary value; corroboration, in which the details of one document are compared with those of another before accepting such details as fact; and contextualization, the act of creating a spatial and temporal context for a historical event.¹³

Cognitive categories like sourcing, corroboration, close reading, and contextualization are construed as historical thinking, yet claims about the disciplinary uniqueness of such cognitive processes are suspect. That these ways of thinking can be found in virtually every aspect of life is rarely considered by advocates of specialization. Farmers, for example, are knowledgeable about sources of parasites; anglers corroborate tidal conditions that precipitate fish-runs; masons pay close attention to context such as air temperature and humidity in order to make an effective pour of concrete; dramaturges engage in close reading of play scripts as they move into production. The list goes on and on. Indeed, myriad activities involve all of these thought modes intermittently and with syncopation. To argue that these modes of thought are specific and unique to historians is difficult to sustain; rather, the application of these worthy thinking skills is fundamentally human, not exclusively historical.

Specialization of thought-modes, a source of fragmentation within the field of social studies, is concomitant with a rise in information accessibility that is part and parcel of living in a digital, global age. As a rapidly growing mass of information becomes increasingly available, there arises a desire to rein in its breadth and intensity, and sort through its varying degrees of quality. Wineburg and Martin's account of Pakistani middle school students' failure to effectively navigate this mass of information is illustrative here.¹⁴ The authors observed students with limited background information trying to ascertain the validity of the Pakistan government's claim that it is a democracy. Ultimately, they found that students lacked the wherewithal to effectively evaluate the claim and recognize that Pakistan is, in fact, not generally regarded as a parliamentary democracy. The intended takeaway is that teachers and students ought to adopt specialization and teach students the ability to corroborate claims so that they would accept this claim as true. The particular situation notwithstanding, they invoke this tale to remind educators about the recklessness of undisciplined inquiry.

This conclusion about the value of disciplinary thought, however, is flawed in at least two respects: namely, with respect to ineffectiveness and nontransferability. First, with respect to ineffectiveness, the digital and global media age is rife with conflicting, asymmetrical, disjointed, and patently false information coming from many sides simultaneously. That educators could somehow inoculate young people against this cacophony of discordance by teaching them about distant historical events is difficult to imagine. A typical U.S. student will spend a maximum of 200 of his or her 8,760 yearly hours studying history. This is a remarkably small percentage (~2.3 percent) when compared to the time spent interacting with various media and being bombarded by the passing messages of the media age. The suggestion that engaging in historical study for this small percentage of time, and *only* this time, can prevent students from taking Pakistani government claims at face value is implausible. If one could demonstrate transferability of these skills, however, concerns about effectiveness could be allayed.

Yet, the second flaw lies just there—in the presumed transferability of disciplinary thought. Advocates of disciplinary specialization assume that historical-thinking skills are readily transferable to the analysis of contemporary events that bear no direct relationship to the history being studied. Read-aloud protocols that permit insights into how historians reason through contradictions in evidence and develop working theories that are evidence-based rather than teleological—assuming history as an unfolding destiny—illustrate the nuance and complexity of historical thinking.¹⁵ These claims are sound as they apply to historians, for sure. What is missing, however, is a clear demonstration of transferability beyond the quasi-experimental settings that studies like these organize. Does a young person educated in this setting naturally think this way when presented with an assertion in a setting far-removed from the artificiality of the classroom context? This claim

is crucial to the historical thinking-as-social-studies movement, and yet it cannot be proven; indeed, it is suspect. Moreover, if one sustains our earlier point that these historical-thinking skills are indeed human thinking skills, then sourcing them in the domain of historical study is also problematic. Might not students learn the same things from raising crops or building a home? Perhaps.

Moreover, given the disciplinary confines within which these skills are taught and learned, it would be problematic to assume that students are able to simply intuit when to activate them, or how to transfer one's orientation to, say, a historical document into everyday cognition about one's own life. Students are deeply socialized by schools to separate subject matters and corresponding learning processes along disciplinary lines such that in cases of, for instance, mathematics and English literature, they are unable to recognize any resemblance or affinity between the two. Indeed, this is the deep grammar of specialization and school organized under an industrial model. Corroborative thinking or sourcing claims can indeed be cultivated in school. Yet, life comes to us whole-cloth, not in ready-made parcels of information. This is the trouble with school curricula generally, and especially social studies in its particularizing mode: the organization of subject matter does not fit the naturalistic way students do and will encounter the world. And the hope that practicing such thinking skills will transfer to novel situations is dubious. Again, within the confines of academic learning, historical thinking and political science knowledge have great value and indeed have promoted instructional practice that moves beyond rote didacticism toward student engagement. But these conditions alone do not move social studies sufficiently into the realm of social education the likes of which Dewey had in mind.

