

The John Dewey Lecture

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Public Education and the Education of the Public

by

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It's a lovely honor that has been granted to me this evening, to deliver the John Dewey Lecture.* And I am very grateful to Maxine Greene and Mary Anne Raywid and the other members of the selection committee and to all of you who are here this evening.

I had the pleasure of knowing John Dewey during the last few years of his life and of talking with him on any number of occasions. I shall never forget the first time I met him, when he was ninety. We had a mutual friend in Sing-nan Fen, who had translated Dewey's works in China and had then come to the United States to study philosophy of education and in the process had come to know Dewey. (Fen, incidentally, now teaches at the University of Nebraska.) Fen asked me quite unexpectedly one evening whether I would be willing to deliver a package for him to the Dewey apartment on my way home, and I said of course I would. The Deweys at that time lived in an apartment at 97th Street and Fifth Avenue. I went on up and rang the bell and Mrs. Dewey came to the door and graciously accepted the package and asked whether I would like to meet Professor Dewey. I said it would be a privilege and was promptly ushered into the study, where Dewey was pecking away at an ancient typewriter, using two fingers. He looked up, smiled, greeted me warmly, said he was working on an article dealing with the

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improvement in his concept of interaction that the term "transaction" had made possible, and then asked quite bluntly, "What do you think, Mr. Cremin?" It was one of those occasions when the lips move but the words have trouble coming out. The words did come, and the point is we had a lively conversation for about a half-hour, in which at the age of twenty-three I was treated as an absolute equal. As I said, I shall never forget it.

Most of my other opportunities to talk with Professor Dewey came at the old Shanghai Restaurant on 125th Street and Broadway. The Deweys had adopted two Polish war orphans named John and Adrian and Dr. and Mrs. Dewey and the youngsters would dine frequently at the Shanghai on Sunday evenings. Fen was often with them, and through Fen's invitations I came to join them. I must tell you that whatever the emphasis on the social and the communal in Dewey's writing, it was rampant individualism in that Chinese restaurant, and I may be the only person living who learned to use chopsticks fighting over fried rice with John Dewey.

I could go on but I shan't. Let me instead turn to the text of my lecture. I would like to take up three matters this evening: first, I would like to point to a fundamental problem in the progressive theory of education, namely, the positing of a polarity between school and society that doesn't sufficiently particularize the educational situation as it actually exists; second, I would like to propose a revision of the progressive theory that I believe details the situation more effectively; and third, I would like to suggest some implications of the revision for public policymaking in education.

First, the fundamental problem of the polarity. One can locate it in John Dewey's Democracy and Education, which is, of course, the classic statement of the progressive theory. Recall Dewey's argument in the early sections of the work. The most notable distinctions between living beings and inanimate things,

he tells us, is that living beings maintain themselves by renewal. Among human beings, that renewal takes place through a process of cultural transmission, which Dewey refers to as "education in its broadest sense." Education in its broadest sense is a process that is continuous, ubiquitous, pervasive, and all-powerful -- indeed, so powerful that Dewey draws the moral that the only way in which adults can consciously control the kind of education children get is by controlling the environment in which they act, think, and feel.

Then, in a crucial leap, Dewey goes on to tell us that there is a marked difference between the education everyone gets simply from living with others and the deliberate education offered by the school. In the ordinary course of living, education is incidental; in schooling, education is intentional. In developing the argument, Dewey takes the familiar early twentieth-century tack of going back to the origins of institutions in some primordial state of society. The family, he tells us, began in the desire to gratify appetites and secure the perpetuity of a line. Religious associations, he continues, began in the desire to ward off evil influences and obtain the favor of supreme powers. And work began in the simple enslavement of one human being to another. Any education that might have derived from participation in these institutions, he points out, was at best incidental. And, indeed, he tells us by way of illustration that savage groups have no special devices or materials or institutions for teaching the young, with the exception of initiation ceremonies. For the most part, they depend on the kind of incidental learning that derives from shared activity.

