

## Dewey's *Democracy and Education*: 100 Years On

### 'Dewey and the Democratic Curriculum'

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This paper uses Dewey's seminal *Democracy and Education* (1916) as a key text to investigate the concept of the democratic curriculum. I argue that a democratic curriculum is one where a series of educational innovations or procedures are followed. These are: a removal of the existing division between 'academic' and 'vocational' education; pedagogy in the form of discussion and dialogue; negotiation of curriculum aims and objectives with students and other local stakeholders. The focus of attention will be on the English school curriculum (both primary and secondary), especially concerning the National Curriculum, [and](#) the debate over 'standards' and testing. A tentative link between the democratic curriculum and increased student motivation and participation is made.

The issue of what constitutes the appropriate forms of study in any given curriculum is inevitably a political decision. Who makes that decision will determine the sources of power in the education system, be they local, regional or national. The idea of a democratic curriculum, where stakeholders other than local or national government have a significant say in what makes up the curriculum, has a long heritage. Educational thinkers of the stature of John Dewey have asked questions and sought answers on the subject of who should control what is learnt by students and when. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the idea of the democratic curriculum in terms of recent developments in the control and management of the English school curriculum. I will be defining the democratic curriculum on two broad fronts: as a means of challenging the traditional dichotomy of 'academic' and 'vocational' education that has persisted in English education for several centuries; and advocating the negotiation between students, teachers and other stakeholders of key learning objectives and curriculum content.

The paper will take a series of themes to structure the discussion. Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916) is a key text with regards to the democratic curriculum. Dewey's concept of the democratic curriculum will be explored by comparing his ideas with the German educationalist, Georg Kerschensteiner (a

contemporary of Dewey less well known in the English-speaking world, whose ideas on democracy and education were often close to Dewey's). Dewey and Kerschensteiner were both highly influential in advocating forms of education that encompassed the theoretical and the practical. Indeed, Dewey's epistemology gave equal weight to applied and theoretical knowledge (Dewey 2007: 194-204).

The issue of 'standards' has been an ongoing debate in education for at least 40 years in England (from the publication of the first Black Papers in the early 1970s). The increasing adoption of a neoliberal philosophy within many national school systems has blended discussion of 'standards' with talk of standardised testing, competitive league tables and cost efficiencies. I will discuss the impact this debate has had on the development of the school curriculum and how the concept and practice of the democratic curriculum has managed to survive and adapt as part of this debate. Particular mention will be made here of England's National Strategies in literacy and numeracy (1998 onwards) and the recent development in academies and free schools in England.

By its very nature, the democratic curriculum is a highly politicised concept. Who owns the curriculum, and the aims and objectives associated with it, is about power and control within education itself. If the definition of a democratic curriculum is one where the content, structure and assessment of subjects (or other modes of inquiry) is a matter of negotiation between the various stakeholders that have a vested interest, then carrying this out is itself a political act. As a project, it remains a radical proposal (often too radical for many administrations to implement, even in diluted form). The example of Participatory Budgeting and the Citizen School in Porto Alegre is the exception rather than the rule. ([Gandin and Apple 2002](#))

One hundred years since its first publication, Dewey's *Democracy and Education* still resonates in the debate over how or whether any curriculum should be democratic. For Dewey, the school was a place where students were introduced to the skills and attitudes associated with democratic citizenship, especially regarding learning as a collaborative activity. Part of Dewey's project in the Laboratory School in Chicago was also to try and break down the traditional hierarchy over the 'academic' and the 'vocational'. I will show that Dewey was highly sceptical of this division, seeing knowledge as a constant push-and-pull between theory and application. In this sense, Dewey was close in thought with his direct contemporary, Georg Kerschensteiner. Kerschensteiner was the Munich Director of Schools who instituted

a policy where all students studied a range of 'academic' and 'vocational' subjects and was one of the pioneers of the modern German apprenticeship. Both thinkers challenged the current notion that activities of the mind took preeminence over activities of the hand, seeing this as a crippling and dangerously false dichotomy.

Dewey's Laboratory School could not possibly live up to all its ideals and Schutz (2001) has identified how the institution could be removed, at times, from the political action around it rather than being at the heart of it. Dewey's advocacy of collaborative learning and the integration of the academic and the practical into the curriculum has also drawn criticism from those commentators concerned that a movement away from sharply-defined subject areas has led to a drop in 'quality' and 'standards', especially politicians, commentators and educationalists espousing neoliberal credentials.

