



## ARTICLE

### **Re-Shaping the Map of Educational Studies: Lessons from Dewey's *Democracy and Education***

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## Re-shaping the map of educational studies: lessons from Dewey's *Democracy and Education*

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### Abstract

The argument of this paper falls into four parts. In the first, an attempt is made to identify the essential characteristics of *Democracy and Education*, first published in 1916, which help us to understand the reasons for its success. This serves as a reference point for subsequent discussion. The second section jumps forward in time and examines debates in the 1960s and beyond about the nature of educational studies, noting points of similarity to, and difference from, Dewey. This is followed, in the third part, by an illustration of how changes in the way educational studies are conceptualised have affected policy proposals, using two Scottish documents, one published in 1977, the other in 2004. In the final part, the question of where this leaves us now is addressed. What options are open to those who are concerned about the relationship between education and democracy? Is it possible to recapture something of Dewey's comprehensive vision or is that asking too much of a disciplinary field that has expanded, diversified and, in some respects, fractured?

(Note: An earlier version of the paper was given at the 2016 conference on Democracy and Education held at the University of the West of Scotland.)

**Keywords** Dewey: educational studies: disciplines: educational policy: democracy.

## Characteristics of Democracy and Education

What are the key characteristics of Dewey's classic book as a contribution to the field of educational studies? It continues to be widely cited despite the fact that some of its ideas are at odds with the dominant educational policies of today (see Higgins & Coffield, 2016). In a recent special issue of the *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, Robert Boostrom suggests that many citations of Dewey are best regarded as 'decorative flourishes' in academic papers and that the references do not really bear close examination (Boostrom, 2016: 7). But he also suggests another reason why Dewey continues to enjoy revered status. Although not a stylish writer, Dewey was a public intellectual who could communicate with a wide audience beyond the academic community. He was able to articulate not just a philosophy of education but a conception of the good life and the good society. His pedagogical thinking was informed by serious ethical and political considerations. If we try to characterise the major features of *Democracy and Education* what merits particular mention?

Firstly, it is comprehensive in character. It deals with the aims and values of education, its social and moral purposes, and its relation to the world of work. It covers curriculum content, the processes of learning and the importance of experience, not just formal knowledge. The work is intellectually ambitious, with wide explanatory power. Thus, although the context in which Dewey was writing was very different from that of the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, much of what he has to say speaks to the human condition in all periods.

Secondly, the work is historically grounded. It makes reference to the great educators of the past in explaining and justifying points, including Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Froebel, Pestalozzi, Herbart and Spencer. Education is placed in the context of the history of ideas. In the preface, Dewey states that his analysis 'connects the growth of democracy with the development of the experimental method in the sciences, evolutionary ideas in the biological sciences, and the industrial reorganization, and is concerned to point out the changes in subject matter and method of education indicated by these developments' (Dewey, 1966: iii).

Thirdly, the book offers practical recommendations in relation to curriculum and pedagogy. There are substantial sections on the content of education, including language, science, history and geography. On pedagogy, Dewey offers a progressive account of growth and development, stressing the importance of the process of learning and the value of play and activity. His philosophy of pragmatism maintains that ideas only become meaningful if they are expressed through action.

Fourthly, the argument is advanced in a way that is conceptually rich. Attention is given to the precise meaning of key terms. The concepts which are invoked throughout *Democracy and Education*, such as growth, reconstruction, environment, community, activity, aims, culture and democracy itself, are all subject to critical scrutiny. On the last of these, Dewey states that 'A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience' (Dewey, 1966: 87).

And fifthly, the school is seen in sociological terms, as a vital part of a growing, organic community, responding to wider social and political movements, including the drive for greater democracy. Thus, Dewey has interesting things to say about economic conditions, social class and the potential of schooling to bring about reform. He is, for example, opposed to traditional distinctions between 'academic' and 'vocational' education and the social demarcation associated with these terms. A divided educational system, in which some students would receive 'an education conceived mainly as trade preparation', would involve regarding schools 'as an agency for transferring the older division of labour and leisure, culture and service, mind and body, directed and directive class, into a society [only] nominally democratic' (Dewey, 1966: 318).

