

Models of Educational Democracy

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TWO MODELS OF EDUCATIONAL DEMOCRACY

In this essay we explore the relation between education and democratic society in terms of the possible participation in school governance of marginalized parents and their communities. We examine what we label the core value model of democracy in terms of some problems that are posed by an alternative which we call the preference model. We also examine the efforts of a local group in a Midwest town to address the issues raised by these conflicting models.

The core value model of democracy holds to a thick model of democratic education — that there are some understandings, skills, and values that democracy requires in order to maintain and re-create itself, and that these are not necessarily those that parents would choose to teach to their children. The preference approach has a considerably thinner understanding of the role of education in a democratic society. Democratic education serves to satisfy parent and student choice. The more choices that are satisfied, the more democratic the educational system.

The core value model can take significantly different forms and may include both John Dewey's style of progressivism, with its emphasis on cooperative inquiry, and E.D. Hirsch's educational program, with its emphasis on core knowledge. What marks them off from the preference approach to democracy is the belief that the skills, attitudes, and perspectives needed to establish and maintain a democratic society, while related to the desires of individual, have an integrity that can not be reduced to these desires. Critical thinking, cooperative inquiry, and decisionmaking, valuing the world view of others, a willingness to submit one's deeply held beliefs to evidence and to allow the deeply held beliefs of others to be held with insufficient evidence, seeking out dialogue and discourse, are valuable for democracy even if no parent wants his or her child to acquire them. Thus according to this model, the sum of parental choices is not adequate to sustain democratic social values. Or, to put it differently, the needs of the larger democratic society are not a necessary outcome of a system in which parents choose what they view to be best for their individual child. As Dewey writes in *Democracy and Education*:

The intermingling in the school of youth of different races, different religions, and unlike customs creates for all a new and broader environment. Common subject matter accustoms all to a unity of outlook upon a broader horizon than is visible to members of any group while it is isolated. The assimilative force of the American public school is eloquent testimony to the efficacy of the common balance and appeal.... The school has the function of coordinating within the disposition of each individual the diverse influence of the various social environments into which he enters.¹

For Dewey these functions are critical for the creation and reconstitution of a democratic society:

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is a mode of associative living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who

participate in interests so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity.²

Although Dewey, like Hirsch, sees value in common subject matter, he, unlike Hirsch, was concerned to provide a cooperative climate for inquiry and decisionmaking, and he was especially concerned about any school that did not involve teachers in the decisionmaking process. Dewey was somewhat divided in his opinion about the success of public schools in establishing this cooperative climate. In an essay entitled "The School As a Means of Developing a Social Consciousness and Social Ideals in Children" he wrote: "that no other influence has counted for anything like as much in bringing a certain integrity, cohesion, feeling of sympathy and unity among the elements of our population as has the public school system of this country."³ Yet he felt that this was accomplished haphazardly and without a great deal of planning and foresight. With new tensions arising from the First World War, there was a need for schools to develop more systematic approaches to cooperation. According to him this need would not be met until the problem of nondemocratic, top-down administration and governance was resolved.

Dewey's solution was to provide teachers with more control in the governance of their schools and to develop structures of teacher and administrator cooperation. In an essay entitled "Democracy in Education," Dewey argued that one of the problems was that teachers themselves were not involved in the development of educational decisions and hence children were not exposed to a democratic alternative to the authoritarian model that pervaded the schools. He wrote:

until the public school system is organized in such a way that every teacher has some regular and representative way in which he or she can register judgment upon matters of educational importance with the assurance that this judgment will somehow affect the school system, the assertion that the present system is not, from the internal standpoint, democratic seems to be justified.⁴

Without exposure to such a model, instruction in citizenship involves mechanical transmission of information, but does not produce the cooperative skills and spirit required by democracy. Largely missing from Dewey's model of cooperative governance was the voice of the parent that is the very voice that the advocates of the preference model believe is primary for the development of democratic education. Also missing was the voice of the community. This is somewhat odd given Dewey's larger concern to relate education to the ongoing needs and interest of the community, and to educate students to be active participants in the process and decisions of a democratic community. We will return to this issue shortly, but first we want to explore the rather dramatic change that has taken place in the discourse about these two models.