The democratic curriculum has, at its core, the idea that learning is a negotiation between those with a vested interest in such learning. Stakeholders are likely to include government, educational administrators, teachers, students, employers and the local community. There are practical implications in terms of the ability, confidence and age of the students involved, as well as the potential difficulty in consulting the various stakeholders over individual programmes. However, the principle of negotiation is key – no one agent or agency should own the curriculum to the extent of determining aims and objectives without the agreement of other stakeholders.

### **Democratic education and the academic/vocational divide**

The academic/vocational divide has been a perennial issue within English education. Dewey saw implications for such a divide on both an educational and epistemological level. He stated in *Democracy and Education*, 'the separation of "mind" from direct occupation with things throws emphasis on things at the expense of relations or connections (Dewey 2007: 109). Dewey believed education (and by implication, knowledge) was, essentially, a combination of both the practical and the theoretical. To view education as 'academic' or 'vocational' is in large part of false dichotomy. This will be discussed in more detail below in relation to what constitutes a democratic curriculum.

Dewey, in *Democracy and Education*, famously referred to democracy as being 'more than a form of government; it is primarily a form of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience' (Dewey 2007: 68). For Dewey, democracy was a way of life (rather than merely a system of voting) and the school curriculum should reflect this: 'things gain meaning by being used in a shared experience or joint action' (Dewey 2007: 17). It is clear from these extracts that a fundamental aspect of a democratic curriculum, according to Dewey, is for students to discover knowledge and new learning in a collaborative way rather than being taught as individuals in near isolation (intellectually if not physically). Learning is a collective enterprise, something students do together, just as democratic governance should, ideally, involve all citizens.

If this is how the pedagogy within a democratic curriculum might look, what of the content of the curriculum itself? What would be studied in such a curriculum? Dewey argued for a curriculum that blended knowledge and experience and challenged 'the feeling that knowledge is high and worthy in the degree in which it deals with ideal symbols instead of with the concrete' (Dewey 2007: 196). As Carr and Hartnett have observed:

Dewey recognised that ... democratic education could only be realistically achieved if the existing separation of a "liberal education" for an elite few from a "vocational education" for the mass of ordinary people was abolished. (Carr and Hartnett 1996: 63).

This echoes the thoughts of the nineteenth-century German educationalist Georg Kerschensteiner who argued for a curriculum that encompassed both general and vocational education, a blend of the 'traditional' academic subjects with subjects that are craft-based to ensure both the mind and the hand are trained in parallel (see Gonon 2009 and Winch 2006). By incorporating skills and disciplines not normally associated with the academic curriculum, Dewey and Kerschensteiner were attempting to break down some of the social barriers and divisions that occur between the 'academic' and 'vocational' disciplines students often 'pigeon-holed' into. For both thinkers, a school curriculum needed to reflect and build upon the wider interpretation of knowledge and understanding held by citizens in society at large (as workers, voters, family members, community activists). Any narrowing of focus (in terms of study) would potentially privilege or diminish aspects of education seen as important by Dewey and Kerschensteiner (particularly concerning the status

of vocational education) (Gonon 2009: 83, 134, 169). Granted, any school curriculum is inevitably constrained by time and must always, to some extent, prioritise certain elements of knowledge over others at certain periods of a school term or year. What Dewey and Kerschensteiner were challenging was the constant privileging of theoretical knowledge over practical knowledge. For Dewey particularly, this was not only socially divisive but a flawed understanding of the theory of knowledge. He was deeply suspicious of 'the separation of "mind" from direct occupation with things' as this 'throws emphasis on things at the expense of relations or connections' (Dewey 2007: 109). It is the constant interaction between thought and application that enables such relations or connections to remain live and relevant.

A democratic curriculum, as understood by Dewey and Kerschensteiner<sup>1</sup>, is a curriculum that embodies, from a pedagogical point-of-view, the social interaction and collective enterprise necessary for active citizenship in a democratic society. It encourages and facilitates equality because 'a society to which stratification into separate classes would be fatal, must see to it that intellectual opportunities are accessible to all' (Dewey 2007: 68). Also, such a curriculum does not overvalue the study of abstract ideas to the detriment of practical skills and application. During Kerschensteiner's time as director of schools in Munich, he devised a series of reforms the upshot of which

was to increase the practical elements in ... the *Volkschule* or elementary school (up to the age of 14) and to develop a mandatory element of college education for apprentices (Winch and Hyland 2007: 34).