Social studies education is suffering, then, from a problem of specialization. The cost of moving in this direction is that social studies education now fosters inquiries that are narrowly focused on disciplinary ways of thinking, which myopically occlude its properly *social* purposes. It no longer provides students with the opportunity to inquire into issues of pressing, universal concern, like climate change, geopolitical violence, and migration crises. These are the very sorts of social issues that, according to Dewey, individuals and communities need to address if they are going to be resolved. Dewey was calling for a study of the social. Social studies could fulfill that office if it only understood itself not through the lens of other academic disciplines, themselves ill-suited to problems of contemporary civics, but as a direct response to Dewey's call.

DEWEY ON HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY, AND PHILOSOPHY

Dewey discusses social studies in chapters 16 and 21 of *Democracy and Education*: “The Significance of Geography and History” and “Physical and Social Studies: Naturalism and Humanism” respectively. He holds that there is “a right and wrong way of conceiving [a subject's] value.”¹⁶ How we conceive of a subject's value

shapes the way we learn and teach it, and its potential role in social life. For Dewey, geography aims at the earth's "natural relations of sympathy and association with human life"¹⁷ and the fact that history cultivates "a more intelligent sympathetic understanding of the social situations of the present in which individuals share is a permanent and constructive moral asset."¹⁸ Ideally, these subjects bring about "the enlargement of the significance of a direct personal experience."¹⁹

Dewey explains that geography and history provide contexts for the local and the present; without geography and history the meaning of the local and the present is reduced. Dewey writes: "With every increase of ability to place our own doings in their time and space connections, our doings gain in significant content."²⁰ He qualifies his remark, insisting that our ordinary experiences will not be enlarged in meaning unless what is studied is "animated and made real by entering into immediate activity."²¹ Progressive educators have interpreted Dewey as recommending that students be involved in those everyday activities and experiences including, for example, cooking, hammering, and walking, of which he writes positively. Certainly Dewey is making a pedagogical point here. He objects to the teaching of "curious facts to be laboriously learned" because such an approach to education contributes to the "deadness of topics." For example, he is concerned that geography not become a "hodge-podge of unrelated fragments" or a "veritable rag-bag of intellectual odds and ends: The height of a mountain here, the course of a river there, the quantity of shingles produced in this town, the tonnage of the shipping in that, the boundary of a county, the capital of a state."²²

To its credit, the teaching of social studies has moved away from "recapitulating, cataloging and refining what is already known."²³ Nonetheless, it has failed to appreciate Dewey's broader disciplinary point. The field of social studies does not ignite the social imagination of students. Instead of being awakened to the profound influence and consequence of customs, traditions, and institutions, students feel instead as if they must learn to demarcate the different realms of human existence: geographic, economic, political, and social. Thus, students fail to connect the potency of social influence with the formation of their own attitudes, aspirations, and possibilities. We contend that Dewey's central thesis in the chapters on geography and history has been missed or misconstrued, namely that the "educational center of gravity is in the cultural or human aspects of the subject. From this center, any material becomes relevant in so far as it is needed to help appreciate the significance of human activities and relations."²⁴ In this section, our goal is to elucidate the thinking that informs Dewey's recommendation and explain why it has gone unheeded.

In the study of geography we consider our spatial relations and must, according to Dewey, always conceive them as whole. Similarly, in the study of history and our temporal relations, we must treat the past, present, and future as continuous. It is within the context of the continuities that we see "the things that fundamentally concern all men in common."²⁵ In the later chapter, "Physical and Social Studies:

Naturalism and Humanism,” Dewey underscores the intimate interdependence of geography and history. He writes that “man is continuous with nature, not an alien entering her process from without.”²⁶ Nature is not exclusively materialistic and mechanistic, just as humanity is not entirely idealistic and autonomous; nature and humanity exist in dynamic relationship with one another, which can be characterized in various ways. This dynamic relationship of humanity and nature is manifest in Dewey’s philosophy of experience, as well as in his conception of culture, which, Dewey came to believe, “fully and freely” conveyed his “philosophy of experience”²⁷; culture, unlike experience, encompasses “the immense diversity of human affairs, interests, concerns [and] values.”²⁸