When these elements are combined, we can say that there are strong philosophical, historical, psychological and sociological elements in the overall theory advanced in *Democracy and Education*, though sociology as a discipline was only just gaining currency at the time Dewey was writing (he was a contemporary of Emile Durkheim) and sociology of education did not really get off the ground until the 1940s (with the appointment of Karl Mannheim to a chair at London University in 1945). It will now be argued that the intellectual framework underpinning *Democracy and Education* can be seen to have influenced later conceptualisations of the field, though it will also be suggested that there was an element of historical accident in the particular forms they took.

### **Fast Forward to the 1960s**

In the 1960s several books sought to provide a rationale for the systematic study of education. J. W. Tibble edited a collection of papers (*The Study of Education*) published in 1966, with contributions from the leading philosophers of education, Paul Hirst and R. S. Peters, the historian Brian Simon, the psychologist Ben Morris and the sociologist William Taylor (Tibble, 1966). The following year Ivor Morrish published *Disciplines of Education* structured under three headings – philosophical, psychological and sociological, each treated historically. Dewey is included in the philosophical section. Morrish concluded that intending teachers needed to have some knowledge of each of the disciplines as well an understanding of how they might be applied to practical educational issues (Morrish, 1967).

There was general agreement that education was not a pure form of knowledge in the way that, say, mathematics might be regarded as such. Although it could be studied for its own sake, it was usually directed to some practical application. It was expected that educational principles would lead to operational outcomes, in terms of decisions about the purposes of schooling, the way in which children were taught and the knowledge that they were encouraged to acquire. A sense of history would enable appreciation of the evolving nature of the process, and how changing social and political conditions led to different educational policies.

These contributions were certainly useful and they have been seen in retrospect as a significant landmark in the way we think about education as a field of study. They could be regarded as an attempt to make explicit the contours and structures of the intellectual field that Dewey was writing about in a more implicit form in *Democracy and Education*. The 1960s writers were bringing to the surface elements that were embedded rather than highlighted in Dewey's work.

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that the writers mentioned above were making a conscious attempt to recapture some Deweyan ideal. There was a fortuitous element in what happened. The 1960s and early 1970s were a period of rapid expansion in education, with pressure on teacher training institutions to increase their output of teachers. New courses had to be created at short notice and secure approval from the Council for National Academic Awards, which in 1965 became a degree-awarding authority for institutions which did not have full university status. This coincided with another development: the arrival on the academic job market of a number of specialists in disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, sociology and history, following the decision to expand postgraduate numbers in universities, who could not all be absorbed into traditional university departments. The demand for more teachers meant that some of those with postgraduate degrees found work applying their knowledge to the field of education. In other words, part of the reason for the conceptualisation of education in terms of the four 'foundation disciplines' can be explained as an accident of academic history. Education was ripe for colonisation by other intellectual fields.

Despite this important caveat, the 'foundation disciplines' view of educational studies continued to have currency for a while. In 1983 Paul Hirst edited a collection called *Educational Theory and its Foundation Disciplines*, essentially an update of Tibble's 1966 volume (Hirst, 1983).

And as late as 2002 there was a special issue of the British Journal of Educational Studies which examined the current state and historical development of educational studies in Britain, with contributions reviewing the four foundation disciplines (McCulloch, 2002). It was a very informative special issue with a superb article by William Richardson dealing with the whole of the UK, not just England (Richardson, 2002).

However, between the 1960s and the turn of the century, all sorts of developments were taking place that served to reconfigure the landscape of educational studies. The traditional four disciplines came under a series of challenges from a range of specialist fields, all of which had a claim to be regarded as important elements in educational enquiry. Curriculum studies came to the fore through the work of people like Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) and Denis Lawton (1975). Curriculum appealed partly because it seemed to offer a focus for enquiry that gave educational studies defined territory of its own, rather than presenting it as being dependent on other disciplinary fields.