Such developments ensured that students in the *Volkschule* or on apprenticeships received an education that was not biased towards either the 'academic' or the 'vocational'. It is not, perhaps, a coincidence that vocational education has historically been held in higher regard in Germany than in England (Pring 1995) due to the emphasis placed on all students towards maintaining a balanced and rounded education.

There have been criticisms of Dewey's ideas on democracy and curriculum design, not least by Dewey himself. According to Aaron Schutz,

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst Dewey and Kerschensteiner shared a great deal in common on education and the curriculum, it is important to note here that there were also fundamental differences between them. An example is Kerschensteiner's concept of educating a community into a 'moral collective personality' which finds no equivalence in any of Dewey's writings (Gonon 2009: 181; Hopkins 2013: 80).

as he grew older Dewey himself increasingly lost faith in the ability of democratic schooling, alone, to equip citizens with the collective practices that would allow them to make their society a better place (Schutz 2001: 267).

One criticism Schultz has noted is the apparent lack of connection, at times, between Dewey's democratic school and the wider society in which it operated. For instance, Schutz has noted that while the 'violent and largely unsuccessful Pullman strike' was happening in Chicago, 'the relatively free and flexible structure of daily activity within the Laboratory School [founded by Dewey as an experiment in democratic schooling linked to the University of Chicago] was largely *unrepresentative* of daily life beyond the school, especially in the work environment' (Schutz 2001: 274) (emphasis in the original). I have already noted how Dewey saw the democratic school as preparation for (and a continuation of) citizenship in a democratic society, so this criticism can be taken one of two ways – it can either be seen as an indication that Dewey's model of a democratic curriculum was often out-of-touch with the political and social realities of the period, or as an example of how democratic society could and should be (as an 'ideal') during moments of social strife and political breakdown. The apparent disconnect, however, between the Laboratory School and political events in contemporary Chicago does appear to contradict Dewey's own emphasis on the need for interaction to draw out the relations between ideas or things<sup>2</sup>.

Whether Dewey should be criticised for the apparent disconnect between his views and the practical environment within the Laboratory School and the wider society is open to question. Dewey viewed the School (and education more generally) as a laboratory for democratic educational practices and pedagogies – the relationship between these and the challenges and conflicts within Chicago or elsewhere was not one of strict correlation or transfer. In some senses, it could be argued Dewey's Laboratory School was a model on how democratic societies could develop and evolve rather than simply mirroring what was occurring within the host communities.

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<sup>2</sup> A recent example of the democratic school in action in Dewey's home city of Chicago is the project carried out by Brian Schultz with his students in the Cabrini Green district (Schultz 2006).

## Standards and the curriculum

There is a consensus among many academics and commentators that education in most Western countries has followed the neoliberal economic agenda of the past 30 years (in terms of the language used and the practices adopted). In the words of Michael Apple, this has created a state-of-affairs in education where '[e]fficiency and an "ethic" of cost-benefit analysis are the dominant norms ... not only are schools transformed into market commodities, but so too now are our children' (Apple 2006: 31, 35). The emphasis on state-devised national curricula, often linked to assessment focused on tests that level or grade, has often restricted the room schools have for innovative and developmental approaches to the curriculum. The increasing practice of measuring schools and colleges by a system of league tables (in the name of public accountability and transparency) has reinforced the pressure on educational institutions to 'teach to the test' and avoid experimentation (as league tables are frequently based on national test results and related data) (Lingard in Wyse *et al*/2013).

For secondary schools in England, the use of GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) results as a significant aspect of national league tables has meant that teachers and students focus on gaining as many Grade A\*-Cs as possible to boost a particular school's score and position. This is at the potential expense of exploring the wider themes or issues within the curriculum that go beyond the narrow parameters of exam syllabuses and set texts. The proposed reform of GCSEs towards final exams and less coursework is likely to exacerbate such trends with negative consequences for less confident students (BBC 2013). The increasing emphasis by the Conservative\Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010-2015) on the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests can be seen as an extension of this process – the assessment (by examination) of 15 year old students on a narrow set of skills in reading, mathematics and science. The present administration is explicit in the links it makes between curriculum reforms and performance in international educational tests such as PISA (Department for Education 2010b: 8, 46-47).