According to Dewey, experience is a temporal process characterized by a cyclical rhythm of acting and undergoing, always directed toward restoring functional unity. His example is that of breathing:

Breathing involves taking in air in such a way that the air taken in is chemically charged with deleterious energies, destructive of the maintenance of the function. But breathing as function also expels the poisoned air as well as oxygenates the blood. The changes in the energy quality of the air involved in the function bring about changes in the other constituent energies *such* that the function is sustained.²⁹

What we distinguish as subjective (self, subject, individual, or organism) and objective (object, world, other, external, or, for instance, air chemically charged with deleterious energies) refers “to phases or stages in a series.”³⁰ Subjective factors contribute to the “going on” of the process; objective factors obstruct it and are converted into referential meanings. Dewey contrasts referential meanings with immanent meanings or values while emphasizing that the distinction is “one of phase and emphasis,” for he concludes that “every meaning in the concrete is both referential and immanent.”³¹ In the case of his example, respiration is a value because it “completes the meaning of the processes which lead to it, which if examined are found to require it, to indicate it or to point to it as their own fulfilled meaning.”³²

Experience is, in essence, “a moving equilibrium of integration.”³³ Its quality depends on the connections between “doing, undergoing, [and] subsequent doing.”³⁴ Human experience is distinctively social: it is characterized by “communication, participation, sharing, [and] communion.”³⁵ As interdependent social beings our functions are expanded to include such activities as the performative and visual arts, storytelling, economics, the judicial system, and understanding—otherwise referred to as culture. Formally speaking, culture is subject to the same cyclical rhythms as experience. Any given state of affairs is going to be characterized by material constraints that inspire individuals to improve the given state of affairs. The imagined possibilities conceived in response to the given state of affairs suggest something to be done on the part of individuals, thereby promoting ingenuity, effort, and action. The

effect of this activity is to produce knowledge of and modifications in nature.³⁶ These modifications produce a new state of affairs with inherent material constraints that inspire individuals to improve the given state of affairs. And so the cycle continues.

Dewey's account of culture emphasizes the conjoint expansion of humanity and nature by means of inquiry and experimentation. Thus, Dewey uses the term "mind" to describe culture in order to underscore the fact that culture uniquely "allows us to participate in a shared life of meaning and value; it is the basis for our having a sense of self and sense of other."³⁷ Given that a large part of our shared life is conducted in the realm of meanings, our ability to achieve our common purpose—"the richest and fullest experience possible"—is thwarted when meanings conflict.³⁸ Inconsistency results from our competing interests: scientific versus economic; conservative versus progressive; personal versus professional; institutional versus individual. Such conflicts are generative nonetheless because they stimulate individuals to develop a more comprehensive understanding. Thus, if culture is to deepen and expand, it must include the kind of criticism that (a) looks at the values animating human behavior or activity, (b) questions those values, and (c) submits actual criticism to even further criticism.

Such criticism is conservative *and* prospective, thereby ensuring the continuity of culture. One of its main purposes is to identify traditional values that are to be maintained and strengthened for future generations; such values are to be passed on as "more solid and secure, more accessible and more generously shared than [those] we have received."³⁹ For example, marriage is an institution that continues to find support within heterosexual communities and has now been extended and adapted to include same-sex couples. A related function of criticism is to identify those "values which have become obsolete with the command of new resources, showing what values are merely sentimental because there are no means for their realization."⁴⁰ One such value is men's chivalrous treatment of women: opening doors, walking on the outside of the sidewalk, and accompanying women home after an evening out. Such chivalry only makes sense against a background of sexual difference, "the idea that a person is essentially characterized as a man or a woman, that this belongs to who he is, who she is, and that one's sex is not like the color of one's hair."⁴¹

Criticism aims to make sense of why we do what we do, allowing us to become conscious of the present in relationship to the past as well as to future possibilities. It seeks understanding of ideas as they enter and order our experience: what happens to us, how we behave in response to what happens to us, and the consequent shape of our lives. Because criticism seeks "to clarify, liberate and extend the goods which inhere in the naturally generated functions of experience," it emancipates the full meaning of experience and liberates the human spirit.⁴² It promotes human freedom, which is important for realizing "the potentialities of an individual and of social progress."⁴³ Criticism enables societies to actively shape their futures by, for example, choosing to isolate and eliminate those practices that have lost their intelligibility and

viability. Contemporary society gets linked to the “continuous human community”⁴⁴ by way of its consolidation, expansion and transformation of values.

