(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 reading writing 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 (Kahne & Westheimer, 2014). At the same time, socio-political conversations lament the erosion of civics and arts of listening in public spaces (Putnam, 2000; Rawls, 1971). The fundamental values of freedom, justice, and liberty are being (re)defined as political ideologies appear increasingly polarized. Considering the erosion of civic discourse and the delimiting of educational discourse to quantifiable outcomes, one cannot help but wonder if there may be some connection between the two. In quantifiable 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 quantifiable 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 locus for inculcating 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 develop 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 (re)consideration of his ideas in the context of the early twenty-first century, the purpose of this presentation is to reinforce 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 more than simply places for knowledge acquisition; schools are a microcosm of culture and society (Cooley, 2011; Heilman, 2011). Their role in shaping future citizens cannot be underestimated or obscured (Cooley, 2011; Noddings, 2008; Parker, 2003). It is incumbent upon us, as a society and citizenry, to continuously (re)consider 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 recentered in our education aims.
2) We must (re)consider 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 (re)focus on acts of knowing and doing as central to individual and social growth.

Dewey’s ideas continue to offer an understanding of education as continuous processes with a recursive 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.

“A 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

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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 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 purposes of this presentation is to reexamine Dewey’s educational ideas about the role of democratic practices and ideas in schools and education.

What is the role of schools in developing democratic citizens?

What does it mean to be democratic citizen?
For Dewey (1916), citizen is ‘the ability to judge men and measures wisely and to take a determining part in making as well as in obeying laws’ (p. 120). He also warns against too narrow an understanding of what it means to be a good citizen, noting that the ‘social efficiency’ of a good citizen includes the ‘capacity to share in a give and take of experience’ (p. 120).

Dewey clearly noted that schools have a special responsibility to education children to their full potential. He stated: ‘Schools require for their full efficiency more opportunity for conjoint activities in those intellectual work that may acquire a social sense of their own powers and of the materials and appliances used’ (p.40). This means, students/children are active participants in their education in connection with their teachers. Such a vision taps into Dewey’s (1916) definition of democracy as a ‘mode of associated living, of conjoint communicative experience’ (p. 57). It calls for a thinking body of people. It calls for critical examination. It calls for democracy as a process. For him, education and democracy are interdependent. Democracy, to survive and thrive requires individual and systematic education. The devotion of democracy to education in a familiar fact’ (p.87). Democracy and strong democratic citizens are to be shared fundamental value underlying all ideas and conceptualizations surrounding educational aims.

What does democratic citizenship education look like?
Democratic citizenship education should stress conscientious, enlightened choice and active, deliberative participation. Being a good citizen in these terms calls for complex, critical thinking. Dewey rightfully asserts: ‘A democratic citizen is required to develop the capacity of the point of competence to choose’ (p.119). For example, to be an enlightened and conscious voter, citizens need to examine the evidence, analyze the rhetoric, compare and contrast different positions, and form an opinion of their own about whom they think is the best candidate.

Dewey also cites the role of education in ‘correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them’ (p.119-120). Schools have a vital role in teaching students to pose and respond to questions, prove reasoning and examine evidence. Student need to be exposed to the full range of ideas, including challenges to the status quo.

Dewey’s ideas continue to offer an understanding of education as continuous process with a recursive 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.

CONCLUSIONS
Schools are the first institutions an individual encounters. They serve as more than simply places for knowledge acquisition; schools are a microcosm of culture and society (Cooley, 2011; Heilman, 2011). Their role in shaping future citizens cannot be underestimated or obscured (Cooley, 2011; Noddings, 2008; Parker, 2005). It is incumbent upon us, as a society and citizens, to continuously reconsider 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 acts of knowing and doing as central to individual and social growth.

Democratic citizenship cannot be taught merely as a product where students are impressed notions of “good citizenship” that rest on colonialism, racism, class, and individual accountability. Citizenship education is a holistic experience that is multidimensional, multidisciplinary, and has “the very heart of what it means to be a citizen of a modern democracy” (p.119). Thus, it is to supply precisely what nature fails to secure: namely, habitation of an individual in social life. The habitation of “social roles” (p.119). In other words, mere compliance stands antithesis to democracy and democratic principles.

Through Dewey, a model of growth and transformation offers students and educators an alternative perspective on the relationship between citizen and government that engenders a new paradigm of freedom.

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