

John Dewey, Interests, and Distinctive Schools of Choice

Terri S. Wilson

Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

INTRODUCTION

Creating smaller schools has become a widely adopted strategy for high school reform. The New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) has aggressively pursued the creation of new schools of choice designed to break up larger failing schools into small schools focused around particular instructional missions. Currently, close to 300 in number, these schools include newly created learning academies, charter schools, and small learning academies that function as “schools within schools.” These new schools are characterized by their size — generally enrolling less than 600 students — and their adoption of specific curricular themes. These themes are designed to both distinguish schools from each other and to attract parents and students within a new district-wide system of choice.¹

Reformers argue that allowing parents and students to select schools on the basis of these themes — which might include the arts, architecture, social justice, science, or environmental studies — can help to build a more equitable system of education in at least three overlapping ways. First, students who are able to choose schools based on their interests will be more engaged in learning. Relevant curriculum, combined with the more personalized relationships possible in smaller school settings, will help build student engagement and — by extension — improve daily attendance, academic achievement, and graduation rates.² Second, choice will act as a lever for school improvement as small schools are encouraged to improve in order to attract students and families. Third, allowing students to choose schools based on their interests and aspirations — instead of by neighborhood attendance area or test scores — will help create integrated and diverse school environments.³

All three of these statements share a common theoretical assumption: that students and parents make academic choices based on a logical assessment of their needs, interests, abilities, and preferences.⁴ As such, small school reform relies, implicitly at least, on a rational choice understanding of human behavior. This understanding is more than just a guiding theory. Predicting that students and parents will act in certain ways is key to claims that choice — as a policy mechanism — will improve academic achievement, school performance, and patterns of residential segregation. The effectiveness of this policy depends on the ability of students and families to make individual, effective choices that create new school communities created around common interests and aspirations.

While a compelling basis for reform, relying on a rational choice framework incorporates several problematic assumptions about how students and parents actually make decisions. Most immediately, and most troubling, this theory discounts how differences of power work to create an uneven field for individual school choices. The inequitable effects of school choice policies — particularly for families who are most disadvantaged — have been well documented by a growing body of

research. This research describes patterns of segregation between schools of choice and regular district schools along lines of race, class, education level, and teacher intervention. In New York, specifically, early evaluations of small school reform found that English language learners and special education students were significantly underrepresented among the students enrolling in new small schools.⁵

This research points to the need for better implementation: more accessible information, resources to help students and families navigate the system, and policies that support students with special needs enrolled in these schools. In this essay, however, I step back from measures of *effectiveness* to consider some of the *theoretical foundations* of the reform model itself. I focus attention not necessarily on the first aspect of this reform — the creation of new, small schools — but on a closely related feature: the idea of creating distinctive schools of choice to draw students and parents into new communities organized around their particular educational interests.

My essay takes up this concept of interest in this reform. Drawing from New York City's small school movement, I explore how this reform conceptualizes the interests of parents and students in choosing distinctive schools. I draw on John Dewey's concept of interest as a critical resource for examining some of the problematic rational choice assumptions of these reforms. In particular, I argue that Dewey provides leverage for examining the normative and democratic questions involved in these new models of school communities. I discuss three dimensions of Dewey's expanded concept of interest: as more than mere preference, as embedded in a temporal and transactional situation, and as connected to a vision of democratic growth. I conclude by sketching out some of the ways that this expanded, democratic conception of interest might draw out attention to reshaping small school policies.

SMALL SCHOOLS OF CHOICE

Presently, reformers see small schools as a means for school improvement, student engagement, and — to certain extents — the desegregation of neighborhood-based attendance areas. This reform has its roots in a tradition of decentralized and alternative approaches to education. New York has a history of teacher-created small schools of choice (most famously, Debbie Meier's efforts in District 4) as well as alternative, personalized schools for students that had failed out of larger high schools.⁶ These small schools have moved from being alternative outliers — what Linda Darling-Hammond and colleagues call “policy by exception” — to the dominant policy response for high school failure throughout the New York City public schools.⁷