Dewey defends the value of intellectual (moral, cultural, or social) freedom, having distinguished it from both political (suffrage) and economic (opportunity and security) freedom. While he acknowledges that schools notably contribute to the achievement of political and economic freedom, he argues that their singular and ultimate purpose is to protect and promote intellectual freedom. Schools do this by developing “free inquiry, discussion and expression.”⁴⁵ If “the spirit of free intelligence” is to pervade the school, however, then ideas and inquiries must be genuine; they must not be sham, trivial, or irrelevant.⁴⁶ They must originate in personal reflection, which, as we explain later in the section, necessarily implies a social context, even if the students are not made aware of it. The point we wish to underscore here is that the ideas entertained in school are not innocent; they contribute to the kinds of persons that students become.⁴⁷ Thus, Dewey writes, “the schools have also the responsibility of seeing to it that those who leave its walls have ideas that are worth thinking and worth being expressed, as well as having the courage to express them against the opposition of reactionaries and standpatters.”⁴⁸

Dewey seeks to establish criticism as an integral feature of experience, culture, and schooling. He defines human well-being as the continuous and detailed engagement of critical reflection within the context of living a meaningful life, referring to such critical reflection as philosophy—the name was “familiar and convenient” and it invokes love of wisdom.⁴⁹ From our perspective, given that we are considering K–12 schools, Dewey might have more aptly named this engagement of critical reflection “social studies,” for social studies, like the form of philosophy that Dewey advocates, ideally deals with “the conflicts and difficulties of social life.”⁵⁰

Not everything called “philosophy,” however, fits this bill. Indeed, Dewey’s critique of professional philosophy in particular, as well as his functionalist account of knowledge, is necessary for reimagining a Deweyan mode of social studies education. In *Reconstruction of Philosophy*, Dewey criticizes professional philosophers for their “ambitious pretensions,” their assumption that the rigors of contemplation have been entrusted to their “sacred priesthood,”⁵¹ and their erroneous belief that their command of logic makes them uniquely qualified to tackle the “technical problems of abstruse philosophy.”⁵² Dewey’s chief concern is that philosophical inquiry is conceived as an end in itself and, for this reason, need not serve human life. Instead of being grounded in and motivated by our human creatureliness—our hungers, fears, conflicts, needs, desires, and aspirations—it answers only to the questions of what exists, what can be thought, and what can be known.

Dewey argues that the received view of professional philosophy is profoundly mistaken. It has failed to take its lead from the empirical sciences, which conceive of objectivity as relative or relational, not fixed by God or Nature, and as a “a range of applicability” with no final conclusions.⁵³ Scientific theory has lost its absoluteness,

having passed into a set of provisional hypotheses. The scientific method is experimental and self-corrective, making it possible for scientists to learn just as much from their failures as they do their successes. Like scientific inquiry, philosophy should become essentially open-ended, active, hypothetical, experimental, and critical. It must develop instruments for the investigation of human life and its social institutions. To this end, Dewey encourages recognition of philosophy's origin in culture. Humans live by means of words and symbols to which they are "most deeply and passionately attached."⁵⁴ Thus, "the material out of which philosophy finally emerges . . . is figurative, symbolic of fears and hopes, made of imaginations and suggestions . . . [i]t is poetry and drama."⁵⁵ If our experience carries within it practical principles of connection and organization, then it is possible to "*use* our past experiences to construct new and better ones in the future."⁵⁶ In such a context, philosophy changes from being contemplative to being operative. While professional philosophers can continue to debate the ends toward which individuals should direct their lives, they should do so with greater awareness of the material conditions and means, and acknowledge that these ends are "a collection of imagined possibilities that stimulates men to new efforts and realizations."⁵⁷ If ends are the instrumentalities of action, then we need ends that in their implementation will form the "right mental and moral habitudes in respect of the difficulties of contemporary social life."⁵⁸ Ultimately, professional philosophers must abandon their pretensions and recognize that "the work can be done only by the resolute, patient, cooperative activities of men and women of good will, drawn from every useful calling, over an indefinitely long period."⁵⁹

What does all this have to do with social studies education? The current view of social studies, much like the received view of professional philosophy that Dewey critiques, is circumscribed by a set of aims that represent only a small fraction of its proper function. It is viewed as a curricular subject that answers only the question of what can or cannot be known. Thus, the field of social studies needs its own reconstruction. Social theories need to be viewed as hypotheses that may or may not promote a kind of growth. As hypotheses, they take on the same dual, meaning-making function that Dewey attributes to criticism: they are conservative in that they alert us to traditional values that we want to retain and live by; they are prospective in that they seek to ground the unfurling of possible future goods.

