A New Vision of Educational Democracy?

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Since the foundation of America's first public schools, educators have been engaged in a perennial struggle to establish and sustain a balance between societal and individual educational needs and goals. The authors of "Models of Educational Democracy" have suggested a promising means of resolving this familiar dilemma.

"Models of Educational Democracy" places many current educational issues within a context of larger philosophical conflicts. In recent years, the "preference model" of education has been promulgated as a way to increase parental involvement in, and control over, education. As Walter Feinberg and his colleagues aptly note, this model's primary premise is that "Democratic education serves to satisfy parent and student choice." This notion is represented by the "shopping mall" metaphor that invites parents and students to "shop" for the educational options that please them most. Voucher systems, charter schools, and home schooling are several of the many possible versions of the preference model.

While John Dewey was greatly concerned with the development of individual students, he would not endorse a preference model of schooling. Dewey addressed the principle shortcoming of this model in *The School and Society*:

> We are apt to look at the school from an individualistic standpoint, as something between teacher and pupil, or between teacher and parent....Yet the range of the outlook needs to be enlarged. What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy....Only by being true to the full growth of all the individuals who make it up, can a society by any chance be true to itself.[1]

Dewey understood that democratic education must meet both individual and societal needs and objectives. Feinberg, Fields, and Roberts designate his form of education as a "core value" model that should not be confused with a model proposed more recently by E.D. Hirsch.

Feinberg, Fields, and Roberts accurately note that Dewey strongly desired for teachers to have a substantive role in school decision processes. He sharply criticized administrators who prevented teachers from participating in decision-making. Moreover, he chastised teachers for failing to actively seek such participation. In an address to the American Federation of Teachers, he said,

> We should have a body of self-respecting teachers who will see to it that their ideas and their experience in educational matters really count in the community....I hope to see the teaching body occupy that position of social leadership which it ought to occupy, and which to our shame it must be said we have not occupied in the past.[2]

Dewey believed that schools should manifest democracy in their own structures and procedures. In his view, schools could only effectively teach democracy if they exemplified it. While Feinberg, Fields, and Roberts agree with this assertion, they see some flaws in Dewey's model. In their view, Dewey magnifies the role of teachers and minimizes the roles of parents and communities.

Feinberg, Fields, and Roberts suggest several possible reasons for Dewey's "silence" regarding parental involvement in education. They accurately note his convictions that education is "a professional calling," that "democratic decision making needed to be modeled" in schools, and that schools in a pluralistic, democratic society must "expose children to values and life styles that were different" from those of their parents. However, the assertion that "Dewey was uncertain about the quality of parental judgment" is troubling.

According to James O'Hara, "Dewey compares the school to the ideal home.…The school is the ideal home magnified. It is made up of children from many homes, bringing a wealth of experiences of many kinds."[3] In *The School and Society*, Dewey urged educators to "retain the advantages" of pre-industrial education, which took place primarily in the home.[4] Dewey spoke highly of the teaching and learning that took place in the home, when learning was motivated by "having to do things with a real motive behind and a real outcome ahead."[5] These are not the views of a man who disparaged parents' ability to educate their children, or to at least offer valuable and valid guidance regarding their children's schooling.

Parents relate to schools in two distinct roles. As the parents of schoolchildren, they are intimately concerned with the interests of individual learners. Additionally, parents are part of the larger community from which educational priorities are derived. Thus, parents communicate with educators from two different but equally significant perspectives. Dewey was aware of parents' multiple connections with schools. Although he never specifically addressed parental concerns, he wrote prolifically about individual learners and communities. Parents' concerns are largely subsumed in one or the other of these categories.

Furthermore, we should not misconstrue Dewey's lack of specific prescriptions for parents and communities. Dewey was fully aware that, in attempting to organize parental and community forces, "The prime difficulty…is that of discovering the means by which a scattered, mobile, and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and express its interests."[6] The Project for Educational Democracy (PED), described by Feinberg, Fields, and Roberts, has overcome this difficulty.

According to Feinberg, Fields and Roberts, The Project for Educational Democracy "is a way to reformulate the goals of both the preference and the core value models." This group was initially formed to enhance parental and community access to educational decisionmaking bodies. The group's structure has solidified, and it is not merely a loosely organized collection of individuals. The PED articulates its concerns sufficiently well, so that it effectively relates to teachers, administrators, and the school board as a coherent interest group.

Feinberg, Fields, and Roberts correctly observe that most parent-school or community-school communications occur in the contexts of unequal power relationships. Parents and community members frequently interact in isolation with teachers and administrators affiliated with powerful groups. It is even more intimidating for an individual to address the entire school board. The school board solicits public participation in meetings, but its members do not immediately address the concerns raised. Consequently, participation in school board meetings increases

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frustration and alienation. In all of these situations, the communicative advantages clearly lie with the groups (or their members), rather than with the individual parents and community members.

PED has given parents and community members a group affiliation with which to identify. Thus, interaction between parents and schools, or community and school board, need not assume the forms and disadvantages of individual-to-group communications. As a result, the PED has succeeded in opening up meaningful dialog between parents, community, and schools.

I share the hope that the PED will serve as a prototype for other communities. However, I disagree with the assertion that the PED offers a substantive modification of Dewey's model of education. Rather than representing a marriage between Dewey's core value model and the preference model, the PED exemplifies Dewey's broad social and educational vision. A primary goal of Dewey's philosophy was the establishment of a "great community."[7] One of the chief ways to achieve such a community is by establishing "an organized, articulate Public."[8] Hence, the PED is a realization, not a correction, of Dewey's vision.

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1. John Dewey, *The School and Society, The Child and the Curriculum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 6-7.

2. John Dewey, "Professional Organization of Teachers," in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1916-1917*, vol. 10, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press), 171.

3. James O'Hara, "The Limitations of the Educational Theory of John Dewey," (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University, 1929), 86-87.

4. Dewey, *The School and Society*, 12.

5. Ibid.

6. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (Chicago: Gateway Books,1946), 146.

7. Ibid., 143.

8. Ibid., 184.

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