This was followed by the growing importance of specialists in assessment, educational administration and management (later extended to include leadership), special education, school effectiveness and school improvement, comparative education, multicultural education, etc. The question of how students were expected to integrate the various insights from these specialist fields into some overall theory of education – such as that found in Dewey – was never made clear. There was an expectation that some magical synthesis would take place in the minds of students but since it had seldom taken place in the minds of those who were teaching them, that was rather an optimistic expectation. Thus, by the beginning of the 21st century, educational studies presented a crowded and rather confusing stage, with all sorts of competing voices trying to be heard. Add in a dash of postmodernism, fuelled by difficult foreign intellectuals such as Foucault, and it was no surprise that some academics retreated to the cover of small-scale case studies and an obsession with the ‘purity’ of research methods. At one level, the over-production of books on research methods during this period can be seen as an attempt – ultimately a vain attempt – to impose strict order on an increasingly chaotic intellectual field.

How does all this relate to Dewey? Are we driven to conclude that the kind of enterprise he embarked upon in writing *Democracy and Education* may have been appropriate for his time but can no longer work for the present? Before a tentative answer to that question is offered, it will be instructive to consider how these issues are reflected in important policy documents, designed to shape and reform the work of teachers. Debates about the nature and structure of educational studies are not simply arcane intellectual exercises. They can have consequences for the way educational policies are framed. Where there is a degree of consensus about the contours of a disciplinary field, policy proceeds in one way. Where there is no consensus but a confused and fractured intellectual landscape, policy is likely to go in a different direction.

## Two Contrasting Policy Documents

The two policy documents to be considered are separated in time by more than 25 years: both are Scottish. The first is the Munn Report of 1977 which examined the structure of the curriculum in the middle years of secondary school. It led to important changes, most notably the introduction of Standard Grade courses and examinations. What is interesting about Munn is the way it proceeded. It started by posing a series of questions involving ‘fundamental principles’:

- What educational aims should the schools set themselves?
- What human capacities should they try to foster?  
What kinds of knowledge are of most worth? (SED, 1977: 15)
-

The report acknowledged that these are 'perennial questions' and 'matters for debate': in other words that they are likely to be contested.

It then proceeded to consider 'three main sets of claims' on the curriculum – social, epistemological and psychological. The first deals with the expectations that society has of its schooling system – in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes. These will be subject to change over time. Epistemological claims derive from 'conflicting theories on the nature of knowledge' (ibid: 16). This leads into a discussion about the kinds of knowledge and understanding that should be promoted, the balance between 'academic' knowledge and 'practical' knowledge, and the way in which knowledge should be structured (whether 'integrated' or 'differentiated', for example). This part of the report was clearly influenced by the work of Hirst and Peters.

The third set of claims derives from the psychology of pupils – the way in which youngsters develop and learn, their abilities, interests and needs, their motivation, drive and ambition. Here too the report acknowledges that it is not easy to reach agreement on many of these topics – such as how much choice learners should be allowed, or whether they should be grouped according to ability.

The general question to arise from the three sets of claims is: 'Is it . . . possible to produce a curriculum design in which all the competing claims are reconciled?' (SED, 1977: 20). For present purposes, it is not necessary to trace the next stage of the argument which involves establishing four sets of aims for secondary schools: these are then used as criteria for determining the scope of the curriculum. This, in turn, leads to the specification of 'a number of modes of activity or fields of study' (ibid: 21) which all pupils must engage in. Here again the influence of the Hirst/Peters school of philosophy of education can be detected.

The essential point is that the Munn report, whatever one may think of its final recommendations, adopted a serious theoretical approach to the task it was set. It asked fundamental questions. It addressed them systematically and with a degree of rigour. It offered justifications and a rationale for its conclusions. And it proceeded to make a series of policy recommendations. Philosophical, sociological, psychological and (to some extent) historical perspectives clearly informed the whole process. In this sense the report was written with some understanding of the intellectual tradition exemplified by Dewey's *Democracy and Education*.