As civilization advances, however, life becomes more complicated, and much of what adults do is so complex that simple participation no longer suffices for the transmission of culture. At this point, Dewey suggests, intentional agencies, called schools, and explicit materials, called studies, come into being. And the task of transmitting particular aspects of life is delegated to a special

group of people called teachers. Dewey is careful to point out that schools are an important ~~means~~ ^{means} for transmitting culture, but only one means among many, and, when compared with other agencies, a relatively superficial means. However, schools are the only means adults really have at their disposal for going systematically and deliberately about the education of the young.

As all of you know, once this leap is made, it is decisive in Dewey's argument. Though Dewey returns at a number of places to what he calls the "larger social environment," the remainder of the book is not about families, or churches, or work, but rather about schools. Dewey's theory of education is ultimately a theory of school and society. And while Dewey was primarily concerned with reconciling the dualism between school and society, I would stress the fact that he may have created the theoretical polarity in order to effect the reconciliation. To say this is in no way to deny that the schools of Dewey's time were abstruse, formalistic, and in need of reconciliation with society. It is rather to suggest that Dewey may ultimately have been victimized by the very polarity he set out to reconcile.

That polarity, as many of you are well aware, had prodigious consequences for the discussion of education and politics during the 1920's and 1930's. We can see it in the two quite different arguments put forward within the progressive camp during the early years of the Depression. On the one hand, George S. Counts asked, "Dare the school build a new social order?" and called upon teachers forthrightly to indoctrinate children in the values of democratic socialism as their contribution to the development of a reconstructed American society. To Counts's argument, however, Dewey replied that whether or not teachers dared build a new social order in that particular way or some other, they probably couldn't. In a modern industrial society, with its multiplicity of political and educative agencies, the school could never be the main determinant of political, intellectual,

or moral change. The best the school could do would be to form the understanding and the dispositions necessary for movement toward a changed social order.

On the other hand, the group that prepared The Educational Frontier, of which Dewey was a member, went in the opposite direction. Far from daring the school to build a new social order, they despaired of the school making any appreciable difference whatever until the larger social ambience within which the school carried on its work had been fundamentally altered. Hence, Robert Bruce Raup called upon teachers to enter the political lists and struggle for a better life in order to create a more hospitable and productive world in which to educate. "When the type of character desired by the school is so dependent for support upon conditions in the whole culture," Raup maintained, "and this support is not forthcoming, the educator's responsibility moves out into society to agitate and to work for that support." Here too, however, though Dewey was a working member of the yearbook committee, he demurred, contending that his advocacy of educators assisting in the development of a changed social order was in no way an advocacy of the school throwing itself into the political arena and taking the side of some particular party there.

Now, my interest is only incidentally in locating Dewey with respect to the problem I have posed. It is primarily in explicating the problem itself. For, in the last analysis, the Progressives ended up on the horns of a dilemma: they could either politicize the school, remaining dubious about their efforts since the school was so powerless, or they could abandon the school and enter the political lists, seeking gradually or cataclysmically to change the entire social ambience in which youngsters came of age. Dewey revealed the dilemma beautifully in an address he gave to a conference on early childhood education at Teachers College in the spring of 1933. The address began with one of Dewey's great aphorisms: "The most Utopian thing about Utopia is that there are no schools at

all." Education in Utopia, Dewey went on to say, is carried out without benefit of schools, since children learn what they have to know in informal association with the adults who direct their activity. So far, so good. But Dewey did not go on from that point to describe a Utopian society whose values were so pervasive and whose institutions were so cohesive as to form the young through the very process of living. Rather, he went on to describe a society in which there were schools, but essentially activity schools of the sort Dewey and his daughter Jane had written about in Schools of To-Morrow. In 1933 Dewey was still trying to reconcile the dualism between school and society, but he was for all intents and purposes the victim of his own theoretical polarity. And, indeed, that polarity persists right down to the present time. We see it in the ambivalence of the educational reform movement of the 1960's, with its free-school proponents on the one side and its de-school proponents on the other. And we see it also -- and in a more dangerous form perhaps -- in the vast pendulum swing of American opinion during the 1970's, from a century-long overreliance on schooling as a general instrument of social aspiration to a decade of widespread disenchantment with schooling. Whether or not we like Dewey and the Progressives, we are heirs to their formulations, and the irony is that an age that has all but forgotten Dewey is still governed by his analytical categories.

