

Between Games and Play: John Dewey and the Child-Centered Pedagogues

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“As I read the contemporary literature [from the child-centered movement of the 1920s] I cannot but call to mind G. K. Chesterton’s remark that the [child-centered] sentimentalist, roughly speaking, ‘is the man who wants to eat his cake and have it. He has no sense of honor about ideas; he will not see that one must pay for an idea as for anything else. . . . He will have them all at once in one wild intellectual harem, no matter how much they quarrel and contradict each other.’”¹

INTRODUCTION

In the educational literature, Lawrence Cremin’s description of the intellectual bankruptcy of the diverse group of 1920s pedagogues is taken as gospel. This dismissal of “child-centered” or “romantic” education was fed by John Dewey’s attacks in a range of writings, especially *Experience and Education*.² Repeatedly, Dewey argued that the “child-centered” approach lacked any coherent educational theory. In this essay, I develop a coherent vision of the child-centered pedagogues and then contrast it with Dewey’s, using the example of “games” and how they work to form society.

I begin by reframing the history of the child-centered movement, explaining why it seems important to recover it from obscurity and misinformation. In the 1920s and 1960s, this branch pushed back against the deadening forces of bureaucracy that movement members believed were increasingly taking over modern culture. They sought to recover rich individuality and rich local cultures from the banality of an increasingly standardized modern world.³

The core of this essay contrasts how Dewey and personalist George

Dennison in his *The Lives of Children*⁴ used the key example of a baseball game to represent different visions of the structure of a healthy society. I prefer the term “personalist,” which captures this group’s celebration of individualism *within* egalitarian communities, but I do also use traditional terms such as “child-centered” throughout.

THE ERASURE OF THE PERSONALIST PERSPECTIVE

In the last decades of his life, John Dewey felt increasingly misunderstood, as people associated his name with forms of education that either conflicted with, or failed to capture, the full richness of his perspective.⁵ He was especially upset by the “child-centered” branch of progressive pedagogy that emerged before World War I and flourished during the 1920s. To Dewey, the child-centered pedagogues seemed obsessed with efforts to encourage uncontrolled, chaotic “freedom,” disregarding the importance of actually teaching children any coherent content or initiating them into effective democratic practices. In *Experience & Education*, he published his most comprehensive demolition of what he understood of the child-centered approach. They had, he argued, developed their “principles negatively rather than positively and constructively,” thereby rejecting “the principle of [curricular and social] organization *in toto*, instead of striving to discover” a coherent theory of education drawn from of a careful study of human learning.⁶ Because of this, they had not “even recognized, to say nothing of” actually solving, the real central challenges of learning. Perhaps even more troubling, the vision of the child-centered pedagogues lacked any “critical examination of its own underlying principles.”⁷ While denying he was pressing “these defects to the point of exaggeration,” it is difficult to see how he could have been much more critical.⁸ Most scholars appear to accept as self-evident the accuracy of Dewey’s descriptions of the child-centered pedagogues. And by leaving his opposition nameless in *Experience & Education* and elsewhere (not uncommon in his work), his writings have assisted in a process of their erasure from the collective memory of the field.⁹

The personalists he was attacking did have names. Pedagogues such

as Margaret Naumburg and Caroline Pratt, along with a group of intellectuals termed the Young Americans by Casey Blake, participated in a broad, powerful, and rich movement that flourished through the entire decade of the 1920s, downtown from Dewey's office at Columbia.¹⁰ As a group, they brought to education, and to social criticism more broadly, the new aesthetics of modern art and the psychoanalytic vision of Freud, Jung, and others. In the writings and pedagogy of the time, these different strands generally merged together into an aesthetically-focused psychology of human development and a healthy society.