[The pressure to improve and maintain 'standards' and 'quality' \(through the influence of PISA and other international educational rankings and comparisons\) is becoming global in its reach. Robin Alexander, in his critique of UNESCO's Global Monitoring Reports \(GMRs\), has questioned the pervasive use of metrics to establish](#)

international definitions of what constitutes 'quality' in education. There is a danger that the focus becomes driven by 'inputs/outputs' rather than investigating the specific educational processes in any given jurisdiction:

the quest for indicators and measures of quality produce ... an understandable preoccupation with *input and output* – pupil/teacher ratio, balance of male and female teachers, balance of trained and untrained teachers, expenditure per pupil as percentage of GDP, net enrolment ratio, adult literacy rate ... at the expense of indicators of *process* [emphasis in the original] (Alexander 2015: 251).

It is this quest for the quantifiable that also prevents, in Alexander's view, a genuine engagement with the study of pedagogy in the international context (including the Global Monitoring Reports). Alexander acknowledges that pedagogy, in any educational jurisdiction, is intimately embedded within local cultures, languages and practices and these do not lend themselves easily to measurable data that can be analysed and compared across borders. However, as Alexander reminds us, '[h]ard data is not necessarily useful data' (Alexander 2015: 252) and he makes a strong case that research into pedagogy can have uses and implications for the international context (his own *Culture and Pedagogy* (2001) is an elegant example). These concerns directly affect any attempts to conceptualise and interpret the curriculum in a given region or country when the quantitative aspects of quality and standards become the dominant international discourse. There is a tendency to squeeze local contexts out of programmes of study in order to meet global targets and benchmarks. In England, these concerns were raised by the *Cambridge Primary Review* and this is why the editors advocated that at least 30% of the school curriculum should be devised locally (Alexander et al. 2010). Whilst it would be anachronistic to explicitly link Dewey to these contemporary global trends in education, he did identify situations not dissimilar to the ones some critics of neoliberal education are currently stating:

Natural instincts are either disregarded or treated as nuisances ... to be brought into conformity with external standards. Since conformity is the aim, what is distinctively individual in a young person is brushed aside, or regarded as a source of mischief or anarchy. Conformity is made equivalent to uniformity (Dewey 2007: 42).



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Paul Carr has noted the following trends in terms of neoliberal educational theory and practice:

The shifting of focus in the neo-liberal educational agenda towards a constrained curriculum, supposedly high standards, greater focus on employability, and a proliferation of standards (Carr 2008: 119).

In England, this emphasis in employability was felt even in primary schools. With the development of the National Literacy and National Numeracy Strategies for primary schools in 1998 and 1999, the government involved itself with matters of classroom pedagogy as never before, requiring primary school teachers to follow a set teaching pattern with children in literacy and numeracy for up to two hours each day. This was based on the belief in government circles that England needed to 'raise standards' in these subjects to ultimately improve the country's educational and economic performance. This policy came at the expense of other areas of the primary school curriculum at Key Stages 1 and 2 (Alexander 2001: 143).

Whilst this structure did produce some improvements in literacy and numeracy (an increase in the number of children achieving the government's benchmark in these subjects in 2002, although not as many as the government had targetted), the Cambridge Primary Review, in its collection of evidence from key stakeholders, noted that many witnesses were concerned with a curriculum that 'was excessively prescriptive and needlessly detailed ... and that it had undermined teachers' professionalism' (Alexander *et al* 2010: 215). Clearly, a curriculum where prescription and the undermining of professionalism are prevalent is not a democratic curriculum in the way I have defined it (where negotiation and consultation over curriculum objectives and content between stakeholders is central). A democratic curriculum, in Dewey's terms, is a participatory and experimental one:

knowledge is a mode of participation, valuable in the degree in which it is effective. It cannot be the idle view of an unconcerned spectator ... The development of the experimental method as the method of getting knowledge and of making sure it is knowledge ... is the remaining great force in bringing about a transformation in the theory of knowledge (Dewey 2007: 247).

It is the prescription and over-attention to detail in government education policy that militates against a democratic curriculum. One cannot deny that many of the lessons planned and facilitated under England's National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (and the Primary Strategy which followed them) encouraged, in the hands of creative teachers and students, examples of genuine participation and engagement. The problem lies in who has control over the curriculum aims and objectives that govern such participation. Whilst it can be argued that firm government control over the curriculum has a semblance of democratic accountability (in societies where the government is elected by the people), this is not the same as schools having a democratic curriculum. Michael Reiss and John White have proposed (as a means of lessening government control of the school curriculum) the idea of a 'Commission' that would oversee curriculum aims every five years and would be independent of the government of the time. Reiss and White also suggest that the National Curriculum should be non-statutory (as it is in Scotland) but schools would be expected to justify any deviation from the broad-based aims outlined by the Commission (Reiss and White 2013: 70-74). It is important to state here that any proposal to allow greater freedom for schools in the curriculum should be balanced by schools consulting with stakeholders (staff, students, community groups, for example) to ensure changes or experiments have a degree of democratic accountability.