A reconstruction of the aims of social studies education will drastically impact the daily routines of schools. The school is not merely preparation for a life destined to be lived in "the real world." Instead, it is life itself. The social dimension of school-as-life should not be conceived as an "add-on"; rather, it should be the basis of everything that happens in schools. All areas of study should be viewed as "means of bringing the child to realize the social scene of action."⁶⁰ There are two underlying claims here, both of which Dewey defends: subject matter must be presented within the context of the students' lives; and students should be encouraged to seek out and

interpret subject matter in light of their own social ends or values. Thus, Dewey tasks the school with developing social intelligence, social power, and social interests.

Although Dewey addresses geography and history, he does not treat them as discrete curricular subjects. Instead, he conceives of them as contextualizing the social nature of such abstract disciplines as mathematics and literature. In other words, geography and history teach students to be mindful of the material and cultural conditions—economics, demographics, and politics—that underlie any disciplinary inquiry. It is necessary for all teachers and students to become cognizant of these social dimensions because their import is not limited to the social studies curriculum. Every subject must be approached from a social standpoint—as expressing social life and influencing social development—because such an approach will ensure that the school moves to “eliminate the chief causes of intolerance, persecution, fanaticism, and the use of differences to create class wars.”⁶¹

The advantage of viewing the school and, more specifically, the K–12 curriculum in this way is that it gives these ideas a chance to become “motive-forces in the guidance of conduct.”⁶² It allows schools to make a difference in the future lives of individuals and communities, cultivating behavior that is “more enlightened, more consistent, more vigorous than it would otherwise be.”⁶³ This behavior is more enlightened, consistent, and vigorous because it is grounded in a rich understanding of the past and guided by dreams for the future that are realistically rooted in the resources of the present. Given the seriousness of the global issues facing current and future generations, there is abundant need for this type of critical education, of an active sense of the past that works toward the future rather than an unnecessarily specialized one that is inert. Dewey concludes that moral education does not consist in “isolated moral lessons upon the importance of truthfulness and honesty,” nor does it involve instructing students in such virtues as patience or courage.⁶⁴ These conceptions are “too narrow, too formal, and too pathological,” and together they have contributed to a “too goody-goody” vision of the moral.⁶⁵ For Dewey, a genuinely moral education forms “habits of social imagination and conception.”⁶⁶ In his view, moral motives, behaviors, and forces “are nothing more or less than social intelligence—the power of observing and comprehending social situations, and social power—trained capacities of control—at work in the service of social interest and aims.”⁶⁷

Given that progressives are critiqued and caricatured for their perceived lack of academic rigor, it is important to underscore that Dewey was not antitheoretical. Despite an emphasis on experimentation, he acknowledged the role of authority and precedent in social inquiry.⁶⁸ Although he did not consider theory “a substitute for personal reflective choice,” he nonetheless believed that it served to enlighten and guide choice by revealing alternatives, and by bringing to light what is entailed when we choose one alternative rather than another.⁶⁹ Dewey criticized an over-reliance upon theory, particularly when it was favored over more commonsense

explanations, and he criticized social theories that were exclusively critical or exclusively conservative. Ultimately, he favored social theories that demonstrate “practical power or efficacy.”⁷⁰ To project and direct social betterment, these theories have to take as their starting point the social, political, and economic situations that present us with choices about and demands on how we live. Such theorizing is far from being a remote intellectual exercise; rather, it is “hard and obnoxious” because it interrupts established, collective habits and precipitates criticism of existing customs and institutions.⁷¹ Yet without such thinking, “old truths become so stale and worn that they cease to be truths and become mere dictates of external authority.”⁷²

Thus, humans must discover new truths, and they can do so with the aid of (theoretical) reflection and experimentation.⁷³ For example, Dewey argues that while students are not in a position to buy or sell property from one another, it is possible for them to reflect on whether property is equitably distributed in society and, if not, whether they wish to do anything about it. In other words, students use what they learn to develop personal conviction and resolve in an effort to assume greater responsibility for their individual and collective decision-making. The students’ personal understandings are broadened to include knowledge of, and reflection upon, social systems and institutions. They are also enriched by the students’ awareness of which social conditions should inform their deliberations if they are to be effective.⁷⁴ The broadening and deepening of the students’ understandings is a vitally important step in the maturation process: students learn to make informed, reflective judgments about what is desirable, rather than acting uncritically, hastily, and haphazardly on their express desires.⁷⁵ Students revise their desires and purposes in light of what they have learned to be the probable consequences of a given pursuit, and thereby act with greater foresight and imagination.