What the literature has largely missed is that, collectively, the Young Americans and the child-centered pedagogues did develop cogent criticisms of Dewey's collaborative, scientific vision of education, despite some egregious examples of misreading. Some, including Naumburg, Pratt, and Randolph Bourne were actually his students at Columbia. And most of their discussions of his ideas were well-informed and, often, reasonably on the mark.¹¹ By the time Dewey published *Experience & Education* in 1938, the child-centered schools of the 1920s were fading. It would not be until the 1960s and '70s that the personalist perspective would emerge again with a vengeance in the free schools movement.¹²

THE "SOCIAL CONTROL" ARGUMENT OF EXPERIENCE AND EDUCATION

To get across what he understood as healthy social control, in *Experience & Education* Dewey used the general example of "games," specifically, a youth baseball game. While he acknowledged that this example was limited, he also asserted that it did, in fact, illustrate a key "general principle" of socialization and social control in society.

The key characteristic of a game is that, unlike play, it has rules. Games differ from democratic collaboration on common projects where participation and action are quite flexible, without any set rules except the focus on achieving the shared "end in view." Games do include aims, but these are defined by the strictures created by standard rules. In this sense, then, games represent an

embryonic form of collaboration, with the exception that goals and the interim steps to accomplishing those goals are pre-set by the rules of the particular game, even though there are many different ways individuals can play out and embody the practices that the rules allow.

Dewey did not usually discuss games in detail in his writings.¹³ Generally in Dewey's work, "play" is distinguished from "work" in which there is some goal that needs to be achieved by an individual or a collaborative group. Games seem to provide a middle space between play and work. Dewey noted that play is distinguished from work in that work "has the sense of a directing idea which gives point to the successive acts."¹⁴ In play, Dewey noted in *Democracy and Education*, children "are *trying* to do or effect something, an attitude that involves anticipatory forecasts which stimulate their preset responses. The anticipated result, however, is rather a subsequent action than the production of a specific change in things. Consequently play is free, plastic."¹⁵ As Dewey noted elsewhere in the same book, "the friction engendered by meeting resistance" allows a game to develop in an unplanned manner... [which] leads to the view that it takes place" when this friction "forc[es] a line of action contrary to natural inclinations."¹⁶ Thus, play involves a constant engagement with, and response to, the limitations of the environment, including the issues, skills, and preferences of other players. Play resembles a game, but instead of rules, there is the push and pull of desire and resistance, and the constant micro-creation of a tiny society. From play, in Dewey's vision, children progressively move into the world of games and work, where the rules are increasingly set, laying out the boundaries of action. From Dewey's perspective, in healthy socialization, the general structure of the extraordinarily complex game of society is combined with the capacity for democratic collaboration focused on social change.

Yet the right kind of joint play among children does not just happen. Two teachers from Dewey's famous Laboratory School, for example, described how young students in the school would generally play by themselves. However, "with skillful management the climbing, jumping, running, and rolling were guided into group games."¹⁷ The students were led to see how playing together, which involved responding to each other's needs, skills, and issues, was more

fun. In the Dewey School, then, students learned to play with each other in a particular manner as a result of “skillful management” by the teachers. The implication is that the children will not naturally begin to play with each other in the way the school wishes without guidance. And this fits with the argument in *Experience & Education*.

And now we come to baseball. In *Experience & Education*, Dewey uses the baseball game as a microcosm of the way children can be initiated into the larger rules of society. A baseball game involves a set of social agreements that allow those playing the game to accomplish something together. The rules, in games, constitute the space in which this social interaction is possible. “Without rules,” Dewey argues, “there is no game.” As a result, “as long as the game goes on with a reasonable smoothness, the players do not feel that they are submitting to external imposition but that they are playing the game.”¹⁸ As in any normal social context, games have a set of conventions or proscribed “manners” that provide a set of shared expectations about what other players will do, albeit more explicit in format than casual social contexts. Within the game, Dewey argued, these conventions are not really questionable since they *are* what the game *is*. One cannot object to the existence of an established rule while one is playing, but instead what “one claims is a violation of it, some one-sided and unfair action”.¹⁹ Games are not “play” because the rules are solidified. And like other established conventions, they:

have the sanction of tradition and precedent. ... Usually, a group of youngsters change the rules by which they play only when the adult group to which they look for models have themselves made a change in the rules.²⁰

Games of this kind provide an explicit example of what happens normally more broadly in society, as social mores are passed down from one generation to another.