Permit me to move on to my second point, the proposal of a revised version of the progressive theory that I believe gives us a more effective approach to the educational situation. The crucial point at which Dewey went awry, it seems to me, is the point in his discussion of incidental versus intentional education where he dwelled on the origins of institutions rather than their functions. What matter that the family may have begun in the desire to gratify appetites and secure the perpetuation of a line? What matter that religious associations may have begun in the desire to ward off evil influences and secure the favor of

supreme powers? What matter that work may have begun in enslavement to others? For one thing, we can't really know how they began; for another, the question of origins may not be central to the argument. The important fact is that family life does educate, religious life does educate, and work does educate; and, what is more, the education of all three realms is as intentional as the education of the school, though in different ways and in different measures. Every family has a curriculum, which it teaches quite deliberately and systematically over time. Every church and synagogue has a curriculum, which it teaches deliberately and systematically over time -- the Old and New Testaments, after all, are among our oldest curricula, and so are the Missal and the Mass, and so is the Book of Common Prayer. And every employer has a curriculum, which he teaches deliberately and systematically over time; and the curriculum includes not only the technical skills of typing or welding or reaping or teaching but also the social skills of carrying out those activities in concert with others on given time schedules and according to established expectations and routines. One can go on to point out that libraries have curricula, museums have curricula, boyscout troops have curricula, and day-care centers have curricula, and most important, perhaps, radio and television stations have curricula -- and by these curricula I refer not only to programs labeled educational but also to news broadcast and documentaries (which presumably inform), to commercials (which teach people to want), to soap operas (which reinforce common myths and values).

To specify this range of institutions is to save us from the Deweyan polarity of all life being broadly educative and overwhelmingly powerful and the school being intentionally educative but not very powerful at all. Rather, we have a theory of education in which each of the major educative agencies performs a mediative role with respect to the others and with respect to society at large. The family mediates the culture and it also mediates the ways in which religious

organizations, television broadcasters, schools, and employers mediate the culture. Families not only engage deliberately and systematically in the teaching of knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, and sensibilities, they also screen and interpret the teaching of churches, synagogues, television broadcasters, schools, and employers. Similarly, the school not only engages deliberately and systematically in the teaching of knowledge, values, attitudes, skills and sensibilities, it also interprets the teaching of families, churches, synagogues, television broadcasters, and employers. One can go on and work out all the permutations and combinations. What is more, these various institutions mediate the culture in a variety of pedagogical styles -- think of the differences between what Jerome Bruner has called enactive education, ikonic education, and symbolic education, and the different combinations of these styles that pertain in different situations at different times. Further, these various institutions mediate the culture via different technologies for the recording, sharing, and distributing of symbols. In effect, they define the terms of effective participation and growth in the society. Remaining within the broad Deweyan context, we can posit a new formulation: the theory of education becomes the theory of the relation of various educative interactions and institutions to one another and to the society at large.

Now, let me go on to my third point, namely, the implications of this analysis for policymaking in education. I would put forward three assertions: first, that we have to think comprehensively about education; second, that we have to think relationally about education; and third, that we have to think publicly about education. Let me take each of these up in turn.

First, thinking comprehensively. We have traditionally assumed in the United States that the public school for more than a century created and recreated the American public, virtually singlehandedly, and endowed that public with its unique capability of working cooperatively on social problems despite its ethnic, racial,

religious, and class heterogeneity. The assumption, of course, is not without foundation. The public school has labored mightily over the years to nurture certain common values and commitments and to teach the skills by which a vastly variegated society can resolve its conflicts peacefully rather than by the methods of guerrilla warfare. Indeed, the public school has actually come to symbolize the quest for community in American society. But the public school has never functioned alone or in isolation. Where it has succeeded, it has functioned as part of a larger configuration of institutions, including families, churches, Sunday schools, and reform schools, committed to essentially complementary values. When the configuration has disintegrated, however, as it has from time to time in our larger cities, and when the centrifugal forces of heterogeneity have overbalanced the centripetal forces of community, the public school has been less successful. My assertion is not the powerlessness of public schooling -- far from it -- but rather the limitations of public schooling. And the moral is simple: the public school ought never to take the entire credit for the educational accomplishments of the public, and it ought never to be assigned the entire blame.