A fundamental aspect of any curriculum describing itself as democratic is one where students are frequently encouraged to emancipate themselves

from ... institutional authorities by promoting their right to exercise their own intelligence in all of their activities ... This emancipation is to be fostered by teachers (Webster 2009: 625).

Student emancipation from the over-reliance on institutional authority is unlikely to occur where curriculum objectives are laid down centrally (or locally) without any room for negotiation with those at the school level (be they staff, students or citizens in the local community). Equally, a fixation with 'standards' (in the guise of National Curriculum attainment levels or exam grades at GSCE and A Level) often runs counter to the need for students to challenge existing knowledge and habits of thinking. This is not to say that planning is not an essential part of any programme of

learning (something that will be discussed in a later section of this paper) – but there is a fundamental difference between planning and prescription.

Dewey was himself concerned with overt state control of the school system and the curriculum. He says in *Democracy and Education* that '[o]ne of the fundamental problems of education and for a democratic society is set by conflict of a nationalistic and wider social aim' (Dewey 2007: 75). Dewey himself asks the question:

Is it possible for an educational system to be conducted by a national state and yet the full social ends of the educative process not to be restricted, constrained or corrupted? (Dewey 2007: 75)

The issue of a national curriculum with benchmarks and standards against which individual schools, teachers and pupils are matched against could be seen as restricting or constraining. Dewey (like Mill before him) worried over whether state control of education would lead to a focus on what the state itself wanted from education rather than allowing children to develop a sense of autonomy and creativity that might be at odds with government requirements for efficiency or adherence to certain national beliefs and values.

It will be interesting to observe the current developments for academies and free schools in England as they are no longer under statutory requirement to implement the National Curriculum (Department for Education 2010a)<sup>3</sup>. Will this lead to examples of schools adopting or devising curricula akin to the democratic models discussed in this paper? If so, they will be followed with genuine interest by those in education (academics, teachers, parents and commentators alike).

### **Stakeholders and the curriculum**

There is a responsibility on teaching staff as well as government if curriculum aims and objectives are to be shared with students in a way that facilitates the democratic curriculum (as I have defined it). Chris Jane Brough argues: 'Committing to living democratically requires teachers to act democratically, like involving children in classroom decision-making and collaboratively co-constructing [the] curriculum'

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<sup>3</sup> Although academies are not required to follow the National Curriculum, they are required to satisfy the requirements of a 'balanced and broadly based curriculum' (Academies Act 2010, Paper 32, 6 (a)).

(Brough 2012: 345). As Brough acknowledges, the idea of involving students in the creation of the curriculum can be problematic on several fronts. In terms of teachers themselves, '[some] ... perceive collaborative planning and shared decision-making in negative terms as a loss of control' (Brough 2012: 349). Allied to this is the contention (explored in the section above) that:

In the UK ... national standards and testing have stifled creativity, narrowed school and classroom curricula, diminished children's engagement and sacrificed in-depth learning (Brough 2012: 349).

If there are already these difficulties in trying to create a curriculum that is more participatory and inclusive of different voices and perspectives, why persist? What are the benefits of pursuing such a path? To return to Dewey's main point about the democratic school being part of a wider project for a democratic society, Gandin and Apple point to the experiment of the Citizen School in Porto Alegre, south-eastern Brazil which is linked to the larger process of *Orçamento Participativo* (OP or Participatory Budgeting) in the city (Gandin and Apple 2002: 261-262). Participatory Budgeting is a deliberate attempt on the part of the city government to create forums, processes and mechanisms to enable the citizens of Porto Alegre to have a more active role in how services and institutions are run. 'In essence, the OP [Participatory Budgeting] can be considered a "school of democracy"' (Gandin and Apple 2002: 262). The Citizen School, according to Gandin and Apple,

is organically linked to and considered part of the larger process of transforming the whole city ... The normative goals that guide practice in the schools are collectively created through a participatory process. (Gandin and Apple 2002: 263-264).