Dewey refers to this kind of reflection and experimentation as “instruction in the art of living,” and he uses the analogy of friendship to illustrate its distinctness from more abstract and rigid forms of instruction.⁷⁶ He argues that it is impossible to develop a friendship based merely on information. A friendship develops, between Bill and Megan, let’s say, if their knowledge and understanding of each other serves to expand their modes of response—if they seek to revise their desires and purposes in light of how they imagine the other will react and behave. To do this, Megan must effectively learn to see with Bill’s eyes, hear with his ears, and think with his mind—and vice-versa. In other words, a friend teaches, but without the intent to teach.⁷⁷ To become friends, Megan and Bill must communicate and participate in each other’s values, but without these values having to be strictly marked off from one another and explicitly articulated as such. Bill presents Megan with the embodiment of ideals that command his thoughts and desires—and vice-versa. Thus, Bill and Megan’s friendship keeps alive the possibility that their values are open to reconstruction as they continue to interact with each other, just as students’ ideals are open to reconstruction as they continue to interact critically and reflectively with social custom and habit.

Throughout his career, Dewey never wavered in his conviction that thinking better the individual, the community, and the community's environment. As Dewey put it:

Without freedom, search for new truth and the disclosure of new paths in which humanity may walk more securely and justly come to an end. Freedom which is liberation of the individual, is the ultimate assurance of the movement of society toward more humane and noble ends. He who would put the freedom of others in bond, especially freedom of inquiry and communication, creates conditions which finally imperil his own freedom and that of his offspring. Eternal vigilance is the price of the conservation and extension of freedom, and the schools should [be] the ceaseless guardians and creators of this vigilance.⁷⁸

SOCIAL STUDIES RECONSIDERED

There are some strong parallels between what Dewey imagined as the socially reconstructive power of education and the role that social studies might occupy in schools. The specialized social studies programs that are currently widespread, however, bear little resemblance to Dewey's conception of educating young people from within a culture to inhabit it more fully, and to develop a practice of criticism through which that culture might be constantly reconstructed. Thus, in the interest of reimagining what social studies might look like in light of Dewey's thinking, we offer a series of recalibrations that could help bring the field of social studies into closer alignment with a thick conception of Deweyan theory.

The first recalibration we suggest is to orient social studies education away from its focus on descriptive knowledge and toward a Deweyan conception of knowledge: understanding that is always pressing toward the future. Much of what currently constitutes learning in social studies classrooms might be categorized as naming/thinking/knowning: to know something is to be able to name it and think about it. In these classrooms, the goal of learning is to develop familiarity with historical epochs and figures, political institutions and procedures, and economic tendencies and mechanisms. Largely missing from these classrooms is an emphasis on the kind of understanding of a situation that positions one to posit, theorize, and imagine into an uncertain future. Knowing about historical antecedents of contemporary circumstances, such as the ongoing global migrant crises, is of limited value: it can help us name the cause of the crisis, but it does little to help us imagine how we could go on to fix it. A robust exploration of what is happening now, however, with an eye toward what can and ought to be done in the near and more distant future, could yield the kind of knowledge that would help us address this crisis. Thus an orientation toward knowledge, one more in keeping with pragmatic thought of Dewey, would be superior insofar as it would help students to more than merely describe their world; it would help them reimagine it.

Second, we suggest that the field of social studies recalibrate its approach to communication around, through, and across difference. The increasing specialization of social studies has fragmented the discipline, thus causing isolation not only from other fields of study but also among the component sub-disciplines that now comprise the field itself. Developing a robust social democracy, however, requires the free and full interplay of communication. Indeed, the importance of communicative experience is profoundly important for Dewey; his philosophy relies on its capacity to shape what we know of our world and its points of intersection with our selves.⁷⁹ He believed there was crucial value in the reconstruction of experience in light of the experiences of the other, which signals the importance of a milieu of difference and otherness, one that invites the communicative mixing needed for social betterment. This sense of otherness is crucial for social studies and its value far outstrips that of the particularism about identity current in the field.⁸⁰ Thus our suggestion is to recalibrate social studies as a field in which students are brought into conversations with otherness not in order to solidify identities, but in order to germinate new social landscapes of participation and development across and about all difference.