We can see the dramatic difference in the evaluation of these two models by examining the subtle but important rhetorical change that has taken place since the ruling in *Pierce v. the Society of Sisters*, a ruling that affirmed parents' rights to send their children to a nonpublic, parochial, or private school.⁵ In granting parents such a right, *Pierce* did not require the state to provide any financial aid in realizing it. In

this case the burden was on the parents to find the means to exercise the right Pierce provided them. The ruling required no more of the state than that it *allow* parents to choose a nonpublic school for their children. The reason for placing the burden on parental choice was largely because it was assumed that the public schools were responsible for developing a core of civic virtues that would enable children to transcend the values of their local group and to identify with the nation at large.

Today the debate around parental choice is focused on issues such as school vouchers, home schooling, and charter schools, but the burden of proof is shifting to the state and its authority to determine how and where children should be educated. Whereas in the Pierce ruling, the important question was how national coherence will be maintained if each parent has the right to choose to educate his or her child privately, today the core question is why should all parents not be enabled to educate their children as wealthy parents now do, according to their own choosing and with the aid of the state.

In allowing, but not encouraging, parents to choose their children's education in light of cheaper and often more convenient options, Pierce was holding to the importance of core values to a democratic nation. However, it was also recognizing that one of these core values was the right of parents to pass on their own values to their children. A similar line of reasoning can be seen in the Yoder case where Amish parents were allowed to remove their children from school prior to the official school leaving age because of religious reasons.⁶ The court was allowing the Amish to hold values that were different from the core, but they were still affirming the importance of these values for the rest of the citizenry.

The argument for vouchers, which has become so prominent in recent years, is considerably different. Here the question is not whether the state should allow parents to send their children to schools of their own choosing, but whether the state should encourage such developments by providing enabling means. Whereas Pierce, even in allowing parents to choose to send their children to nonpublic schools, still assumed that there were a core set of values that constituted the civic virtues and that these were largely the responsibility of the public schools to transmit, most arguments for vouchers seem to assume that democracy can be equated with maximizing individual parental choice. The system that satisfies the most choice is the most democratic. Instead of an approach which envisages democracy in terms of a set of core values, this one views it in additive terms, and seeks a system where the most parents are satisfied in terms of their educational desires. If there are to be any core values they are largely those needed to stabilize the system.

There are probably at least four reasons why Dewey emphasized the voice of the teacher but was largely silent about that of the parent: First, Dewey believed that teaching was essentially a professional calling, and that teachers had expert knowledge that was needed in order to make sound educational decisions. Second, Dewey was uncertain about the quality of parental judgment, and felt the education of the young needed to be controlled by more scientific tendencies. Third, he

believed that one of the purposes of education was to expose children to values and life styles that were different from their parents. Fourth, he felt that democratic decisionmaking needed to be modeled if children were to develop the intellectual and spiritual values that it required, and he was more secure in teachers doing this than parents. This is the point of his comment quoted earlier from "Democracy in Education": "Without exposure to such a model, instruction in citizenship involved mechanical transmission of information, but does not produce the cooperative skills and spirit required by democracy." He felt secure that teachers had or could develop a special understanding of children and therefore should cooperate with the administration in determining the educational programs of the school.

Given this understanding of democracy, the preference model by itself is never sufficient for Dewey. Indeed, one of the functions of Dewey's model is the development of structures for the cooperative reconstruction of desires. Thus when, under Dewey's model, desires are satisfied, it is not the first blush of desire, but that wiser desire reshaped as a result of cooperative discussion. The problem with all of this from the point of view of the preference model is both that it excludes parents and that it does not describe the real, on the groundwork of many schools. Many public schools do not advance the values and perspectives that Dewey sought, and there is little in our resegregating society to see how they might. Thus, from this point of view, it is argued that it is better to enable parents to choose the schools they want for their children.

It is hard to argue with either of these two models. The core value model seems correct, there are certain values that are critical for developing and maintaining democratic society and these values need not necessarily be of high priority among parents. Moreover, the quality of democracy is likely to be improved when people are willing and able to discuss their differences in an open and reasonable way. However, it also seems quite undemocratic to exclude the immediate choices of parents on the grounds that they have not been subject to sufficient deliberation or that they are not quite scientific, refined or democratic enough to count, especially when the parents are more likely than any one else involved to care about the object of these decisions — their own children.