One of the ways participation is demonstrated within the Citizen School is through the local negotiation of curriculum aims and objectives. The curriculum is seen, at a fundamental level, as a construct of the local community, something the local population play an active role in discussing and creating (in terms of both the content and the perspective). According to Gandin and Apple, '[t]he starting point for the construction of curricular knowledge is the culture(s) of the communities themselves' (Gandin and Apple 2002: 367).

It is important to state that the creation of Citizen Schools in Porto Alegre is part of a very specific attempt at local democracy in an individual city. The application of such practices away from the original context is a problematic one – south-east Brazil has a range of cultural, educational and socio-economic priorities that are very different from those in England (Hopkins 2013: 143). However, the example of the Citizen School and Participatory Budgeting shows what can be achieved in terms of the links between school and the community regarding democratic representation and active citizenship. The idea of community involvement in the curriculum was taken up by the Cambridge Primary Review in *Children, their World, their Education* (2010) where it argued that '[a] local element ... is appropriate, essential and therefore required' (Alexander *et al.* 2010: 262). The important point, in terms of the democratic curriculum, with local influence and input over curriculum planning is the issue of consultation and accountability. The local elements of any curriculum need to be drawn up as part of an ongoing discussion with stakeholders in the community to ensure points-of-view are raised and listened to from different perspectives. As Dewey stated, 'the school must itself be a community life' (Dewey 2007: 261) and community involvement within the school and as part of the school is integral to such a view.

Another significant benefit a democratic curriculum potentially brings is in the area of student motivation and commitment. Brough, in a research project in three New Zealand schools, focused on student-centred curriculum integration (CI) which the author defines as 'a curriculum design theory where democratic education is reified and the curriculum is collaboratively planned' (Brough 2012: 346). Brough describes democratic pedagogy (within the wider framework of student-centred CI) as requiring

themes and planning to be collaboratively constructed with students. Subject-area lines are blurred, as discipline knowledge is repositioned within the context of enquiry (Brough 2012: 347).

This connects back to Dewey's proposals regarding the curriculum. Dewey was not against the idea of studying discrete subjects within a curriculum but emphasised the importance of applying knowledge to practical activities and experiments (as a means of discovery). Such views lend themselves to seeing potential in the crossing of subject boundaries, especially when investigations are a collaboration between students:

Active connections with others are such an intimate and vital part of our own concerns that it is impossible to draw sharp lines ... In so far as we are partners in common undertakings, the things which others communicate to us as the consequences of their particular share in the enterprise blend at once into the experience resulting from our own special doings (Dewey 2007: 141).

This appears to run counter to the Department for Education's emphasis on the importance of a traditional curriculum where 'academic' subjects are to be studied in a discrete, compartmentalised way. John White, for instance, has been critical of the government's approach, describing it as a 'rigid ... [and] uncompromising opposition to ... interdisciplinary collaboration, themes and projects' (White 2010: 8).

There is a focus, in student-centred CI, for curriculum aims and objectives to be devised (where possible) by means of negotiation between teacher and students. The sense of inclusion that the students gain from this method of course planning has tangible consequences based on Brough's study:

The findings showed that by including negotiation where possible, student ownership over learning was enhanced, motivation increased and the ability to self-manage was evident ... learning was retained and applied in new contexts (Brough 2012: 361).

This is only a relatively small study (as Brough points out) so care needs to be applied when drawing conclusions from the results. Nevertheless, the research produced a range of practical activities and processes that could well inform other researchers and practitioners interested in the democratic curriculum. The issue of questioning, for instance, was linked to concept of democracy, 'since the way teachers asked questions either empowered or disempowered students' (Brough 2012: 364). This passage conflates 'democracy' with 'empowerment' – whilst the concepts are often linked, they are not the same thing and this needed to be explored by Brough in more detail to ensure clarity in the use of different terms. Students and citizens can be empowered in ways that are not necessarily democratic (a student might feel empowered answering questions in such a way that she/he dominates the class discussion, for example). That said, the point Brough is making here is close to Alexander on Bakhtin's discussion of dialogue and conversation:

For him [Bakhtin], dialogue is 'inquiry and conversation' (that is to say, it combines questioning with the social ease of conversation) and 'if an answer does not give rise to a new question from itself, it falls out of the dialogue' (Bakhtin cited in Alexander 2001: 520).

