

## John Dewey's View of the Curriculum in *The Child and the Curriculum*

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### *I. Introduction*

When we think of John Dewey and curriculum, *The Child and the Curriculum* may immediately come to mind—and justifiably for this work, although published in 1902, remains a centerpiece in Dewey's thinking about curriculum. Of course, there are other notable works related to his view of curriculum: some published around the time of *The Child and the Curriculum* (e.g., *The Educational Situation*, 1901) and some published much later (e.g., *Experience and Education*, 1938). And still many other works deserve attention in any thorough and comprehensive study of Dewey's curriculum theory or philosophy. However, we will restrict our inquiry to *The Child and the Curriculum* in this essay. This decision is largely a celebratory one, an effort to honor Dewey for his brief but influential volume published a hundred years ago.

Today, whether in the name of accountability, higher standards, or economic competitiveness, we risk putting the formal school curriculum ahead of the child—a problem that Dewey addressed in 1902. Advantaged and influential individuals and groups unconsciously surrender the individuality, aspirations, and humanity of the child to privileged interests and voices, and in so doing, they unwittingly give or take away the professional roles and responsibilities of educators. That is, educators are frequently stripped of the freedom to think for themselves, to make professional judgments, and to teach in ways that they consider are in the best interest of children and youth, because we wish to prescribe precisely when students learn which specific skills and information. High-stakes testing, for instance, dominates the curriculum and, therefore, the teacher and the student in certain situations. But this scenario is not a completely new one, and we can learn much from Dewey's analysis of similar departures from sound educational thinking. Revisiting *The Child and the Curriculum*, then, may enable us to better understand and resist some unwarranted contemporary policies and practices.

For Dewey, educational theory is largely a matter of making sense of education and warranted practices in schools. In fact, all theorizing is a question of giving meaning to experience, moving from private interpretations of them to publicly defensible understandings of the same. So, curriculum theorizing involves seeking to make sense of pertinent as-

pects of education, subjects, the child and related matters in order to clarify what should be publicly defensible learning experiences for students. As we consider his overall views in *The Child and the Curriculum*, consideration of his thoughts about educational theory, commonsense and theoretical controversies, and the curriculum itself offers insights and cautions for those who are keenly interested in children, schools, and society.

### *II. Educational Theory*

In discussing his view of the educative process, Dewey's ideas about educational theory and, embryonically, curriculum surface early in *The Child and the Curriculum*. He observes:

The fundamental factors in the educative process are an immature, underdeveloped being; and certain social aims, meanings, values incarnate in the matured experience of the adult. The educative process is the due interaction of these forces. Such a conception of each in relation to the other as facilitates completest and freest interaction is the essence of educational theory. (MW 2, 273)

Dewey connects both the educative process and educational theory with the student's *interaction* or involvement with particular societal aims, meanings, and values that emerge from adult experiences. He identifies or describes the active role of the student (i.e., "interaction"), the "fundamental factors" of the educative process, and "the essence" of educational theory. The aims, meanings, and values of the adult experience are also identified with "the matured experience of the adult." While the mature experience of the adult—or "the adult mind"—is important to Dewey, it is not self-explanatory. Thus, experience should be seen as material or facts to be examined, not conclusions that are self-evident or beyond reflection (MW 2, 279). The adult mind, therefore, may be either justifiably or incorrectly formed or both, depending upon a variety of matters, including the quality of the experience and reflection of the person as she or he matures, studies, and works.

In one sense, however, theory—or meaning-making—can be problematic because, if left unquestioned, it can be-

come the realm of "insoluble" controversy, especially if a practical problem or issue (such as the relationship of the child and the curriculum) results in polarized or either-or thinking that fails to grasp the whole picture. To be satisfied with either-or thinking as in the phrase "the child vs. the curriculum," then, is to walk away from new possibilities and from our responsibility to think reflectively and comprehensively about educational issues, theory, and curriculum (MW 2, 274). So a key question for Dewey is how we think holistically or synthetically—and reflectively—about educational issues, processes, and theory, and thereby, the curriculum.