The fact is that the public is educated by many institutions, some of them public and some of them private, and that public schools are only one among several important public institutions that educate the public. There are, after all, public libraries, public museums, public television, and public work projects, the most pervasive, perhaps, being the military services. Other societies, of course, have used quite different agencies to educate the public. The Soviet Union, for example, has used the Komsomol, a network of youth organizations, as an important instrument of public education, while the People's Republic of China has used communes in public factories and on farms in similar fashion. And the Indians, the Australians, and the Venezuelans have used public radio to teach the skills of literacy in areas too remote for schools.

A kind of obverse of these propositions is the recognition that all educational transactions have both private and public consequences. Family nurture that encourages independence, church teaching that condemns family planning, television news programs that dramatize the human consequences of military ventures -- these are but a few examples of private educative efforts with profound public impact.

In sum, then, to think comprehensively we're going to have to think about policies with respect to a wide variety of institutions that educate, not only schools and colleges, but libraries, museums, day-care centers, radio and television stations, offices, factories, and farms. To be concerned solely with schools in the kind of educational world we are living in today is to have a kind of fortress mentality in contending with a very fluid and dynamic situation. Education must be looked at whole, across the entire life span, and in all the situations and institutions in which it occurs. Obviously, public policy will not touch and ought not to touch every situation with equal intensity -- that only happens in totalitarian societies, and even in totalitarian societies it never happens quite as efficaciously as the leaders would prefer. Indeed there are some situations public policy will not touch at all. But it must consider each so that wise choices can be made as to where to invest what effort to achieve which goals with respect to which clientele. The United States Congress already does this when it decides to allocate so many dollars to children's television rather than schooling, and incidentally in dealing with children's television it inevitably affects the family. And local communities already do this when they decide in a period of budgetary stringency to close a public library rather than a public school. I would only insist that the range of possibilities be made far more explicit than it has been in the past and that public authorities approach these questions of allocation rationally rather than whimsically, and with a full

awareness of educational consequences.

First, then, we must think comprehensively about education. Second, we must think relationally. To do this means in the first instance to be aware of the problem of allocation of financial and human resources, as indicated above, and of resultant educational outcomes. And it means in the second place that wherever an effort goes forward in education, it must go forward not in isolation from other educative institutions but in relation to them. From the vantage point of the school, this is a significant point. Given the thrust of my argument, I am often accused of downgrading the school and being uninterested in schoolteachers. (I note that Learning Magazine in the February issue included an excerpt from an address of mine which seemed to carry this implication.) Nothing could be farther from the truth. I am interested rather in making schools and schoolteachers more effective. And they will not be more effective until they become aware of the other educators and actually engage their instruction. In some subject areas, of course, the school originates much of what it teaches. Mathematics is an example. In mathematics, the student learns much of what he needs to learn for the first time in the classroom (though with the new mathematics series now being produced for television by EDC, that may become less and less true). But in other realms, in languages and literature, for example, or in social studies or hygiene, or the arts, or the domain of values and morals, the child has his first learning and possibly his most persuasive learning elsewhere. In these realms, it may be that the best the school can do is engage the instruction of the other educators and seek to strengthen or complement or correct or neutralize or counter-educate, or, most importantly, perhaps, try to develop in students an awareness of the other educators and an ability themselves to deal with them.