The idea of pedagogy as dialogue here is critical. Alexander's description of questions leading on to other questions makes explicit the shared element in any worthwhile educational encounter. A democratic curriculum should have, at its core, the idea of knowledge as a shared pursuit between all those involved in a given learning environment. [Julia Flutter](#) (2007), for instance, makes a strong case for the use of 'pupil voice' as a means of developing teachers' own practice by eliciting ongoing feedback from students that will, in time, develop into a dialogue on what is effective teaching and learning. Flutter acknowledges that such negotiations need to be gradual and dealt with sensitively (to ensure teacher authority is not undermined and that all students in a given class, and not just the most articulate, are heard).

A conversation, to return to the Bakhtin quote above, implies a communication between peers (to a greater or lesser extent) – this is what differentiates it from an interview. If one or more agents control that conversation, then it becomes unequal and the communication itself is jeopardised. If education is a dialogue then, by extension, the learning objectives and the structure of the curriculum should form part of that conversation. For a wider sense of dialogical education, Dewey offers this in *Democracy and Education*:

since democracy stands in principle for free interchange, for social continuity, it must develop a theory of knowledge which sees in knowledge the method by which one experience is made available in giving direction and meaning to another (Dewey 2007: 252).

## **Conclusion**

By its very nature, the democratic curriculum is a highly politicised concept. Who owns the curriculum, and the aims and objectives associated with it, is about power and control within education itself. If the definition of a democratic curriculum is one where the content, structure and assessment of subjects (or other modes of inquiry) is a matter of negotiation between the various stakeholders that have a vested

interest, then carrying this out is itself a political act. As a project, it remains a radical proposal (often too radical for many administrations to implement, even in diluted form). The example of Participatory Budgeting and the Citizen School in Porto Alegre is the exception rather than the rule.

Almost one hundred years since its first publication, Dewey's *Democracy and Education* still resonates in the debate over how or whether any curriculum should be democratic. For Dewey, the school was a place where students were introduced to the skills and attitudes associated with democratic citizenship, especially regarding learning as a collaborative activity. Part of Dewey's project in the Laboratory School in Chicago was also to try and break down the traditional hierarchy over the 'academic' and the 'vocational' (some learning might fit into neither category). I have shown that Dewey was highly sceptical of this division, seeing knowledge as a constant push-and-pull between theory and application. In this sense, Dewey was close in thought with his direct contemporary, Georg Kerschensteiner. Kerschensteiner was the Munich Director of Schools who instituted a policy where all students studied a range of 'academic' and 'vocational' subjects and was one of the pioneers of the modern German apprenticeship. Both thinkers challenged the current notion that activities of the mind took preeminence over activities of the hand, seeing this as a crippling and dangerously false dichotomy.

Dewey's Laboratory School could not possibly live up to all its ideals and Schutz has identified how the institution could be removed, at times, from the political action around it rather than being at the heart of it. Dewey's advocacy of collaborative learning and the integration of the academic and the practical into the curriculum has also drawn criticism from those commentators concerned that a movement away from sharply-defined subject areas has led to a drop in 'quality' and 'standards', especially politicians, commentators and educationalists espousing neoliberal credentials.

Advocates of the democratic curriculum, such as Henry Giroux, argue for

pedagogical relationships marked by dialogue, questioning and communication ... This view of knowledge stresses structuring classroom encounters that synthesize and demonstrate the relationships among meaning, critical thinking, and democratized classroom encounters (Giroux 2001: loc. 893).



The democratic curriculum has, at its core, the idea that learning is a negotiation between those with a vested interest in such learning. Stakeholders are likely to include government, educational administrators, teachers, students, employers and the local community. There are practical implications in terms of the ability, confidence and age of the students involved, as well as the potential difficulty in consulting the various stakeholders over individual programmes. However, the principle of negotiation is key – no one agent or agency should own the curriculum to the extent of determining aims and objectives without the agreement of other stakeholders.

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Dear Neil

We liked this piece very much – it speaks well to the fallacies that are dominating education at the moment. We have been asked by the reviewers to ensure that the diversity of jurisdictions we are presenting in the book also refer to the global context and similar global reforms. In particular we wondered if you might add just a paragraph or two on this, maybe using Robin's paper, Alexander, R. (2015) Teaching and Learning for all? The quality imperative revisited. International Journal of Educational Development. See

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0738059314001205>

If you could manage this by 18<sup>th</sup> July, that would be great!

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