Within a game, participants are “sharing in a common experience,” as “control of individual actions is effected by the whole situation in which individuals are involved, in which they share and of which they are cooperative

or interacting parts.”²¹ While the fact that roles in a game are set ahead of time, this does not necessarily restrict participants from contributing their unique skills and perspectives to the whole.

This experience of contributing one’s unique capacities to a common effort provides the access to embryonic forms of collaboration that Dewey is seeking. But what matters to personalists are those unique aspects of people that are suppressed by the rules. Capacities to spit long distances, or to do a cartwheel, or punch someone in the nose, for example, are not relevant and thus should remain external (or at least marginal) to the game. From Dewey’s perspective, however, the difference between games and more democratic collaborative efforts is that, in democracy, participants have more freedom to negotiate both the roles each takes on and the aims they are seeking. The ability to engage in games with each other is a key indicator that children are ready for initiation into practices of collaborative democracy. Democracy is always dependent upon an ability to subject one’s actions to a set of restrictions that allow groups to work together coherently, even as parts of this social contract may be under reconstruction through democratic work.

GAMES IN THE LIVES OF CHILDREN

This brings us to the discussion of games in George Dennison’s 1969 *The Lives of Children* as a key counter-example to Dewey’s in *Experience & Education*. Dennison’s book tells the story of the First Street School, one of the few efforts to use free school pedagogy with mostly poor Latino and black students instead of relatively privileged middle class children. A rich and lyrical text, Herbert Kohl noted that “there is no other book I know of that shows so well what a free and humane education can be like, nor is there a more eloquent description of its philosophy.”²² Dennison was also one of the few 1960s free school pedagogues (unlike those in the 1920s and almost all others in the 1960s²³) who engaged directly with Dewey.

Dennison’s discussion of games begins by criticizing the organized Little League approach to baseball. Since he cites *Experience & Education* and *Democracy*

and Education in his book, Dennison's use of the example of baseball is clearly a direct response to Dewey's argument. From Dennison's perspective, the kind of adult-controlled baseball described by Dewey is oppressive. Dennison contrasts:

the richness of children's natural play with the stultifying rigidity of play that is organized by adults. No better example can be found than that of Little League, for what boys, left to their own devices, would ever invent such a thing? ...

The standard Little league game ... is an affair of uniforms and scoreboards, umpires, and coaches, record books, and publicity. And there in the stands ... is an audience of adults ... just waiting to be proud of them. How put-down these boys are! They are strained and silent. They try to act manly and serious, and one sees at a glance that they are anxious and uncomfortable, and deeply resent having to prove themselves. The winners exult. The losers weep. What strange occurrences in the play of children! And who invented it? Not boys themselves, but nervous adults seeking to allay their own anxieties.

For Dennison, the Little League game represents a microcosm of the kind of bureaucratic, lockstep world that both the 1920s and 1960s personalists feared; what Naumburg referred to as the "herd society" and what in the 1960s they called "technocracy."²⁴ Within the pre-established and restricted hierarchy of the game (as in more traditional schools), opportunities for actively negotiating relationships and engaging with real and complex challenges of order that arise in real relationships between distinctive human beings are largely eliminated.

Dennison then turns to a description of the social structure of the kind of baseball game he believed was more healthy and authentic. In truly child-organized games, he argues, children's interactions:

are expansive and diverse, alternatively intense and gay, and are filled with events of all kinds. The boys make much of one another's personalities, one another's strengths and

weaknesses, and their witticisms fly back and forth with unflagging vivacity. They do not stop their game to argue a fine point, but rather the arguments are great features of the game. ... Between innings, the boys throw themselves on the grass. They wrestle, do handstands, turn summersaults. ... A confident player will make up dance steps as he stops a slow grounder. ... [And through it all] no one has forgotten the score or who was at bat. The game goes on. ... *Everything is noticed, everything is used.*²⁵