### III. Commonsense and Theoretical Controversies

*The Child and the Curriculum* provides insight into how Dewey thinks about moving away from largely private interpretations of experiences and facts and toward a more publicly defensible theoretical understanding. Correctly or incorrectly, Dewey believes that it is fortunate that either-or thoughts are "rarely carried to their logical conclusion" (MW 2, 277), saying:

Common-sense recoils at the extreme character of these [either-or thinking] results. They are left to theorists, while common-sense vibrates back and forward in a maze of inconsistent compromise. The need of getting theory and practical common-sense into closer connection suggests a return to our original thesis: that we have here conditions which are necessarily related to each other in the educative process, since this is precisely one of interaction and adjustment. (MW 2, 277)

Thus, Dewey thinks we need to get theory and practical commonsense "into closer connection" because the child and the curriculum are "related to each other." To discuss the child and the curriculum in isolation of one another can only result in a flawed understanding of each domain and of education, educational process, and educational theory. But if theorists often lead us to an "insoluble, theoretic problem," commonsense frequently leads us to a "maze of inconsistent compromise" (MW 2, 273-74, 277). Are we doomed to have and to be lost in insoluble theoretical problems and inconsistent ideas? Does Dewey have any suggestions to help us out of this dilemma? In particular, how does he think the controversy about the child and curriculum can be successfully handled? His answer in *The Child and Curriculum* appears simple but, undoubtedly, to act on it is not. Three of his points are procedural:

- First, it is important for us to recognize that any significant theoretical problem arises out of "a genuine problem" (MW 2, 273). Consequently, the problem needs to be approached both carefully and seriously, for genuine problems of curriculum design and implementation indicate theoretical problems that need to be addressed before significant progress can be made.
- Second, in theoretical and practical debates, we need to step back from our differences, set aside our terms and their meanings, and look for a fresh way to see and discuss the conflicting opinions (MW 2, 273). This advice, of course, is demanding, for it requires that we search for and use different terms as we communicate with one another. On the other hand, if we do not take this step, we may continue to be locked in our verbal prisons and, thereby, inoperable circumstances.
- Third, we need to realize that it will be easier for us to "stick by" our ideas and to look for ways to "buttress" them than to "think" and to "surrender" our ideas and detach ourselves from our existing beliefs (MW 2, 273). Thinking, surrendering, and detaching are challenging activities because we seem personally and culturally disposed to defend rather than to examine our beliefs. We are too frequently prone to critically evaluate the ideas of others but not our own.

Applying these three points to the problem of the child and the curriculum brings us to a fourth, substantive point:

- We need to abandon our prejudice that there is a "gap in kind (as distinct from degree) between the child's experience and the various forms of subject-matter that make up the course of study" (MW 2, 277-278). To retain the belief that the child understands nothing important about mathematics, language, history, art, music, and science is a prejudice or prejudgment that needs to be abandoned. We find in the experience of children the rudiments of ideas that lead into a formal study of nearly all subjects.

Dewey continues and clarifies this fourth point by saying that

*From the side of the child*, it is a question of seeing how [her or] his experience already contains within itself elements—facts and truths—of just the same sort as those entering into the formulated study; and, what is of more importance, of how it contains within itself the attitudes, the motives, and the interests which have operated in developing and organizing the subject-matter to the plane which it now occupies. (MW 2, 278; italics added)

Conversely, he adds:

*From the side of the studies*, it is a question of interpreting them as outgrowths of forces operating in the child's life, and of discovering the steps that intervene between the child's present experience and their rich maturity [as found in the thinking of educated adults]. (MW 2, 278; italics added)

But, we are prodded to ask, will attempting to work our way through these steps enable us to meet our goal of getting "theory and practical common-sense into closer connection"? Will the process enable us to develop a reflective curriculum perspective (MW 2, 277)? Perhaps—dare we say, *probably*?—not as much as we may wish, for Dewey identifies a fifth step

to take. Or, more accurately, he delineates an entire set of additional, overlapping prescriptions that should guide us as we seek to bring theory and practice together. We must

