

DEWEY WITHOUT DOING
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Naoko Saito confronts us with two big problems. One is social and existential; the other is methodological and intellectual. The existential problem results from a discrepancy between our desire to cultivate relationships among our students that foster their individuality, and our discovery that the very closeness of their social groups tends to breed authoritarianism, exclusiveness, and the suppression of individuality. Ms. Saito calls this “closedness,” and she exemplifies it by referring to the “school-bully” problem in Japan, which is characterized by authoritarian student groups that suppress individuality.

Because she wants to utilize the philosophical thought of John Dewey, Ms. Saito encounters her second problem, a daunting methodological and intellectual one: “the application of philosophy from one culture to another.” I think it is this second problem that sets the tone of her paper. Because it does, I think the paper might have been easier to follow if she had mentioned it early on, rather than waiting until her second-to-last paragraph. In any event, the solution to the existential problem of closed student groups is made dependent on how she tackles this methodological problem.

It seems to me that Ms. Saito was wise to look for some common ground between Dewey’s thought and Japanese cultural and educational traditions. Most of what I have to say will address this common ground. Since I’m not qualified to comment on Japanese traditions, I’ll limit my remarks to Saito’s interpretation of Dewey’s thought. I’m going to argue that she will not succeed in finding the common ground she seeks, because the ideas she takes from Dewey are not the ideas Dewey offered. After showing why this is so, I’ll offer some alternative ways in which Ms. Saito might build a stronger and more persuasive case for educators to consider.

I select for comment two points that are critical to her case. One point has to do with what Saito calls “the poetic and imaginative eye.” It focuses on the pedagogy of creating ethical relations among the members of closed, authoritarian groups. But another, broader, point will be addressed first, because it raises the question of how you can teach members of a group anything at all.

Here is the issue: Can the relations among members of a group be changed by educating each of its individual members, or must you instead try to change the structural and functional relations of the group itself? Dewey’s position on this is unambiguous. Education for him is a shared activity,¹ and it will be the richer the more widely the activity is shared. For Dewey, education and a democratic social order require one another because a democracy — like an educational environment — demands that members of groups share a wide variety of interests and interact freely with other groups.² By way of contrast, students in an authoritarian group can be indoctrinated, but they can’t be educated.

Ms. Saito may well agree with Dewey about this, but she is silent about the structure of the groups in which her educational suggestions might be carried out.

That is, she deplores the educational impact of a group that is authoritarian, or closed, but she writes only about the education of *individuals* within those closed groups. Some references to her paper will make this clear.

In her introduction she writes,

The poetic and imaginative eye of the teacher...helps bring the actual condition of the student toward a new vision by reaching the depths of the student's self; it helps the development of the student's individuality....Consequently, [it] opens the group as a whole to more inclusive possibilities.

Thus she aims to make profound changes in individuals, in the hope that the group as a whole will be transformed.

Saito writes that "the poetic and imaginative eye of the teacher expands the horizon of the student's self" and "helps develop each student's self toward the good." It is then implied that this will help educators "transform a closed bond of a community to an ethical relationship." But this atomic approach to a molecular problem clashes with everything Dewey wrote about how people learn. Equally important, it contradicts a mountain of empirical observation and research on the impact of groups on individual learning, from the early studies of Kurt Lewin to the more recent work of Seymour Sarason on institutions and Robert Slavin on learning groups.³ Thus I must conclude that Saito's unwavering focus on the teacher's concern with individual students just won't get the job done.

To expand this point a little, I would remind Ms. Saito of her discussion of factors that cause student groups to become authoritarian, exclusive, and closed in the first place. Along with certain Japanese cultural traditions, she mentioned the hierarchical structure of student groups, a school exam system that promotes memorization and uniformity of thought, and "mechanisms of strict control in schools that suppress individuality." I would ask, why not address these causal conditions directly, as a means of enhancing openness and individuality? Why not reorganize student groups, change the system of examinations, or give students a greater voice in the managing of school affairs?

My other point addresses Ms. Saito's conception of "the poetic and imaginative eye," a metaphor, I take it, for a way of interpreting the thoughts and actions of children by seeing them from the standpoint of *their* purposes and values. The metaphor is correctly drawn from Dewey's *Theory of the Moral Life*. To view our students in this way makes good sense, and it should be recommended to teachers. But why think that exercising a poetic and imaginative eye will produce the results that Ms. Saito hopes for?

The poetic and imaginative eye described by Ms. Saito is a *way of seeing* the young — a trained *attitude* on the part of the teacher, if you like. But Saito writes that this eye "expands the horizon of the student's self beyond the visible to the unseen"; that it "helps develop each student's self toward the good." Earlier Ms. Saito had acknowledged Dewey's belief that the activity of students is "the heart of the curriculum." Now she says that the *teacher's* activity will produce educative results. But what sorts of activities will *students* undertake? Ms. Saito is silent on this point, but a Deweyan interpretation of education that omits all mention of students' activities does not seem compatible with what Dewey wrote about education.

This problem has another dimension. Not only has Ms. Saito shifted attention from students to the teacher, but in focusing on how the teacher should *see* children, she has not told us what the teacher should be *doing*. It makes sense for the teacher to look at her students in the way Saito urges, but a way of seeing cannot, by itself, produce tangible results. In contrast, Dewey urged teachers to exercise intelligent sympathy *in the context of sharing activities* with students: "When the...teacher has provided the conditions which stimulate thinking and has taken a sympathetic attitude toward the activities of the learner *by entering into a common or conjoint experience*, all has been done which a second party can do to instigate learning."⁴ Saito's discussion of the poetic and imaginative eye gives us Dewey without doing.

Let's return to the methodological problem identified at the outset. Ms. Saito noted the difficulty of applying a philosophy from one culture to another culture. I would suggest that a primary cause of this difficulty is her misconstruction of the philosophical view she intends to apply. If Ms. Saito's aim is to bring to Japanese educators some useful ideas based on the thought of John Dewey, she should seek greater accuracy in the interpretation of Dewey's thought by her own poetic and imaginative eye. However, if her aim is only to help educators by elaborating the virtues of this eye, then she might consider giving up Dewey altogether and developing her own ideas within a compatible, philosophical account of human action that she can defend on her own terms.

1. See, especially, John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), chap. 2, "Education as a Social Function."

2. *Ibid.*, chap. 7, "The Democratic Conception in Education."

3. For a recent discussion of the use of groups in schools and the ways in which problem-solving, or thinking, is enhanced within the context of deliberately structured groups, see Donald Arnstine, *Democracy and the Arts of Schooling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), chaps. 6 and 7. For a discussion of the profound difference, for ethical relations, in the consequences of being educated in groups, in contrast to being socialized, see Arnstine, *ibid.*, chap. 1.

4. *Ibid.*, 188, (*italics mine*).