The point is not that there are no rules at all. But rather, as in Dewey's vision of play, rules are continually responsive to the particular circumstances of a unique time and location. In contrast with Dewey's vision of games, the rich, ongoing complexities of life are integrated holistically into the collective experience of game-playing. Instead of being trapped within an established structure, children in this kind of game are constantly engaged in regenerating and maintaining the order of their relationships through and in their play. Each child remains responsive to the desires, needs, and actions of the others. This is the story of a community that is playing a game, not, as in Dewey, a structured game that generates a temporary, bounded community and initiates children into the idea of a structured society.

Dennison gives other examples from his school of how children in such games can alter the structure of their play to respond to the range of capacities of different participants in their activities. For example, he notes that "Vincente's limited maturity level led him to cheat and throw tantrums when he was playing with the other children." Although annoyed, the other children did not exclude him. But neither "did they play as if he were a 'regular boy.' They complained to him directly ... and at the same time they slightly lowered the demands of the game, granting him many concessions." Importantly:

they did not ... lower the game to *his* level, but only so close to it as to make him reach and exert himself. This combination of concession, pressure, criticism, and acceptance worked a powerful effect, as one might well imagine. Yet it was the

ordinary dynamic of children - *at play without adults*. For if I had intervened, if it had been I who had yelled at Vincente instead of the other boys, there would have been no good effect.²⁶

Because the teachers refused to intervene (in this case):

each boy was able to experience the *necessary* relationship between his own excitement and the code of conduct which joined him to others because it was a social group. Which is to say that their play - *because it was unsupervised* - acquired the moral pressures which are inherent in games, for at bottom this is precisely what morality is: the sense of the necessary relation between self and others, group conduct and individual fulfillment.²⁷

More generally, the work and writings of personalists such as Dennison express no desire to force children into the straightjacket of formal, socially-defined rules. A capacity to continually play with each other underlies the personalists' vision of a good society. This is an essentially anarchist vision where social interaction emerges naturally through people's engagement with what Dewey (again) also understood to be "the friction engendered by meeting resistance" in the environment. As with 1920s personalists, Dennison showed how community emerges organically from the ways the unique individuals in the school interact and come up against challenges in living and playing together. The teachers stand ready to intervene, and in other parts of the book, as in Pratt and Naumburg's writings, they do intervene in supportive ways. But the key learning takes place through the largely independent interactions between the students themselves. They do not intervene unless it is absolutely necessary. And when they do intervene, the intervention is not about rules. Teachers express their own unique but honest feelings in the moment, helping students understand what healthy "resistance" from others looks like. For example, at one point Dennison is with a group on a walking trip and he just gets frustrated and leaves. In response, the students follow him and agree to collaborate with him to shift to some other end in view.²⁸

Personalists such as Dennison were not unconcerned about changing society. But they tended not to focus on it or even speak about this. The implication is that they believed that as more people responded healthily to each other, the society would slowly shift as more and more people began to act this way. In the end, however, they were much less interested in broader social change than Dewey. They wanted to create authentically free people who responded honestly to the unique aspects of other people, resisting the social “rules” that would define how their interaction would proceed. The point was not to change the world or other people, but to change the world by acting differently with respect to each other and the world.

While Dewey uses the example of games to show how societies reproduce themselves and structure the interaction patterns of their citizens, Dennison, in contrast, uses the example of games to illustrate how children can generate order *by themselves*. In fact, he distinguished between the kind of game Dewey was talking about, operating under the umbrella of adult authority and rules, and the kind of game he and other free schoolers tend to value. In Dewey’s vision, collaborative efforts are focused on some common goal like building a clubhouse, or solving some scientific problem. This is why the aim of “winning” in a game provides a precursor to Dewey’s more advanced model of collaborative experimentalism. In Dennison’s vision, however, the “goal” of community engagement — to the extent the idea of a “goal” even applies — is the enrichment of the community itself and the individuals that make up that community. What one wants to accomplish depends on how individuals are engaging at any moment, and can change unpredictably. When Dennison gets mad and walks away, the group must reform in ways that respond to this act, completely changing whatever their end in view might be.