What I have said about the school also goes, of course, for the other educators. For day-care workers, pastors, editors of children's encyclopedias, and directors of senior citizen's centers, the message is the same: whatever is done, to be effective, must be done with an awareness of what has gone on and what is going on elsewhere. Incidentally, the principle has special relevance for evaluation and accountability, because whatever judgment is made of any particular educational program must always be made in light of what is going on elsewhere that affects that program. This to me is the real message of James Coleman's study of equal educational opportunity, not that the school is powerless but that the family is powerful. What often happens is the same thing that happens when negative numbers are added to positive numbers: an immense contribution by the school is frequently reflected in a comparatively modest showing on an achievement scale, since with respect to the understanding or behavior being measured by the achievement scale, the child started out not at ground zero but with a deficit, at least as defined by the scale. Or, conversely, as is frequently the case with highly selective institutions, a very modest contribution by the school is reflected in an admirable showing on an achievement scale, since the child has already learned a good deal of whatever it is the scale is measuring, elsewhere.

First, then, we must think comprehensively; second, relationally; and third, publicly. By this I mean several things. To begin, it means we must be aware that public thinking about education and public policymaking for education goes on at a variety of levels and in a variety of places. It goes forward at the local, state, regional, federal, and international levels, and it proceeds in legislatures, in the courts, in executive agencies, and in private and quasi-public civic organizations. The intense political struggles this past year in Boston, and Kanawha County, West Virginia, are excellent examples, as is the

battle to get the Federal Communications Commission to adopt more stringent rules for the governance of children's television. What's more, the growing reliance on the courts during the past quarter-century to develop policies through the definition, assertion, and claim of certain social and educational rights, is also exceedingly relevant. It is an oft-repeated truism that the courts have been our most influential agencies of educational policymaking since World War II. But, as John Coons recently pointed out in a discussion at Teachers College, courts tend to stress our differences: they tend to affirm the rights of individuals or groups to dissent from agreed upon policies. Legislatures, on the other hand, tend to deal with the definition and advancement of that which is common. And hence the growing recourse to the courts in matters of educational policy is fraught with significance for substance as well as procedure. And it is fraught with significance for the polity itself. As my old teacher Henry Steele Commager, certainly second to none in his insistent espousal of the cause of civil liberties, pointed out some years ago in a discussion of Majority Rule and Minority Rights, recourse to the courts, particularly in the realm of constitutional law, is an immensely powerful tool in a democratic society for the achievement of short-term goals, especially with respect to the redress of civil and political inequity. But recourse to the courts short-circuits certain processes vital to a democratic society. There is, after all, little appeal once the court of last resort has handed down its ruling, and there is precious little political education for the public in appellate proceedings. This is not to say that the Warren court and the Burger court have not tried at many points to educate the public with respect to the bearing of the Constitution on education. It is only to argue, with Commager, that the legislative process and the public debate surrounding it is a surer and more fundamental long-range educator of the public than the judicial process. I should add quite explicitly

at this point that nothing here should be taken as a criticism of the political outcomes of recourse to the federal and state courts, from Brown in 1954, to Serrano in 1971 and Robinson in 1973, to Goss in 1975. It is merely to argue that the process of public education resulting from court decisions is very different from the process that leads to the enactment and implementation of legislation. And the current turmoil in Boston, the failure of the legislatures of California and New Jersey to accomplish the mandated reforms of their respective state systems of school finance, and the puzzlement that has followed in the wake of the more recent Goss ruling on the rights of pupils, are illustrative of this fact.

The distinction between the politics of the courts and the politics of legislatures brings me to my final point, namely, that given the range and variety of institutions that educate the public, some of them public, some of them quasi-public, and some of them private, simplistic notions of "public control" become untenable. Control, after all, varies in character and intensity from the kind of direct supervision one sees in the management of public school systems or public libraries, to the kind of regulation exercised over the television industry by the Federal Communications Commission, to the kind of influence tax policy exerts on the size and structure of families, and hence on the character of familial education. And if one looks at the power of the educative agencies farthest removed from the public reach, one is led not to deny the need for effective public regulation of public schools, public libraries, and public television, but rather to affirm the need for public discussion in the realms beyond the reach of direct public control. And hence we are thrown, inevitably, back to the politics of persuasion and to the public dialogue about educational means and ends which is the essence of the politics of persuasion.