Each of these models has its problems however. The preference model can be excessively individualistic, willing to accept all parental desires as equal regardless of how they were formed. Desires formed through indoctrination, through a hard sales pitch, through misinformation, or prejudice are equal in value to those that are formed through study, reasoned discourse, and discussion. Some parents may choose their schools wisely, but there is little to aid them in doing so, and it is very likely that preference models will reproduce educational inequities.

If the preference model has the problem of excessive individualism, the core value model has the problem of excessive professionalism. Where matters of pedagogy, curriculum, and discipline are at stake some parents feel left out and alienated from the very institution that is supposed to develop allegiance to the larger political and social order.

PROJECT FOR EDUCATIONAL DEMOCRACY AND THE
ATTEMPT TO RECONCILE THE TWO MODELS

We have been studying a movement, Project for Educational Democracy (PED). PED was initiated by teachers and members of the teachers union, but now includes parents, community organizers, and other members of the community. Its aim is to strengthen the legitimacy of the public schools by including members of the community in its governance. This movement has been focused on the African-American segment of the community with additional concern voiced for including poorer whites. Many members of these groups express alienation from the schools and their administration and feel left out of the decisionmaking process. PED is a work in process and so at this time we will describe the concerns that motivate it, the vision of some of its more active members, and where we think it may be moving. PED is a way to reformulate the goals of both the preference and the core value models. For the former, it seeks ways to increase the voice of poorer parents and community members in shaping the local schools. For the latter, it holds that the public schools are the best opportunity we have for addressing problems in a democracy. Moreover, it seeks to create environments in which teachers, parents, students, and community members are involved in a common discourse in which initial interests and desires are reshaped in ways that are consistent with many of Dewey's formulations.

The community, which we call Edge City, has a population of about 35,000 people with an African-American population of between ten and fifteen percent. The sense of alienation that we mentioned above is somewhat invisible to the administrators and school board representatives who are proud of what they see as the openness of the system. Indeed they believe that the system is so open to the desires of individual parents that they have coined a phrase, "The Edge City way," to indicate the informality of the chain of command and the fact that parents can jump over one layer in the chain and gain access to the next. Whether or not the "Edge City Way" works for a significant number of parents is uncertain, but a sizable number of the African-American community believe that the system is closed to them, that the schools board members do not care about their ideas, that teachers and administrators do not listen to their concerns, and that they simply do not have an effective voice in the process.

Although Edge City has been integrated for more than two decades, there are a number of reasons to believe that the present system of representation has not served the African-American community well. There are but two African-American Administrators, and only a handful of African-American teachers. These numbers have left the impression among many in the Black community that the school board has been unwilling to do what is necessary to hire and maintain African-American administrators and teachers. In addition, African-American representation on the school board has been considerably lower than their numbers in the community. Only two African Americans have served of the board since the schools were integrated in the late 1960s, and at the present time there are no African Americans on it. Moreover, in interviews with one of the African Americans who had served on the board some time ago, he expressed considerable frustration and alienation,

believing that little that he said was taken seriously and that many decisions were made behind his back. The board itself has adopted a procedure that contributes to the community's sense of alienation. While they will solicit comments from the community at their open meetings, they will not respond to those comments except as they discuss among themselves the reasons for voting this way or that. This policy leaves the impression among many Blacks that the Board is just not listening to them.

The teachers, parents, and community members who comprise PED are racially mixed and all are committed to one degree or another to public education. Early in the formation of PED, meetings were held in an African-American church to avoid the more formal appearance of a school. It was moved to the public library about the same time that the minister of the church began developing plans for a private school, and our speculation, which was denied, was that the private school project played a significant role in the move. Even though we were wrong about the reason for the move, our judgment arose from the commonly expressed sentiment that even though there is considerable dissatisfaction with public education, it deserves another chance.