This is a view of democracy as constant participation in a fluid form of “play.” It is not anti-democratic, it is simply a different form of democracy than Dewey valued. Dewey wanted people to learn specific, if also somewhat fluid, skills for working together on common projects. He wanted to give students the capacity to target specific aspects of their society in collaboration, and this was his understanding of what counted as “democratic.”

One final fundamental difference is in the approach to students as growing individuals. Dewey and his teachers argued that teachers need to constantly control the environment so that students learn to play together and then work together on common projects in the correct manner. The personalists saw this as a failure of trust. Through their own pragmatic experience they saw children working together by responding to “the friction engendered by meeting [the] resistance” of other human beings. Children didn’t need to be “managed” in order to develop skills for forms of collaboration and social structure. They naturally developed it through play. And play led to a world of play. This, for the personalists, was a democratic society. It may seem unrealistic, but it is debatable how realistic Dewey’s own vision was.

CONCLUSION

The contrast between Dewey and Dennison on what constitutes a “game” encapsulates the more general conflict between Dewey and personalist visions of how society should operate and how education should initiate students into this society. In Dewey’s view, education requires careful management and intervention. From the free school perspective, this represented a failure of trust in children.

The personalists presented an alternative view of democracy. In fact, Dennison and other 1920s personalists believed that Dewey did not realize how bureaucratic the world had become. Dennison noted that “writing in 1902, 1916, 1936, Dewey did not envision, and could not, the incredible consolidation of centralized power that has taken place in our country since World War II.”²⁹ While this is not an accurate assessment of Dewey, who understood these changes quite well, the argument of the personalists was that these new bureaucratic structures required a different form of education than Dewey had developed. Dennison pointed out that Dewey said he was flexible in response to changing conditions. If so, he and other personalist educators argued, Dewey’s vision of democratic education needed to change. “As a nation,” Dennison argued,

echoing the complaints of other personalists across the decades, we have become “a wretched hog wallow of administration function.”³⁰ Naumburg and others had argued earlier in the century that Dewey didn’t understand the dangers of initiating children into the structures of the “baseball game” and even structured forms of democratic engagement. This was, they believed, not resistance but, in key ways, a capitulation to an increasingly bureaucratized society.

A Dewey who was more willing to take them seriously might have agreed that his vision of collaborative democracy did require participants to tamp down aspects of themselves that were not relevant to the common project (as baseball players also had to do). Even if he admitted that, he would argue that it is through their focused collaborative actions they will be able to concretely change society. Students who learn only to play are not equipped to engage with, much less change, aspects of modern society.

The personalists may have had a good point, however. Increasingly, corporate and government bureaucracy draws on quite similar forms of collaboration to accomplish their aims. Students taught to collaborate will thrive in these new bureaucratic structures. But, of course, they cannot choose their ends in view in these settings. What Dewey and most other progressives never quite understood was that one needed to go beyond collaboration to develop the power to pursue aims defined by the collaborative group, even in contexts designed to suppress this. Otherwise skills of this kind will simply be coopted by the powerful. The contrast, then, is between two visions of democracy, two visions of democratic society and, implicitly, two conceptions of how society might be changed for the better.

1 Lawrence Cremin, *The Transformation of the School* (New York: Knopf, 1961), 376-77.

2 John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1938).

3 For the progressives of the 1920s, see: Robert Beck, “Progressive Education and American Progressivism: Margaret Naumburg,” *Teachers*

College Record 60, no. 4 (1959): 198-208; Robert Beck, "Progressive Education and American Progressivism: Caroline Pratt," *Teachers College Record* 60, no. 3 (1958): 129-37; Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957* (New York: Knopf, 1961); Margaret Naumburg, *Child and the World: Dialogues in Modern Education* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1928); Caroline Pratt and Jesse Stanton, *Before Books: Experimental Practice in the City and Country School* (New York: Adelphi, 1926). For the progressives of the 1960s, see Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd* (New York: Vintage, 1962); Ron Miller, *Free Schools, Free People: Education and Democracy After the 1960s* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); A. S. Neill, *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing* (New York: Hart, 1960).