Almost 300 new small schools have been created in recent years; 58,000 high school students alone have moved into small high schools opened in the last five years.⁸ In fact, the New York City schools now require all students to choose a high school by ranking their preference for up to twelve schools among an ever-increasing range of options. Students can choose schools that concentrate on the arts, the sciences, legal studies, and even aviation. Themes vary in both their specificity as well as the degree to which they are instantiated in the schools' curriculum. In their

research on small schools in New York, Jacqueline Ancess and David Allen posed three different degrees of thematic integration: integral, marginal, or nominal.⁹ While many small schools retain their theme in name only, or at the outskirts of their curriculum, themes can focus the school community around a coherent curriculum that engages students and strengthens the mission of the school. In their profile of one small school with a well-integrated theme, Ancess and Allen describe the multiple ways that the school's theme — architecture, in this case—acted to focus the curriculum, engage and challenge students, create meaningful, public assessments, and build strong connections with community partners.¹⁰

Nevertheless, their research also cautions that themes are not just about students' interests. In the context of school choice, they also function as powerful codes: implicit signals about the kinds of students and families that schools hope to recruit and are designed to serve. For example, the school in their profile, while racially integrated, enrolled 75 percent male students, in part — they argue — because an architecture theme reads as “male.” Here, themes often function as implicit markers of race, class, gender, educational ambitions, and self-identity. Additional research has demonstrated that families with more cultural capital are more likely to be able to decode and interpret thematic markers: parents who want their child to attend college are more likely to choose schools emphasizing liberal arts — for instance — or intensive science and math, as well as schools that are highly ranked or more selective.¹¹

In addition, while the reform positions choice in terms of interest, families weigh a variety of factors in their choice, including location, peer group, school reputation, transportation and other issues. Furthermore, interest does not equal access. Many of these small theme schools are permitted to screen students by standardized test scores, attendance records, or — in the case of arts-based schools — by the creation of portfolios or the ability to audition. These differences are reflected in the research on how students are matched with schools in New York City. There is clear evidence that many students — particularly those who are most disadvantaged — are assigned to schools they did not choose, or to schools that were undersubscribed (and often failing). In 2005, 82 percent of students received one of their choices; of those, 45 percent received one of their top three choices. But 18 percent, or 16,609 students, were assigned to an undersubscribed school they did not choose. In another wrinkle, students who score in 98th and 99th percentile are automatically given their top choice. It is thus possible for some highly desirable schools to be entirely subscribed with students who have scored in the top two percentiles of state tests.¹²

Policy makers acknowledge these difficulties as part of an “ongoing process” of “imperfect conditions” that remain better than the alternative, what one district leader describes as “expensive tinkering with big high schools that had a twenty year history of failure and steroid strength immunity to reform.”¹³ While the implementation of small school reform is certainly — and hopefully — improving, I argue that many of the inequitable effects of this policy can be traced back to problematic assumptions that parents and students will act in theoretically predictive ways.

In this case, that families will make logical, unfettered choices in selecting the school that best fits their interests and needs.

DEWEY ON INTEREST

I now turn to the ways that Dewey's understanding of interest helps us reconstruct some of these assumptions. In what follows, I highlight three major aspects of Dewey's account. First, Dewey's concept of interest differs from contemporary understandings of the term — as equivalent to preferences — in school choice policy. Second, I examine what “interest” means for Dewey, focusing on how his conception of self challenges the individualistic account of “self-interest” prevalent in school choice. From there, I examine the broader interrelationships between these terms — interest and self — with other terms — democracy, education, and growth — central to Dewey's understanding of interest. Together, the interconnections between these terms offer an alternative account of interest that stresses the role educational environments play in connecting the developing interests of young people with the broader practices of democratic life.

PREFERENCES V. INTERESTS

First, and conceptually, how does Dewey's understanding of interest differ from small school reform? As discussed previously, asking students and parents to choose schools on the basis of their interests makes several assumptions about how they will act, if given the opportunity. In this framework, parents have stable and ordered preferences about the schools their children should attend; likewise, students have pre-existing and coherent preferences for different kinds of schools. When choosing a school, parents and students examine the available alternatives, weigh preferences against constraints, and make a choice.¹⁴

Here, choice is framed as a discrete event: influenced by a variety of preferences, limited by certain contextual factors, and resulting in certain effects. Understanding parents and students as individuals seeking to maximize their preferences allows policymakers and researchers to predict how they might choose schools and how these choices might work to improve schools. In this understanding, the interests of parents and students in particular curricular themes function as preferences, shaping choices within a context of competing preferences (location, for example) and constraints (such as transportation). The influence of a rational choice framework lies, in part, on its ability to elegantly distinguish between aspects of human action: preferences, constraints, choices, and effects.