Initially PED was formed with a rather vague idea of increasing the voice of parents and underrepresented communities, especially the African-American community, in the public schools. The founders were concerned about the threatened flight from public to private schools and they were also concerned about the alienation of the African-American Community. Their movement was a way to marry parental choice and core values by bringing decisions closer to the schools and by involving parents in them. The movement was motivated by a good deal of idealism. It was initially comprised of some old civil rights workers, new teachers who wanted an outlet for their activism, a union representative who had been captivated by the involvement of workers in participatory management in Tito's Yugoslavia, and a community organizer, along with some committed teachers. Some had visions of participatory modes of decision making actually replacing a representative school board that many felt had been unresponsive to the needs of the African-American community.

This grand vision is mentioned less frequently now that the nuts and bolts deliberation has begun. As interaction with members of the school board has increased, indeed as one newer PED member has been elected to the Board, some of the initial ideas have been toned down as the Board itself has become more involved in the development of what is vaguely labeled site-based decision making. Why replace a body that has appointed a committee to do what you want done and that has put you on the committee, and appointed two sister PED members to co-chair it? And just possibly it is dawning on some that the school board may serve a legitimate purpose as it represents, among others, the interests of those whose taxes pay for the all the schools, but do not have a special interest in any one of them.

Even though many of the concerns that motivated the formation of PED still exist — the African-American community is still not represented on the school board and African-American parents still feel alienated from the schools — PED's role is changing, and these changes are providing us with new ways to think about

the goals advanced by the two models and perhaps especially by Dewey. Dewey wanted a democracy that created opportunities for different interests to be discussed and reshaped, and he wanted education to enrich both individual and community life. Yet he also advanced a view of teachers as professionals that brought them into cooperation with administrators, but not with the community as a collective unit. While teachers were to relate to administrators as members of a collective that had certain rights, parents and community members were to continue to relate to teachers as individuals, just as the Edge City way suggests. Given this model, and the implicit power relations it suggests, teachers are there to help parents and community members reshape their interests, but influence and power are uneven. The parents and community are not there to reshape the teacher's interest. We believe that one of the reasons the preference model seems to be gaining in favor is that it breaks up the collectivity of teachers and requires both parents and teachers to relate to each other as individuals. Indeed, under this model parents have considerable power because they can choose not to participate in schools that do not satisfy them. Yet their power is exercised only as individual consumers, without a structure to reshape their interest in light of contact with others in the community. We see PED raising a new vision; one which increases the roles of the parents but does so as active agents for the community and in ways that enable interests and desires to be reshaped.

PED is now questioning this power equation that brings individual parents into contact with a teacher who is also a member of a collective body. Although it is maintaining a position as a change agent and gadfly, it is taking on a new position as a broker between the formal institutions of the schools and organizations that serve the interests of underrepresented communities such as the Urban League, The NAACP, and a number of locally based groups. For example, one of its concerns has been the lack of student representation of the District Site Based Committee. At the last school board meeting, at the instigation of one or two of the teachers involved with PED, sixteen students from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, volunteered to serve. At this moment PED is concerned about the practice of schools and the central administration appointing the same parents to committees, and of not holding meetings at a time when working parents are able to attend. They will begin to notify the schools of this problem and request that they be informed of the formation of school committees. They will then inform community activists, and agencies that represent the interests of the poor and people of color so that they may find new volunteers for these committees.

PED itself has become a forum for discussions between teachers and community members about the policies and directions that are best for the schools, and in the coming year these may be the issues that test PED the hardest. They will also be the ones that test Dewey's concern that interests be reshaped within a context where power is more evenly distributed between teacher, parent, and community. To take one recent instance, some parents on the committee object to a number of policies that the union fought hard to obtain, and some of the more conservative African-American community members have voiced objection to educational policies that many of the more progressive teachers cherish. Some of these concerns have provided the union members on the committee with an opportunity to explain the

reasons for the policies in terms of the educational needs of the children in the school system. We suspect that this kind of dialogue will continue and that there is a reasonable possibility that new interests will be identified, discussed, and sometimes reshaped in ways that will provide a more collective spin to Dewey's often voiced ideas that teachers are workers and that schools are instruments of both children and communities.

1. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan), 21-22.

2. *Ibid.*, 87.

3. John Dewey, "The School As a Means of Developing a Social Consciousness and Social Ideals in Children," *Complete Works*, electronic edition.

4. John Dewey, "Democracy in Education," *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1906*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), 231.

5. *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, 268 US 510 (1925).

6. *Wisconsin v. Yoder* US (70-110) 1972.