Contrast this with the 2004 report of the review group which produced the original Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) document (Scottish Executive, 2004). This is a report that has had a more profound and comprehensive impact on the shape and direction of Scottish education than Munn (see Priestley & Biesta, 2013). It has been the flagship policy for more than a decade, and challenging questions about how successful it has been have been asked (Priestley & Humes, 2010; OECD, 2015). The CfE document is short compared to Munn and focuses on three main areas: the values which should underpin the curriculum; the purposes of the curriculum from 3 to 18; and the principles which should determine the design of the curriculum. There is no acknowledgement of the contested nature of many of the issues. Statements are offered as assertions. There is little in the way of analysis, discussion or justification and no reference at all to the kinds of philosophical, sociological and psychological material that featured in Munn (Gillies, 2006).

The central recommendation of the CfE document – the four capacities of successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors – is offered as a self-evident statement of purpose and the document moves on immediately to ask how schools could achieve these desirable outcomes. Within a very short time, the four capacities had become the mantra of virtually every teacher in Scotland, a clear example of the effective spread of official discourse and the closing off of other options. It is no accident that within a couple of years 'A Curriculum for Excellence' had become 'Curriculum for Excellence'. Alternatives were not to be encouraged.

How is the stark difference between the two reports in both approach and language to be explained? There are several possible explanations. The CfE report had been preceded by a National Debate which allowed some scope for the airing of a range of views. It was felt by politicians and senior policy advisers that it was now time to move on, reach decisions and implement change.

Moreover, many of the details were to be worked out in the subsequent development programme: thus there was still opportunity to influence the final outcome. It is also likely that the slow pace of change evident in previous reforms – Standard Grade, 5-14 and Higher Still – had led politicians and officials to become impatient with the tendency of professionals, and especially academics, to want to argue over every detail.

But there is another set of explanations that is relevant to the main theme of this paper. As argued above, in the 1970s the view of educational studies as consisting of the four 'foundation disciplines' (philosophy, psychology, sociology and history) still had some currency. But in the decades that followed it came under a series of challenges from a range of specialist fields, all of which had a claim to be regarded as important elements in educational enquiry. This meant that the territory had become messy and confused. The rather tidy landscape that had been assumed by the 'foundation disciplines' approach no longer seemed to offer an adequate account of what was happening. Nobody felt able to come forward with some kind of grand synthesis, in which the foundation disciplines could be somehow reconciled with the new specialisms; perhaps, for example, by proposing a classification using a distinction between 'first order' questions – to do with aims, values and principles – and 'second order' questions which related to operational matters. A critic might well have concluded that educational studies lacked any kind of intellectual coherence. It was just a general label for a collection of approaches and perspectives which, taken together, did not amount to much.

Although intellectually unsatisfactory, this state of affairs had some advantages for policy makers. They could pick and choose from the array of perspectives on offer. Thus, during the Thatcher years, school effectiveness and improvement came into its own and several academic careers flourished under its banner. Alternatively, politicians could say we cannot look to the academic and professional community in education for clear guidance so we will press ahead on the basis of our own convictions. The original decision in England to make all state schools academies was an example of such an approach, though the Westminster government was subsequently forced to retreat from this position.

The intellectual landscape of educational studies thus lacked coherence, a situation that arguably still prevails. Politicians claim that they want their policies to be 'evidence informed' but they are quite willing to abandon this principle if it suits them. In Scotland, research contracts are now more likely to go to market research organisations than to academics in universities. Educational initiatives increasingly conform to what Murray Edelman called 'policy as spectacle' (Edelman, 1988) rather than well-grounded proposals based on the best evidence. And governments are reluctant to allow proper evaluation of policies that have been in place for some time. Witness the slowness to report on the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence.

When OECD reviewers were eventually commissioned by the Scottish Government, after sustained pressure from a number of sources, they concluded that they could not produce a proper evaluation since some of the required data was simply not available. Their report bears all the hallmarks of a heavily negotiated text, with officials striving to highlight the good news and researchers trying to ensure that their areas of concern were included (OECD, 2015).

With a new SNP government elected in 2016 and a new Cabinet Secretary for Education (John Swinney), an international panel of experts has been appointed to advise on how best to tackle the attainment gap between children from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds. This policy focus is undoubtedly important but narrow: it fails to locate educational underachievement within a broad range of social indicators and places the major responsibility for success or failure with schools and teachers.