4 George Dennison, *The Lives of Children* (New York: Random House, 1969).

5 As Cremin notes: "A good deal of his [Dewey's] effort in education after 1920 was spent criticizing self-styled disciples" (p. 173). Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education, the National Experience, 1783-1876* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981).

6 Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 20-21.

7 *Ibid.*, 22.

8 *Ibid.*

9 In part because of their erasure by Dewey, while mentions of child-centered pedagogy are not unusual in historical texts, few works in education acknowledge the existence of the scope of the movement. Lawrence Cremin's *The Transformation of the School* is the most important exception. But while its brief portrayal of Pratt and Naumburg is fairly accurate, as the epigraph that begins this essay indicates, its overall tone is harsh and dismissive. Mary Hauser's biography of Pratt in this context is quite welcome — hopefully a harbinger of a shift in the reputation of the child-centered educators — but its narrow focus does not give a sense of Pratt's deep embeddedness in the larger intellectual movements of the time. See: Mary E. Hauser, *Learning from Children: The Life and Legacy of Caroline Pratt* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

10 The best, really the only significant, study of the Young Americans as a group is Casey Nelson Blake's *Beloved Community* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

11 For Naumburg I draw on my own reading. See Aaron Schutz, *Social Class, Social Action, and Education: The Failure of Progressive Democracy* (New York,

Palgrave, 2010). While I have not examined the others in as much detail, see also: Beck's 1959 articles on Naumburg and Pratt (see note 4 above); Hauser, *Learning from Children* (on Pratt); and Blake, *Beloved Community* (on the Young Intellectuals more broadly).

12 See Miller, *Free Schools*.

13 See, e.g., John Dewey, "Brigham Young Lectures," in John Dewey, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969-1991). In *The Later Works* vol. 17, 269, he writes:

"[Eventually] make-believe play ceases to take so large a part of their thought, which means that they are not so contented to go on and make-believe. Their plays change to games. A play has no rules, no particular point or end, no aim. Suggestions come one after another to children, and each is played until they tire of it. But when you have a game, like hide-and-seek, you have a certain point that has to be made, a certain result that has to be reached, and consequently the steps toward it have to be regulated. When children therefore begin to substitute games for plays, begin to be more critical, begin to plan ahead, then has the changed attitude fairly come upon them. ...

He can now be given tasks, can now assume responsibility for performing certain things that bring definite results. Schooling, that is to say, more conscious instruction, can now profitably begin."

See also John Dewey, "Growth in Activity," *Later Works* vol. 2, 245:

"Play tends to develop into games with certain objective conditions to be observed.

It is a sign of progress in the mental development of a child when he begins to play ... games ... and to observe their rules. He reaches the "second stage" when he has a sense of end or aim. This is a transition within the play period itself.

By this transition he has gained an ability to *work*."

14 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (Free Press, 1916), 211.

15 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (Free Press, 1916), 211.

16 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 41.

17 Katherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards, *The Dewey School*:

The Laboratory School of the University of Chicago 1896–1903 (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1936), 63.

18 Dewey, *Experience & Education*, 52.

19 Ibid., 52-53.

20 Ibid., 55-57.

21 Ibid., 53.

22 Herbert Kohl, "A Review of 'The Lives of Children,'" *New York Review of Books*, September 14, 1969.

23 Johnathan Kozol, *Free Schools* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).

24 Margaret Naumburg, *The Child and the World: Dialogues in Modern Education* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1928); see also Blake, *Beloved Society*.

25 Dennison, *Lives*, 195.

26 Ibid., 197-8.

27 Ibid., 202.

28 Ibid., 77.

29 Ibid., 133.

30 Ibid., 133.