(Re)Thinking Dewey, democracy and educational purposes for the 21st century

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INTRODUCTION
As education continues to be caught in the snare of high stakes testing, educational purposes tend to hyper-focus on the essential skills of reading and arithmetic. Thus, a hallmark purpose of education—developing democratic citizenship—is increasingly ignored in the larger discourse of educational purposes and curriculum decisions in schooling (Kuhns & Hophmeyer, 2014). At the same time, socio-political conversations lament the erosion of civility and acts of listening in public spaces (Putnam, 2000; Rawls, 1991). The fundamental values of freedom, justice, and liberty are being undermined as political debates appear increasingly polarized. Considering the erosion of civic discourse and the diminishing of educational discourse to quantifiable outcomes, one cannot help but wonder if there may be some connection between the two. In quantitative terms, we might ask: Is there a relationship between the erosion of democratic public discourse and democratic citizenship learning in schools? While such a question may ultimately be unanswerable by quantitative means, we can—and must—examine the deep connections between schools, society, and the individual as they pertain to the promotion and preservation of democratic principles.

PURPOSE
Schools and education have long been established as a focus for instilling the values of democracy and developing democratic citizens (Carpenter, 2013; Dewey, 1916; Ross, 2014). This aim of education in America was first articulated by Thomas Jefferson, who stated that the primary purpose of education is to form democratic citizens. In the early twentieth century, Dewey clearly articulated the vital importance of an educational model focused on growth and stressed the importance of democratic principles in educational spaces. In a reconsideration of his ideas in the context of the early twenty-first century, the purpose of this presentation is to reframe Deweyan educational ideas about the role of democratic practices and ideas in schools and education.

CONCLUSIONS
Schools are the first institutions an individual encounters. They serve as much more than simply places for knowledge acquisition; schools are a microcosm of culture and society (Cooley, 2001; Helman, 2011). Their role in shaping future citizens cannot be underestimated or overlooked (Cooley, 2011; Noddings, 2008; Parker, 2003). It is incumbent upon us, as a society and citizenry, to continuously reexamine the role of schooling in educating for democratic citizenship and the influence these institutions have on ALL citizens. This conversation, I argue, needs to be brought back to the forefront of our attention. We can do this in three ways:

1. Democracy and what it means to be a democratic citizen ought to be incorporated into our education aims.
2. We must reexamine school curriculum as the site where students come to know, to consider, and to deliberate.
3. Schools, as sites for individual intellectual transformation and growth, ought to reexamine the act of knowing and doing as central to individual and social growth.

Dewey’s ideas continue to offer an understanding of education as a continuous process with a reciprocal role in influencing and being influenced by public life and public discourse (McKnight, 2011). Dewey continues to bear relevance as we consider the roles of school curriculum and individual learning in shaping future citizens.

The characteristic of the public as a state springs from the fact that all modes of associated behavior may have extensive and enduring consequences which involve others beyond those directly engaged in them” (Dewey, 1927, p. 27).

SELECTED REFERENCES