We live in an age that affirms individuality and plurality, and, given what

governments, including democratic governments, have done with their power in our time, one can understand and sympathize with the attractiveness of such an affirmation. Yet, if Dewey taught us anything, it was that the public good is something more than the sum total of private goods, and that a viable community is more than a collection of groups, each occupying its own turf and each doing its own thing. Indeed, Democracy and Education is as much a work of social theory as it is of educational theory, and Dewey's own position is strikingly clear: there must be ample room in a democratic society for a healthy individualism and a healthy pluralism, but that individualism and that pluralism must also partake of a continuing quest for community. In fact, individuality itself is only liberated and fully realized as the individual interacts with an ever-widening variety of communities. Recall Dewey's classic paragraph:

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. These more numerous and more varied points of contact denote a greater diversity of stimuli to which an individual has to respond; they consequently put a premium on variation in his action. They secure a liberation of powers which remains suppressed as long as the incitations to action are partial, as they must be in a group which in its inclusiveness shuts out many interests.

How do we achieve the educational balance between individualism and community suggested in this formulation? I have a very simple starting point, to which I think there is no alternative: We talk. The proper education of the public and indeed the proper creation of publics will not go forward in our society until we undertake anew a great public dialogue about education. In fact, I would maintain that the questions we need to raise about education are

among the most important questions that can be raised in our society, particularly at this juncture in its history. What knowledge do we wish our people to hold in common? What values? What skills? What sensibilities? When we ask such questions, we are getting at the heart of the kind of society we want to live in and the kind of society we want our children to live in. We are getting at the heart of the kind of public we would like to bring into being and the qualities we would like that public to display. We are getting at the heart of the kind of community we need for our multifarious individualities to flourish.

Two thousand years ago, Aristotle wrote that when we educate we aim at the good life; and, since men and women disagree in their notions of a good life, they will disagree in their notions of education. It's as true today as it was two thousand years ago. Obviously, men and women of good will are going to disagree about education. What's important about public education is that we work through to certain agreements about values and policies. We don't simply divide the world into turfs; we also decide on common ground. We do that in the public schools, in public libraries, and over certain programs on public television because we have a notion of the kind of society our children are going to grow up in and live in. It's not that we're going to do away with different life-styles and different beliefs, or with the educational institutions -- both public and private -- that keep those different life-styles and beliefs alive. It's that we must practice those different life-styles and beliefs within a common framework of mutual respect and understanding. So often in recent years, we have cast the choice as one between a full-blown and segregationist ethnicity on the one hand and some plastic, lowest-common-denominator commonality on the other. I would reject both in favor of new modes of thought that permit -- nay, encourage -- maximum variation within certain common policies. I think we have the models in the alternative programs that have grown up in our contemporary

public schools, public libraries, and public television systems, and I think we should develop, share, and publicize those models. In the last analysis, the most important dimension of the politics of education is the business of debating and defining the various forms those models might take ^{and the various curricula they might teach.} Moreover, the public debate itself over what knowledge, what values, what skills, and what sensibilities we might want to nurture in the young and how we might want to nurture them is more important than the particular decisions we happen to arrive at during any given time. For the debate educates, and that education will affect the entire educational apparatus of the society and therefore the principal apparatus for creating the public.

My conclusions, of course, are vintage Dewey. You may recall that in the pedagogical creed he wrote for The School Journal in 1897, he argued that "education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform" and that "all reforms which rest simply upon the enactment of law, or the threatening of certain penalties, or upon changes in mechanic or outward arrangements, are transitory and futile." In the last analysis, the fundamental mode of politics in a democratic society is education, and it is in that way over all others that the educator is ultimately projected into politics. You will recognize here the ancient prophetic role, which Dewey himself had in mind when he wrote in 1897 that the teacher is always "the prophet of the true God" and "the usherer in of the true kingdom of God." The millennialist tone of these phrases has always left me a bit uncomfortable, but the insight is none the less profound. Prophecy: in its root meaning, the calling of a people to their noblest traditions and aspirations. Prophecy, I would submit, is the essential public function of the educator in a democratic society.