[a] *Abandon* the notion of subject-matter as something fixed and ready-made in itself, outside the child's experience; [b] *cease* thinking of the child's experience as also something hard and fast; [c] *see* it as something fluent, embryonic, vital; and . . . [d] *realize* that the child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process. Just as two points define a straight line, so the present standpoint of the child and the facts and truths of studies define instruction. It is continuous reconstruction, moving from the child's present experience out into that represented by the organized bodies of truth that we call studies. (MW 2, 278; italics added)

Worth noticing is Dewey's claim that "instruction" is "moving" from the present experience of the child "out into" the curriculum or organized bodies of knowledge—a process of reconstruction. Instruction or, as we may prefer to say today, teaching or facilitation, assists the child as she or he moves from current experiences into new realms of experiences. Thus, he brings together the terms and ideas *child*, *educative process*, *educational theory*, *instruction*, and *curriculum*. These terms can be distinguished for discussion and clarification, but they cannot be completely separated conceptually or operationally. Nor can the curriculum be understood rightly and fully if it is dichotomized from the child. Simply stated, the curriculum, from one perspective, *includes* the child's past, present, and future experiences as she or he moves into adult forms of knowledge and creativity.

Thinking, particularly rejecting our prior thinking, is neither easy nor enjoyable much of the time. Neither is thinking in different, holistic ways about this complex of interwoven ideas and issues. As Dewey notes: "But here comes the effort of thought. It is easier to see the conditions in their separateness, to insist upon one at the expense of the other, to make antagonists of them, than to discover *a reality* to which each belongs" (MW 2, 273; italics added).

What is this *reality* that Dewey thinks is a key to moving us closer to both collective and reflective, but not prescriptive,\* thinking? His answer is that "the facts and truths that enter into the child's present experience, and those contained in the subject-matter of studies, are the initial and final terms of one reality." This one reality encompasses (a) the child's immature experience and the adult's organized experiences, (b) the child's infancy and the adult's maturity, (c) the child's moving tendencies and the adult's final outcomes, and (d) the child's nature and the adult's destiny (MW 2, 278). Seeing the beginning and the ending—however provisional—of the educative process is critical, for it provides guidance toward the "direction the present experience is moving" (MW 2, 279). Thus, "the systematized and defined experience of

the adult mind . . . is of value to us in interpreting the child's life as it immediately shows itself, and in passing on to guidance or direction" (MW 2, 279). This notion returns us to a familiar statement by Dewey: "the child and the curriculum are two limits which define a single process" (MW 2, 278). The single process and the one reality merge in educative experiences.

So, the concepts of educative process, interaction, child, curriculum, instruction, and educational theory are overlapping and compose an interrelated network of Deweyan thinking. Consequently, Dewey's overall curriculum theory is intimately involved with each of these overlapping ideas and, as we shall now see, more.

#### IV. Curriculum

From what we have seen, Dewey, at least in part, sees the curriculum as "the child's present experience" and "the subject-matter of studies" (MW 2, 278). The former notes the early steps in our understanding the world and the latter the more developed understanding that is involved in formal inquiry. But he says more on the topic, emphasizing "the attitudes, the motives, and the interests" involved in knowledge development (MW 2, 278) and the outcome of the maturing, developing "adult mind" (MW 2, 279). But what is the value—or how do we use—the curriculum, especially "the adult mind" or "organized bodies of truth," since they are not the child's present mind (MW 2, 278-279)? In at least three crucial ways we think, Dewey replies:

- First, the adult mind provides a distant goal toward which to educate (MW 2, 279). The adult mind, at its best, serves as a goal toward which education, including schooling, ought to move. To not move in this direction is to inhibit the intellectual growth of the student.
- Second, it helps us to understand the child's life and mind and to provide guidance in view of both the adult's and the child's mind (MW 2, 279). As the child expresses interests and interacts with the environment (including other children and teachers), her or his level and way of understanding indicates to the teacher where to begin and how to proceed in the educative process. If the teacher's adult mind is poorly developed, she or he will be handicapped in understanding the child's life and mind and poorly prepared to direct the development of the child.
- Third, the teacher's adult understanding enables her or him to create learning environments that are needed in order to promote the child's growth (MW 2, 291). From

this angle, adult knowledge—"the adult mind"—constitutes the building blocks for educative environments that facilitate the growth of the student as she or he develops a knowledge-enriched and reflective mind. In a sense, then, the child's mind develops into one that is similar to the teacher's as it is manifested in the environment that was created by the teacher and reconstructed by the student.