On a basic level, Dewey would challenge the quick conflation of “interest” with a notion of “preference.” Specifically, he would argue that interests (even understood narrowly, as preferences) are inseparable from choices. For Dewey, interest is a broader transactional process, a line of continual interaction where we — literally — become interested in — and actively engaged with — our world. Two aspects of this process are worth highlighting. First, interest is *temporal*: it changes over time, developing within the ongoing context of our choices. Second, interest is *situational*: it develops through ongoing engagement with a world that is, itself, always changing.

In both ways, Dewey shifts our attention towards the fundamentally interactive — what he terms transactional — character of interest. As new situations call forth new perceptions, judgments, and actions, we — in turn — are constantly modifying these situations. We are always adjusting and modifying our relationship to an ever-changing world. Dewey alternately terms these interactions, “reconstructions,” “experiments,” “imaginative rehearsals,” and even “intelligence.” For Dewey, these interactions encompass moments that we might term “choices,” although he deliberately complicates our understanding of that term. As in a rational choice framework, we also weigh alternative courses of action, or “various competing possible lines of action.”¹⁵ Instead of emphasizing deliberation in terms of preferences and constraints, however, Dewey understands it as an “imaginative rehearsal” of consequences.¹⁶

In other words, we do not act on the basis of pre-existing values, preferences, or interests; we are *always already* acting. For Dewey, a motivation does not, “exist prior to an act and produce it,” but is “an act plus judgment upon some element of it, the judgment being made in the light of the consequences of the act.”¹⁷ We only discover the existence of what might be termed “preferences” when reflecting on our ongoing action, that is, *after* we have already acted upon them. The values, commitments, and norms behind preferences are supplied — “funded,” in Dewey’s term — by the world in which we live. We do not choose our preferences and then apply them to decisions, but they are invoked and enacted in the process of making choices. In this sense, Dewey pushes back on the very idea that we could *have* preferences or interests — like possessions; instead, as Jim Garrison once remarked, interests could be said to have *us*. Interest is more identity than preference; more process than possession. The process of self-formation is, like the nature of ends and means, radically unsettled and dynamic.¹⁸

INTERESTS, SELF, GROWTH

Second, and more substantively, I believe that Dewey provides more than resources for critiquing the problematic accounts of “interest” used in rational choice frameworks for school choice. Drawing on concepts of self and growth, he provides an *alternate account* of what we might mean when we talk about “interest.” Dewey’s account of interest — as transactional and situational — differs from a notion of preferences.

This account of interest is rooted — first — in Dewey’s understanding of the fundamentally transactional character of the relationship between self and world. The world is a physical and natural place, but also an intersubjective and experiential space of activity and meaning. This world coalesces into particular moments, situations, and environments that define and — in his language — activate our experiences. For Dewey, “there is no ready-made self behind activities.”¹⁹ That is, an individual is neither complete nor fully formed prior to experience, but activated in experience. Dewey stresses that both self and world are always in a transactional process of reconstruction and re-formation.²⁰ For Dewey, the inter-related nature of self and world makes “having a preference” or “acting in our self-interest” impossible. Our values, interests, and beliefs are intrinsically a part of our social contexts,

situations, and activities.²¹ As Dewey remarks, “attitudes, dispositions and their kin, while capable of being distinguished and made concrete intellectual objects, are never separate existences. They are always *of, from, toward*, situations and things.”²²

Here, we see a difference between understanding interests as fixed *possessions* with a view of interest as a transactional *process*. David Hansen, in his exploration of Dewey and the “public interest” understands this contrast as, “the difference between interest, in the singular, and interests in the plural.”²³ For Dewey, interest — in Hansen’s singular sense — encompasses three overlapping dimensions: an object or objective in the world, our disposition or attitude of engagement, and, most crucially, the *process* itself, where “self and world are engaged with each other in a developing situation.”²⁴ Here, interest becomes a developing attitude or disposition, bound up within an activity.²⁵

In this emphasis, we see how interest — as a developing disposition — might be understood as synonymous with the self. For Dewey, interest is, “the active or moving identity of the self with a certain object” (*DE*, 352). In fact, the notion of self is so integral, that Dewey contends, “self and interest are two names for the same fact” (*DE*, 352). Furthermore, this identity — this self — is not ready-made, but, “something in continuous formation through choice of action” (*DE*, 351–52). Here we see the connection with growth. Certain choices, interests, or lines of action open up future possibilities for growth; other choices preclude or limit these possibilities. In this sense, Dewey argues, “every choice sustains a double relation to the self. It reveals the existing self and it forms the future self...shapes the self, making it, in some degree, a new self.”²⁶