Decades of evidence show that this is a simplistic reading of the situation. As Dewey argued a century ago, educational provision has to be located within a broad understanding of how the school community relates to the home, to social networks and to work environments. To place the burden of social inequality solely, or mainly, on the school reveals a serious misunderstanding of the complex factors involved.

Against this background, what are the options for the future direction of educational studies? Is it possible to detect a way of re-establishing some intellectual coherence to the field? Or must we just learn to live with uncertainty and the absence of clear signposts? Does Dewey still offer ideas and approaches that have relevance to the contemporary educational scene? These questions will be considered in the final section.

### **Where do we go from here?**

If the landscape is as confused as suggested above, is there anything that might give an indication of the direction in which we ought to be going? Would it be possible, for example, for someone to produce a seminal text, such as Dewey's, synthesising insights from the expanded list of intellectual fields contributing to education? The knowledge and skills required for such an undertaking would be formidable. The idea of trying to provide an overarching view of the territory is, however, attractive. It would carry the possibility of enabling us to get a better sense of our intellectual bearings. It could not claim to be definitive – there would always be scope for dissent and alternative accounts – but it could provide a stimulus to a renewed attempt to position education as a coherent discipline within the academy. Many of Dewey's concepts are still very relevant, not least democracy itself. But, of course, much has changed and any such enterprise would have to take account of the vast economic, social, political and technological developments that have impacted on education.

Critics might well say that such an undertaking is now beyond the scope of any one person. We are all, to varying degrees, specialists with a limited range of expertise.

In any case, they might argue that the very attempt to produce an overarching synthesis, a comprehensive theory of kind produced by Dewey, is misguided. The metaphor of mapping the territory presupposes a defined field of enquiry, a place with boundaries, whereas the nature of education is that it spreads in all directions, spilling over here, being subject to incursions there.

We should welcome diversity, the argument goes, embrace the invasions from unexpected directions and see them as an opportunity to create a richer intellectual culture.

A paper by Anne Pirrie and Donald Gillies challenges the appropriateness of employing a spatial or cartographic metaphor, thus questioning whether it is right to speak of 'mapping the territory'. They argue that the degree of clarity and precision implied in the notion of 'mapping' is no longer possible, nor is some lofty overview of the 'field' a meaningful exercise. They 'challenge the prevailing view that the decline, or indeed progressive demise, of the disciplines of education is necessarily a bad thing' (Pirrie and Gillies: 389) and offer a sharp critique of accounts of educational studies which depend on notions of boundaries and territories. Instead they emphasise the importance of the personal narrative of academics, citing the example of Tim Ingold in anthropology: they present him as a 'wayfaring intellectual', an 'interdisciplinary subject', whose enquiries lead him in all sorts of directions and who resists the hierarchies and demarcations of established disciplines.

The Pirrie/Gillies approach is appealing in many ways and they make their case elegantly, but they are bound to be aware of its vulnerabilities, particularly in the context of mass higher education with its corporate values and institutionalised constraints. It could be portrayed as rather too personal, placing the intellectual interests of individual academics above the expectations of students and employers. To be fair, they do state that 'Education as a field of enquiry needs to . . . address the social, cultural and moral dimensions of human existence' (ibid: 397). What is not clear is how the efforts of individual wayfaring intellectuals connect with the lived experience of others or indeed with the need for policy ideas that that might help to improve educational systems.



The acquisition of personal understanding and meaning is certainly important, but it has to be shown how this will bring wider benefits to society. Pirrie and Gillies do talk about the importance of 'exploring the reciprocal relations between . . . personal narrative and grand narrative' (ibid: 387). This is an important point and it brings us back to Dewey and his continuing relevance to current debates about the importance of educational studies in the context of democracy.

A major complication is that optimism about democracy as a political system has declined. There is now a substantial literature on the fragility of democracy (see, e.g. Keane, 2010; Mair, 2013; Graeber, 2014). It is seen as vulnerable from a number of sources: public disenchantment with mainstream politics and the rise of populism (evident in the election of Donald Trump as US President and the decision of the British electorate to leave the European Union); the power of multinational companies which can exert economic pressure on nation states, thus undermining the democratic process; the influence of trans-national organisations, run by unelected elites, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the OECD, on the economic and social policies of many governments, steering them in a uniform direction; the power of technology to create a globalised world in which the scope for national diversity is curtailed (Humes, 2014); and, not least, the threat of terrorism, fuelled by extreme political and religious ideologies.