The third recalibration we wish to suggest is the expansion and integration of social studies throughout all scholastic disciplines. The field of social studies has become “schooled”: divided within and among itself and cordoned off from the wider society of school and beyond that it seeks to reinvent. Social studies education in its current iteration is a far cry from the broadly social forward-moving discourse of connectivity of which Dewey had dreamed. Dewey imagined that schools themselves would have little utility as societies took up their truly educative purpose, a state of affairs perhaps best illuminated by his imagined visit to a future, utopian society:

I inquired, having a background of our own schools in mind, how with their methods they ever made sure that the children and youth really learned anything, how they mastered the subject matter, geography and arithmetic and history, and how they ever were sure that they really learned to read and write and figure. Here, too, at first I came upon a blank wall. For they asked, in return to my question, whether in the period from which I came for a visit to Utopia it was possible for a boy or girl who was normal physiologically to grow up without learning the things which he or she needed to learn—because it was evident to them that it was not possible for any one except a congenital idiot to be born and to grow up without learning. When they discovered, however, that I was serious, they asked whether it was true that in our day we had to have schools and teachers and examinations to make sure that babies learned to walk and to talk. It was during these conversations that I learned to appreciate how completely the whole concept of acquiring and storing away things had been displaced by the concept of creating attitudes by shaping desires and developing the needs that are significant in the process of living.⁸¹

Dewey's vision of education, though admittedly futuristic and utopian, is not outside the purview of contemporary schools when social studies education is reconceived on the model we have proposed in the preceding pages. This way of thinking about society, about culture, about others, and about our capacity to critically theorize what is and what might be, rests deep in the DNA of social studies. If it is to be realized, however, care will need to be taken to wind the field out of the disciplinary ruts and present a more robust examination of the social in light of all that is possible.

The final question that remains is, precisely how will this reconstruction of the social studies be realized? As will have become apparent, we are not calling for more social studies teachers. Instead, we are calling for teachers who have the ability to socially situate their inquiries. What does this mean in practice? It means that educators have a responsibility to learn about the aesthetic, ethical, political, and social dimensions of what they teach, whether it be algebraic equations or Shakespeare. Our argument has been that social studies is the kind of activity that beings like us should be engaged in: because we exist socially, we must reflect communally about the things that matter to us. Simply put, social studies education makes sense for us in light of who we are. To be engaged with the difficulties of social life is to be engaged with eternal questions. The teacher's commitment to inquiring into these eternal questions and reflecting upon our shared life is vital for the classroom, as it conveys to students the importance of engaging in their own processes of inquiry and reflection. This commitment both demonstrates and catalyzes what Dewey recognized as the transformative power of social education.⁸²

NOTES

1. Here we deliberately invoke the title of John Dewey's book *Reconstruction of Philosophy* and this passage from the introduction, written twenty-five years after the text was first published under its original title, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*: "Reconstruction of Philosophy is a more suitable title than *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. For the intervening events have sharply defined, have brought to head, the basic postulate of the text: namely that the distinctive office, problems and subject matter of philosophy grow out of stresses and strain in the community life, in which a given form of philosophy arises, and that, accordingly, its specific problems vary with the changes in human life that are always going on and that at times constitute a crisis and a turning point in human history." MW 12:256. All references to John Dewey's published works are to *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston and published by the Southern Illinois University Press in Carbondale and Edwardsville (1969–2003). All such citations take the form of two capitalized letters indicating the reference is to either *The Early Works, 1882–1898* ("EW"), *The Middle Works, 1899–1924* ("MW"), or *The Later Works, 1925–1953* ("LW"), followed by two sets of numbers separated by a colon. The first numeral indicates the specific volume in which the cited work appears, and the second numeral indicates the page number or numbers where the citation is to be found.

2. MW 9:341. By way of explanation, Dewey's epistemology is premised on his philosophical-psychology. In his 1896 paper, "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology," Dewey argued that if psychologists are to properly understand human behavior, then they must study humans as they function in their immediate and spread-out environment. For Dewey, the organism and its environment exist in a continuum. Thus, he writes, "At every point and stage, accordingly, a living organism and its life processes involve a world or nature temporally and spatially 'external' to itself but 'internal' to its functions" (LW 1:212). Put differently, the mind, associated as it is with a living and adaptive organism, has as "the material of [its] thought . . . the events and connections of this environment" (LW 1:213). The organism thinks "as a means of sustaining its functions" (*ibid.*); meanings "are tools *par excellence*" (MW 13:376). When successful, these thoughts or meanings assume the status of knowledge.