INTEREST AND DEMOCRACY

This vision of the constantly growing self brings us to the third aspect of Dewey on interest: the close connection between interest and democratic life. Because interest is literally inseparable from our activities in the world, these activities — and the environments that shape them — are central to the development of the self. Our interests are not pre-existing, but shaped in response to invitations from different kinds of environments, associations, communities, and publics. Here, Dewey’s attention to the role of an environment — and the unique environment provided by the school — is particularly helpful for reconsidering the issue of schools formed around distinct interests.

For Dewey, an environment refers to more than the background, or surroundings, which encompass an individual (*DE*, 11). Instead, an environment implies a “specific continuity” of surroundings with what Dewey calls our “active tendencies,” or developing lines of interest (*DE*, 11). Environments educate, in Dewey’s sense, indirectly, by means of inviting — or dissuading — certain kinds of action and lines of growth. Schools are purposefully designed environments, created to help introduce young people to a wide and extensive world of subject matter, tradition, and culture.

In this sense, the school environment balances young people’s active, developing interests against the broader social goals of education. Dewey poses four features

of an educational environment: it should be simplifying, purifying, balancing, and steadying (*DE*, 20–22). For the purposes of this essay, I note the interconnection between *two* of these features: the simplifying and balancing. The school environment works, first, to simplify the complexity of possible subject matter, focusing on students' present interests and capacities. We could understand this as a kind of endorsement for some of the curricular themes established at many of the new small schools in New York. Rather than attempting to "cover the curriculum," these schools choose activities designed to connect the moving interests of students with extensive subject matter. Dewey links this simplifying function to another, however, that particularly bears on the creation of distinctive schools: the school's role in balancing individual interests — as well as their family and community-centered perspectives — with the perspectives of others, particularly across lines of race, class, religion, and tradition. For Dewey, schools are crucial *environments* that connect and mediate across lines of difference and diversity.

We might ask why Dewey stresses an environment rather than other mechanisms that encourage interaction and communication. This question takes us to the integral relationships between interest, learning, and democracy. In Dewey's oft-cited formulation, democracy is "conjoint, communicated experience" (*DE*, 20–22). It cannot be learned from a textbook, from activities, or through modes of self-reflection or social criticism. In contrast, democracy must be enacted in small-scale moments of communication, interaction, and collaboration. These moments are precisely what characterize the routines and practices of many thoughtfully designed school communities and classrooms. They are in fact synonymous with Dewey's understanding of *when* education happens: when an individual shares and participates in some conjoint activity (*DE*, 22).

This definition of democracy — as conjoint, communicated experience — renews the focus not only on what *happens* in a school environment, but on who *constitutes* it. Thinking in terms of Dewey's democratic criteria, how many different interests are consciously shared inside a school community? To what extent do schools promote free and full interaction across different communities, associations, or interests? To what extent do individuals participate in joint activities, so — in Dewey's terms — each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others in giving point and direction to his own? This openness to the interests of others — and the challenges they place on our own — is Dewey's understanding of democracy. And, by extension, the role that interest — properly understood — might play in fostering growth and learning for democratic ends.

CONCLUSIONS

How might this expanded sense of interest help us rethink some of the implications of small school reform? On one hand, we could see Dewey support efforts in schools to present a focused, powerful curriculum that clarifies and simplifies the complexities of the world into an activity that engages the developing interests of students. On the other hand, we can imagine — through powerful arguments against specialized curriculum and the narrow preservation of group

interests — that Dewey would challenge the rationale of organizing schools around fixed and static conceptions of student interest.

In contrast to either of these extremes, Dewey would urge a reconsideration of the role and office of the school environment: as a place of focus, but also integration. He highlighted this balancing act in one of his earliest statements on education:

It is clear that with the increasing differentiation of lines of work and interest, leading to greater individuality and independence in various studies, great care must be taken to find the balance between, on one side, undue separation and isolation, and on the other, a miscellaneous and casual attention to a large number of topics, without adequate emphasis and distinctiveness to any.²⁷

This task is not — nor should it be — easily solved. Rather, it draws our attention to an essential tension in educational practice, one that countless schools and teachers wrestle with on a daily basis: how to balance the tumultuous complexity — and possibilities — of the world against the interests — passionate, and sometimes limiting — that students bring with them through the classroom door.

