

Experience and Education: Implications for Teaching and Schooling Today

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As the 21st century dawns, the U.S. schooling system is in the throes of a major revolution, the scope of which has not been seen for more than a century. Just as the Industrial Revolution led to the replacement of one-room rural schoolhouses by modern school bureaucracies, the information age is pressing for new forms of schooling that will enable many more students to think creatively, communicate proficiently, manage information and resources, solve novel problems, and engage in knowledge work.

In response to these demands, educators have created and redesigned thousands of schools during the past decade to educate rich and poor students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds to levels of success traditionally thought impossible to achieve (Darling-Hammond 1997). Like the progressive schools built from the work of reformers like John Dewey at the turn of the century, Ella Flagg in the 1930s, and Lucy Sprague Mitchell in the 1960s, these schools are working to create an "equity pedagogy" (Banks 1993), challenging diverse learners to think independently; create, invent, and understand academic subjects through research, writing, and inquiry; experience ideas firsthand; and make decisions democratically.

These restructured schools reflect what Dewey called a "new education," featuring reforms that have reappeared in each era of progressive reform: disciplinary learning conducted in more

experiential ways; interdisciplinary curriculum aimed at making connections among ideas; research and other projects emphasizing the use of knowledge and the development of higher-order thinking skills; cooperative learning; shared decision making among teachers, students, and parents; and “detracking” to make a challenging curriculum available to more students. Yet such schools and the practices they embrace remain marginalized, rarely embraced or supported by the systems in which they struggle to exist and generally unexamined for what they can teach about the educational enterprise. Furthermore, the ideas upon which they are built have recently engendered a political backlash—just as earlier reforms gave way to standardizing influences in the efficiency movement of the 1920s, the teacher-proof curriculum reforms of the 1950s, and the “back to the basics” movement of the 1970s and ’80s. Today, the curriculum wars center on debates over “whole language” instruction versus phonics, direct instruction versus indirect instruction, transmission of facts in traditional disciplines versus development of skills across disciplinary contexts, “teacher-centered” approaches versus “student-centered” strategies, and authoritarian control over student behavior versus efforts to develop intrinsic responsibility.

In *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1) foreshadowed this dance of the dichotomies by acknowledging that

Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of Either-Ors, between which it recognized no intermediate possibilities. . . . The history of educational theory is marked by opposition between the idea that education is devel-

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opment from within and that it is formation from without; that it is based upon natural endowments and that education is a process of overcoming natural inclination and substituting in its place habits acquired under external pressure.

More than a half century ago, Dewey urged the development of a more balanced educational philosophy—one forged through a thoughtful consideration of experience and its role in education rather than by simplistic rejection of “old” ideas and the adoption of the opposite extreme. Dewey (8) noted,

When external authority is rejected, it does not follow that all authority should be rejected, but rather that there is need to search for a more effective source of authority. Because the older education imposed the knowledge, methods, and the rules of conduct of the mature person upon the young, it does not follow, except upon the basis of the extreme Either-Or philosophy, that the knowledge and skill of the mature person has no directive value for the experience of the immature.

Dewey (9–10) expressed concern about some of the “newer” schools that, in reaction to the drudgery of traditional education, “tend to make little or nothing of organized subject-matter of study; to proceed as if any form of direction and guidance by adults were an invasion of individual freedom, and as if the idea that education should be concerned with the present and future meant that acquaintance with the past has little or no role to play in education.”