Dewey's perspective brings us two important benefits. First, it gives us a way of interpreting the child's present tendencies and schooling's future end. We gain help in understanding that some inclinations of the child are "waning," others are "culminating," and still others are "dawning" (MW 2, 279-280). But these tendencies, impulses, and interests are not determinative in making curricular decisions for the student. They can be as much for the child's ill as good. They can be educationally helpful or of little or no educational promise. Neither "continuous initiation" of studies fueled by the student's impulses nor "continual repression" of tendencies by the teacher, therefore, is educationally well advised. Instead, Dewey claims, second, that his conception gives us a way of evaluating—not just understanding—the child's tendencies, impulses, and interests and ideas about how they might be put to good use in further developing the child's understanding. He explains:

... the subject-matter of science and history and art serves to reveal the real child to us. We do not know the meaning either of his [or her] tendencies or of his [or her] performances excepting as we take them as germinating seed, or opening bud, of some fruit to be borne. (MW 2, 281)

The significance in the child's experience is that it is leading or tending. Subject matter is used to interpret the child's tendencies and abilities—to see their potential to grow into fuller, richer understanding; it can then be used to direct or guide the child's growth. Such guidance or direction, however, is not an "external imposition," but a "freeing the life-process for its own most adequate fulfillment" (MW 2, 281). But this does not mean leaving the child entirely to her- or himself (MW 2, 281). If we leave the child completely to her or his interests, independent thinking will be impossible for no one can "evolve a universe out of his [or her] own mind" (MW 2, 282). Some of our experiences can be made richer and can in turn enrich others. Dewey elaborates on the need for and the nature of direction and its connection to developing the adult mind:

Development does not mean just getting something out of the mind. It is a development of experience and into experience that is really wanted [italics added]. And this is impossible save as just that educative medium [stimulus] is provided which will enable the powers and interests that have been selected as

valuable to function. They must operate, and how they operate will depend almost entirely upon stimuli which surround them and the material upon which they exercise themselves. The problem of direction is thus the problem of selecting appropriate stimuli for instincts and impulses which it is desired to employ in the gaining of new experience. What new experiences are desirable, and thus what stimuli are needed, it is impossible to tell except as there is some comprehension of the development which is aimed at; except, in a word, as the adult knowledge is drawn upon as revealing the possible career open to the child. (MW 2, 282-283)

Thus, the teacher is concerned with seeing that the logical dimensions of the curriculum are "psychologized; turned over, translated into the immediate and individual experiencing within which it has its origin and significance" (MW 2, 285). The teacher is concerned with the subject matter

... as representing a given stage and phase of the development of experience. His problem is that of inducing a vital and personal experiencing. Hence, what concerns him, as a teacher, is the ways in which that subject may become a part of experience; what there is in the child's present that is usable with reference to it; how such elements are to be used; how his own knowledge of the subject-matter may assist in interpreting the child's needs and doings, and determine the medium in which the child should be placed in order that his growth may be properly directed. He is concerned, not with the subject-matter as such, but with the subject-matter as a related factor in a total and growing experience. (MW 2, 285-286)

Growth, consequently, is not simply change, but change in a worthwhile direction. A significant problem, therefore, faces the teacher who seeks to direct a student's learning: if the curriculum is taken in its organized adult form, the child may be coercively or inappropriately motivated to learn the material as *an outsider* to that realm of inquiry or creativity (MW 2, 286-290). How is the teacher to avoid curriculum imposition? Dewey offers an alternative, getting the student to become *an insider* to the knowledge: "The legitimate way out is to transform the material; to psychologize it—that is, once more, to take it and to develop it within the range and scope of the child's life" (MW 2, 290). This idea takes us back to Dewey's third point about the use of the curriculum or the organized, logical adult mind. He explains:

Now, the value of the formulated wealth of knowledge that makes up the course of study is that it may enable the educator to determine the environment of the child, and thus by indirection to direct. Its primary value, its primary indication, is for the teacher, not for the child. It says to the teacher: Such and such are the capacities, the fulfillments, in truth and beauty and behavior, open to these children. Now see to it that day by day the conditions are such that their own activities move inevitably in this direction, toward such culmination of themselves. (MW 2, 291)

The teacher, therefore, is to *direct indirectly*—so as not to impose adult forms of knowledge directly upon children—the present “powers,” “capacities,” and “attitudes” of students until they are “asserted, exercised, and realized” (MW 2, 291). In order to do so, we must rely upon “the teacher [who] knows, knows wisely and thoroughly” the realms of understanding and creativity which are a part of what “we call the Curriculum,” for understanding it is essential to understanding both the child’s present development and her or his desirable future development (MW 2, 291).

### V. Conclusion

Dewey’s conception of curriculum in *The Child and the Curriculum* can be stated in a set of related propositions about the existing knowledge of a student, the mature knowledge of an educated adult, and the transition from one to the other. His ideas are complex and can be easily misunderstood and misstated if traditional ways of understanding curriculum are deeply imbedded in our minds. Consequently, we are well advised to note from time to time what he does not mean by particular ideas as well as what he does intend by them. Whether we are agreeing or disagreeing with his beliefs and proposals, this seems important given the plethora of misinterpretations and distortions of Dewey’s perspective.

From Dewey’s perspective, learning needs to be seen as a dynamic, reconstructive, complex, and personal process that cannot be legitimately and thoughtfully legislated by governments, prescribed by policy makers, insisted upon by administrators, demanded by parents, stipulated by curriculum committees or even required by teachers. The child’s learning prior to and outside school differs significantly from person to person, culture to culture, ethnic group to ethnic group, and socioeconomic stratum to socioeconomic stratum. That means that in-school learning should not be delineated in detail—even if the prescribed curricula and outcomes are standardized and assessed.

Why is it counterproductive to prescribe the details of the curricula and/or the outcomes of such study? Dewey tells us that it is because the child is a thinking, feeling, choosing, and maturing being who has already learned many values, lessons and much useful information and who needs to personally integrate that which has already been learned with new attitudes, skills, and understandings. To attempt to force a previously packaged adult mind upon a child—even in the unfortunate but fortunately unlikely case it was successful—does not lead to an enthusiastic spirit of learning. Indeed, the opposite is the case: the child learns to dislike learning or, at least, in-school learning. The logically ordered adult mind needs to be adapted to the intellectual and emotional development and legitimate interests of the child if learning is to be enjoyable, useful, and fruitful. Adult knowledge needs to

be turned over, translated into the immediate and individual experiencing within which it has its origin and significance” (MW 2, 285). Following Dewey, then, means that districts, schools, and teachers need the latitude to make professional judgments and to adjust studies for each student if she or he is to learn a great deal of the adult mind in an agreeable and effective manner.

This is not to say that these groups and individuals should have nothing to say about determining curricula and learning outcomes. To the contrary, their voices should be heard as they describe ideals about which types of adult minds they want children to develop. They have a right and, perhaps, an obligation to express concerns about the goals and outcomes of schooling. They are well advised to exercise their right to be involved in these important debates given that they are citizens as well as, on occasions, politicians, parents, and professionals. Indeed, this is the same healthy educational debate that advances our own thinking and the bodies of knowledge and creativity we have developed. On the other hand, the curriculum is best taught, if Dewey is correct, when we view it as something that is gradually learned as novices and experts create stimulating and interactive environments that engage each student with others. The environments will need to be highly varied and variable, not created by distant specialists. The outcomes of such learning will be various, too, but they will include the development of educated adults who think and act on the best available and warranted knowledge. The paths to this end are highly personal and the learned content of the curriculum can be considerably different. But, in time, the child and the curriculum will grow together and become, in important but limited ways, one.

### Note

\*The phrase “but not prescriptive” is used to suggest that reflective and collective thought are not forced in terms of process or outcome.

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