

## John Dewey, Public School Reform, and the Narrowing of Educational Aims

Josh Corngold  
*University of Tulsa*

Jacqueline Ancess and David Allen attest that the small school reform movement spreading throughout New York City and making inroads in districts across the nation is laced with a number of good intentions.<sup>1</sup> According to proponents, small schools organized around particular themes hold the promise of enhancing student engagement and interest in learning, reducing retention and dropout rates, and raising academic achievement. Proponents claim further that when parents and their children are presented with an array of small schools from which to choose, this will infuse healthy competition into a public education system that has long been far too comfortable with mediocrity and resistant to change. Small theme schools are also sometimes framed as a palliative to persistent segregation in American education. Proponents suggest that by organizing students on the basis of common interests and goals, as opposed to place of residence and scores on standardized tests, these schools are more likely to attract a diverse student body. While Ancess and Allen acknowledge that some schools have shown promise in raising expectations and student achievement, they caution against some of the above claims — in particular, the claim about the desegregating effects of small school reform. They contend that the themes around which these schools are organized often serve as code for gender, race, socio-economic status, and predicted educational attainment. Furthermore, middle and upper class parents with cultural and social capital and a knack for getting the inside scoop are effectively able to place their children in schools where they are surrounded by other privileged students. In other words, small theme schools may serve to exacerbate segregation, not attenuate it.

In her thoughtful and carefully argued essay, Terri Wilson adds an interesting wrinkle to this debate — using John Dewey's conception of "interests" to critique some of the underexplored assumptions behind this reform movement. Small school reform, as Wilson notes, operates under the assumptions that parents and children have fixed, stable educational interests, and that they predictably will seek to maximize these interests by examining the educational alternatives, weighing costs and benefits, and ultimately arriving at an ideal match. Yet Dewey's nuanced and expansive conception of "interests" problematizes these assumptions. According to Dewey's conception, interests are not stable and fixed, but are susceptible to change over time and according to context and situation. Interests are constantly developing and transforming as the individual interacts with her surroundings, makes choices, and pursues different courses of action. The environment of which the individual is a part profoundly shapes the direction of her interests. And schools, which Dewey describes as environments consciously designed for the purpose of "influencing the mental and moral disposition of their members," profoundly shape the budding interests of children.<sup>2</sup>

By Dewey's account, in order to prepare students for life in a complex democratic society, the school environment should have the following characteristics: it should be *simplifying* (enabling the child to pursue various studies "in a gradual and graded way"), *purifying* (eliminating that which is "undesirable," "trivial," and "perverse" in the world outside the school), *balancing* (exposing the child to diversity so that he may "escape from the limitations of the social environment in which he was born"), and *steading* (helping the child negotiate the very different social environments he encounters outside of school).<sup>3</sup> As Wilson suggests in her essay, the first and third of these features have particular relevance for the small schools debate, and give us a framework for considering where Dewey might stand in this debate. On the one hand, Dewey might approve of the thematic component of small schools: he might view the themes as an instantiation of the *simplifying* principle insofar as they serve to organize and focus widely ranging and complex material and make it meaningful and relevant for students. On the other hand, Dewey might have misgivings about small schools due to their potential disregard for the *balancing* principle: surely he would denounce an educational movement whose effect was to cluster students with similar backgrounds and aspirations together, and reduce diversity in the classroom.

Ultimately, Wilson's careful and tempered analysis leads her to the conclusion that Dewey would probably stake a middle ground (as Dewey was wont to do) between willing acceptance and denunciation of small school reform. Dewey might use the debate to reissue his call for greater balance between narrow specialization and "mile wide and inch thick" generalization in the curriculum, and to reemphasize that schools ought to be diverse social environments where students are exposed to multiple perspectives and interact with others who are unlike themselves. He might see the potential for small theme schools to activate students' developing interests in a focused and educationally rich curriculum. At the same time, he likely would raise probing questions about the risks of overspecialization, about how the schools' student bodies are composed, and about what the ultimate objectives of these schools ought to be.

I also believe Dewey might view the small schools movement, lamentably, as part of a larger package of reforms that have coincided with a narrowing of the purposes of American public education. With the emergence of standards, testing, accountability, and free market competition as the driving forces behind public school reform, the basic aims of education are increasingly defined in terms of preparing students for work in the competitive global marketplace. Dewey would surely denounce this trend, for he viewed the purposes of education in more expansive terms — not just as job preparation, but as preparation for democratic citizenship and for "a variety of callings" requiring exposure to a broad spectrum of knowledge, skills, and dispositions.<sup>4</sup>

In the year before the publication of *Democracy and Education*, Dewey engaged in a heated debate with David Snedden — a champion of vocational education and the "social efficiency movement" in American education — in the pages of *The New Republic*. Dewey fired the opening salvo in an article entitled

"Industrial Education — A Wrong Kind," in which he assailed a piece of legislation in Indiana for drawing a sharp distinction between general and vocational education, for placing business groups in control of the latter, and for discouraging social mobility among students.<sup>5</sup> Taking great exception to the article, Snedden penned a strongly worded defense of separate vocational schools, which he believed could provide a more sensible and effective education for what he called "the rank and file of our youth."<sup>6</sup> Dewey subsequently wrote a sharp reply to Snedden's response, in which he voiced opposition "to giving the power of social predestination, by means of narrow trade-training, to any group of fallible men no matter how well-intentioned they may be."<sup>7</sup> Education should not aim to "'adapt' workers to the existing industrial regime," Dewey insisted; it should instead seek to "transform" the regime.<sup>8</sup>

In his analysis of this exchange, the educational historian David Labaree argues that while Dewey "won the debate," Snedden "won the fight to set the broader aims of education."<sup>9</sup> Within a few short years, Congress passed the *Smith-Hughes Act* (1917), which set aside federal funds for the vocational training and "fitting for useful employment" of noncollege bound youth.<sup>10</sup> And in 1918, the National Educational Association released the report, *The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, which called for differentiated curricula in the name of preparing different students for different lines of work. As Labaree explains, "Both documents reflected key elements of the social efficiency vision that Snedden espoused and Dewey detested, a vision that has characterized schooling in the U.S. ever since."<sup>11</sup>

To the extent that contemporary education movements share in this social efficiency vision, reinforcing the notion that schools' predominant purpose is to prepare students for future employment, and narrowing the curriculum to achieve this purpose, Dewey, I believe, would vehemently oppose them. And to the extent that the small schools movement shares in this vision, functioning as a student sorting mechanism and denying some students access to a broad and rich curriculum, Dewey surely would oppose it as well.

---

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. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916) (New York: Free Press, 1997), 19.

3. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 20.

4. *Ibid.*, 307.

5. John Dewey, "Industrial Education — A Wrong Kind" (1915), *Curriculum Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1977): 56–59.

6. David Snedden, "Vocational Education" (1915), *Curriculum Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1977): 35.

7. John Dewey, "Education vs. Trade-Training — Dr. Dewey's Reply" (1915), *Curriculum Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1977): 38.

8. Dewey, "Education vs. Trade-Training," 38–39.

9. David F. Labaree, "How Dewey Lost: The Victory of David Snedden and Social Efficiency in the Reform of American Education" (2008), 1, [http://www.stanford.edu/~dlabaree/publications/How\\_Dewey\\_Lost.pdf](http://www.stanford.edu/~dlabaree/publications/How_Dewey_Lost.pdf).

10. Quoted in Labaree, "How Dewey Lost," 10.

11. Ibid., 1.