3. MW 1:19–20.

4. We reviewed all published pieces in the social studies education flagship research journal, *Theory and Research in Social Education*, from 2000 to 2008 and found that thirty-eight were based in a Deweyan conception of democratic education. However, in the period 2008–2015, we found that the number was only eleven.

5. Jen Kalaidis, "Bring Back Social Studies," *The Atlantic*, September 23, 2013. Retrieved on July 23, 2016 from <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/09/bring-back-socialstudies/279891>.

6. MW 9:208.

7. LW 12:54.

8. LW 1:306

9. National Council for the Social Studies, "About NCSS," 2016. Retrieved on September 1, 2016 from <http://www.socialstudies.org/about>.

10. See Ronald W. Evans, *The Social Studies Wars: What Should We Teach the Children?* New York: Teachers College Press, 2004.

11. See Sam Wineburg and Daisy Martin, "Reading and Rewriting History," *Educational Leadership* 62, no. 1 (2004): 42–45; Sam Wineburg, "Reading Abraham Lincoln: An Expert/Expert Study in the Interpretation of Historical Texts," *Cognitive Science* 22, no. 3 (1998): 319–346.

12. See Wayne Journell, Melissa W. Beeson, and Cheryl A. Ayers, "Learning to Think Politically: Toward More Complete Disciplinary Knowledge in Civics and Government Courses," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 43, no. 1 (2015): 28–67.

13. Wineburg, "Reading Abraham Lincoln," 322.

14. Wineburg and Martin, "Reading and Rewriting History," 42–45.

15. *Ibid.*

16. MW 9:222.

17. MW 9:221.

18. MW 9:225.

19. MW 9:226.

20. MW 9:216.
21. Ibid.
22. MW 9:219.
23. MW 9:220.
24. Ibid.
25. MW 9:223.
26. MW 9:294.
27. LW 1:361.
28. LW 1:363.
29. MW 13:378.
30. MW 13:379.
31. MW 13:381.
32. MW13:380.
33. MW 13:377.
34. MW 13:379.
35. MW 13:382.
36. MW 9:294.
37. Thomas Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 82.
38. LW 1:308.
39. LW 9:57–8.
40. MW 9:339.
41. Cora Diamond, “Losing Your Concepts,” *Ethics* 98, no. 2 (1988): 268.
42. LW 1:307.
43. LW 11:254.
44. LW 9:57.
45. LW 11:252.
46. LW 11:254.
47. See John Dewey, “Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy,” *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2015): 7–44.
48. LW 11:253.
49. LW 1:305–6.
50. MW 9:333.
51. MW 12:273.
52. MW 12:124.
53. MW 12:262.
54. MW 12:94.
55. MW 12:83.
56. MW 12:134.
57. MW 12:147.
58. MW 9:341.

59. MW 12:273.
60. MW 4:31.
61. LW 7:338.
62. MW 4:267.
63. MW 4:268.
64. MW 4:283.
65. MW 4:285.
66. MW 4:283.
67. MW 4:285.
68. MW 7:329–30.
69. MW 7:165.
70. Dewey, “Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy,” 10.
71. Dewey, “Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy,” 7.
72. LW 11:254.
73. MW 7:316–7.
74. MW 7: 319.
75. LW 13: 219.
76. LW 10: 349.
77. Ibid.
78. LW 11:254–5.

79. See Megan J. Laverty, “Communication as Translation: Reading Dewey after Cavell,” in *Stanley Cavell and Philosophy as Translation*, edited by Paul Standish and Naoko Saito (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 121–140.

80. See William Gaudelli and Megan J. Laverty, “What Is a Global Experience?” Special Issue on John Dewey’s *Education and Experience*, edited by Leonard Waks, *Education and Culture* 31, no. 2 (2015): 13–26.

81. LW 9:138–9.

82. An earlier version of this article was presented as part of the past panel on Dewey and Philosophy: Revisiting *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey Society, American Educational Research Association (AERA). We are grateful for comments from David Granger, Maughn Rollins Gregory, Rachel Longa, and an anonymous reviewer.

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