

## DEWEY'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Let us consider three main works in the Dewey canon. *Democracy and Education*, *The School and Society*, and *Schools of To-Morrow* reflect different aspects of Dewey's thinking. In one, Dewey viewed education through the democratic political prism; in another, he studied the societal infrastructure of learning; and in another he fleshed out theories of progressive education as practiced in a laboratory school.

*Democracy and Education* is Dewey's major work. This classic text summarizes Dewey's main educational ideas. The main thesis of *Democracy and Education* is how progressive educational ideas best fit a democratic political system. This work clearly presents Dewey as a major philosophical apostle for liberal democracy.

Scholars have noted Dewey's philosophy to be concerned with a dualistic matrix. Dewey perceived his philosophical task to reconcile the dualism he saw in mind and matter. *Democracy and Education* is full of such dualisms. Besides the two main ideas that form the title of the book, Dewey discussed the relationships of the "individual and the world," "intellectual and practical studies," "inner and outer" modes of learning, "intelligence and character," and "the social and the moral."

Dewey announced his aim in the book to be "no less than to apply the ideas in a democratic society" to "the problem of the enterprise of education."<sup>16</sup> For Dewey, there could be no real learning without the political freedom implicit in a democratic society. In Dewey's words, "lack of the free and equitable intercourse of [ideas] makes intellectual stimulation unbalanced."<sup>17</sup> Education, he argued, is a "social process" that implies "a particular social ideal."<sup>18</sup> Dewey concluded that in terms of education "the devotion to democracy is a familiar fact."<sup>19</sup>

Dewey's vision of democracy was a liberal one, devoted to pursuing a social ideal. He wrote of "education as a social function" whereby teaching, essentially, consists of "social direction."<sup>20</sup> The classroom constitutes for Dewey a "social environment."<sup>21</sup>

Despite present-day allegations that he did not stress intellectual rigor, Dewey made clear in *Democracy and Education* that the main aim of education is to develop intellectual abilities. For Dewey, that consists of equating thinking with problem solving. "If he [the student] cannot devise his own solutions," Dewey wrote, "and find his way out, he will not learn."<sup>22</sup> In short, "ideas have to have their worth tested experimentally."<sup>23</sup> This is the essence of pragmatism.

Such an axiom changes the nature of teaching. What is proposed is "a classroom social environment" whereby "learning is achieved through doing."<sup>24</sup> Dewey condemned the lecture method as meaningless. "No thought, no idea," he wrote, "can possibly be conveyed from one person to another."<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey showed that he was also concerned with content. "History and geography," he declared, "are the information studies *par excellence* of the schools."<sup>26</sup> And science is no less than "the agency of progress in action."<sup>27</sup>

In addition, Dewey was concerned with moral education. He conceded that "the establishing of character is a comprehensive aim of school instruction."<sup>28</sup> But he quickly added that moral education is "practically hopeless" when "the development of character" is proposed as the "supreme end" and "at the same time . . . the acquiring of knowledge . . . [is treated] as having nothing to do with character."<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, Dewey argued for both "play and work in the curriculum," which has often led both critics and followers to perceive Dewey as placing less stress on intellectual rigor.<sup>30</sup>

Dewey's attempt to reconcile democracy and education has serious drawbacks. The proposition that true learning is only a staple of a democratic political system is simplistic. Despite the handicap of orthodoxy, some closed systems have, nevertheless, been able to achieve certain intellectual accomplishments. The Middle Ages produced a richness in art, and the Communist societies achievement in science.