To negotiate this balance, it might be worth reconsidering — in a sense resuscitating — a wider and more creative understanding of interest. Rather than reducing the term to mere preference, Dewey contends that interest is a constantly developing notion of self, one that changes over time, and in response to different kinds of environments. This broader concept of interest focuses our attention on several dimensions of policy and practice in new small schools.

First, at the level of policy, Dewey might frame questions that ask: How are these school communities formed? What support and information do parents need? What sorts of strategies — and restrictions — might encourage school communities to encourage interaction across lines of difference, and encourage experiences that broaden interests? Second, at the school level, we might ask: How exactly are distinctive curricular themes instantiated in schools? To what extent are they integrated into curriculum and instruction? How open-ended are the themes? How do they draw students into diverse areas of interest? And, third, within these schools, Dewey focuses our attention on what “curriculum” actually means in terms of day-to-day interactions between students and teachers. Here, we might ask how the micro processes of classrooms — countless conversations and interactions, mediated by teachers — expand and deepen students’ understandings and interests. Across these different dimensions, Dewey highlights the inescapably important role that schools play as environments that promote democratic deliberation, conversation, and interaction with others about the purpose of schooling.

1. Jacqueline Ancess and David Allen, “Implementing Small Theme High Schools in New York City: Great Intentions and Great Tensions,” *Harvard Educational Review* 76, no. 3 (2006): 401–16.

2. Patrick J. McQuillan, “Small-School Reform Through the Lens of Complexity Theory: It’s ‘Good to Think With,’” *Teachers College Record* 110, no. 9 (2008): 1772–801.

3. Ancess and Allen, “Implementing,” 403.

4. Douglas D. Ready and Valerie E. Lee, “Choice, Equity, and the Schools-Within-Schools Reform,” *Teachers College Record* 110, no. 9 (2008): 1934.

5. This reflects the history of small school reform in the NYCDOE. The first small schools opened under Chancellor Klein were exempted from enrolling English Language Learning (ELL) students or special education students until they were enrolled at full capacity. After public outcry, however, the department reserved this policy; all small schools are currently required to serve any student assigned to them. Small schools do not always, however, have the same resources to meet the needs of ELL and Special Ed students. See Clara Hemphill and Kim Nauer, "The New Marketplace: How Small School Reforms and School Choice have Reshaped New York City's High Schools." Center for New York City Affairs, Milano: the New Schools for Management and Urban Policy, June 2009, 28.
6. Ancess and Allen, "Implementing," 404.
7. Linda Darling-Hammond, Jacqueline Ancess, and Suzanna Ort-Wichterle, "Reinventing High School: An Analysis of the Coalition Campus Schools Project," *American Education Research Journal*, 39 (2002): 639–73; cited in Ancess and Allen, "Implementing," 404.
8. Hemphill and Nauer, "The New Marketplace," 2.
9. Ancess and Allen, "Implementing," 408.
10. *Ibid.*, 408–09.
11. Ready and Lee, "Choice, Equity and the Schools-Within-Schools Reform," 1935.
12. Ancess and Allen, "Implementing," 412.
13. Eric Nadelstern, cited in Ancess and Allen, "Implementing," 412.
14. Laura Hamilton and Kacey Guin, "Understanding How Families Choose Schools," in *Getting Choice Right: Ensuring Equity and Efficiency in Education Policy*, ed. Julian Betts and Tom Loveless (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), 41.
15. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: Modern Library, 1922), 190.
16. John Dewey and James Tufts, *Ethics* (1925), in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 7, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 275.
17. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 120.
18. On an even broader level, we see some of this same concern in Dewey's particular understanding of the relationship between means and ends. While rational choice frameworks understand action in terms of choosing the best means to a given end; for Dewey, ends and means exist *together* and *inside* a dynamic situation.
19. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 96.
20. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (1925), in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 2, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 246.
21. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (1925), in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 1, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 160–61.
22. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 183.
23. David Hansen, "John Dewey, The Public Interest, and Educational Practice Today" (paper presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, Calif., Saturday, April 2006).
24. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916) (New York: Free Press, 1997), 126. This work will be cited as *DE* in the text for all subsequent references.
25. Hansen, "John Dewey," 3.
26. Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, 286.
27. John Dewey, *The School and Society*, in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, vol. 1, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), 76.