Despite this, some writers have turned to Dewey as a source of hope and inspiration. In the United States, Randall Hewitt has invoked Dewey in support of his critique of corporate incursions into the world of education. He cites Dewey's belief that democracy has to be born anew in every generation and is particularly concerned about the promotion of 'consumption as the ultimate expression of participatory democracy' (Hewitt, 2006: 44). Against this, he makes the case for 'a democratic theory of education that privileges the social over the private, the public over the corporate' (ibid: 44). Also writing from an American perspective, Leonard Waks looks at some of the consequences of globalisation. He is concerned about what he sees as 'the decline of democratic participation, the transformation of the nation state, and erosion of its social contract'. These trends, he argues, 'force us to ask about agencies for protecting basic human rights, in particular rights to the full and free development of children, including their preparation for democratic life' (Waks, 2007: 27). In developing his case, Waks draws on the theoretical sections of *Democracy and Education* and Dewey's moral and political conception of 'international order' and 'federated humanity' (ibid: 30-31). A European perspective on the continuing value of Dewey's thinking is given by its application to recent EU policy documents in a paper by Nordin and Wahlstrom (2016). They 'use the basic concepts of Dewey's pedagogical philosophy . . . as analytical tools for exploring the democratic potential of a transnational education policy' (ibid: 36) in the context of risk factors such as population movements, social unrest and the threat of terrorism. In all of these contributions, the explanatory power of Dewey's ideas – their capacity to inform major political and social issues – is apparent.

In the UK, a collection of papers published only last year draws on various strands in *Democracy and Education* to assert Dewey's continuing relevance to current educational debates (Higgins & Coffield, 2016). One of the editors, Steve Higgins, endorses Dewey's insistence that an effectively functioning democracy requires a well-informed public and that schools and teachers are vital in ensuring this (Higgins, 2016). Diane Reay mobilises Dewey's ideas on community, civic fellowship and social integration to attack what she sees as the growing inequality of English education, promoted by a culture of competitive individualism. Vivienne Baumfield emphasises the potential of democratic pedagogy in ensuring that the voices of students are heard and that teachers are learners in this process. And the question of whether the basis of Dewey's conception of democracy is primarily moral or political is addressed by Gert Biesta. All of these contributions reinforce the view that *Democracy and Education* is still a rich source of ideas about the function of schooling in society.

## Conclusion

It is possible to detect certain broad trends in writing about education over the last hundred years or so. It has become more specialised and fragmented.

It has drawn on concepts and methods from both the natural sciences and the social sciences, and to a lesser extent the humanities. It has responded to a wide range of social, political, cultural and technological changes. It has engaged in periodic agonising about the intellectual status of the field (see Wilson, 1982; Ball, 1995; Furlong & Long, 2011; Thomas, 2012). In policy documents, there has been a progressive decline in addressing fundamental questions of principle, informed by a sense of history, and a tendency to concentrate on operational issues and public presentation.

It is against this background that we still have something to learn from Dewey. He offers a grand narrative, a comprehensive educational theory based on the best scientific knowledge of his time, informed by a coherent vision of the function of schooling in a democratic society and clear recommendations for curriculum and pedagogy. Of course, given the picture described above – the expansion, diversification and fracturing of the field of enquiry, as well as more recent arguments in favour of some form of inter-disciplinarity – any attempt at a 21st century grand narrative would have to be very different in form. It could not offer a definitive map to guide us in all circumstances, but it might enable us to get a better sense of our intellectual bearings – in this sense, spatial metaphors still have some relevance.

Perhaps most importantly, it would reinstate at the centre of educational debate the big concepts that have preoccupied the great educators over the centuries: freedom and authority; rights and responsibilities; knowledge and understanding; democracy and justice. It would also be willing to address the inescapably political nature of educational policy. What we need is a public intellectual with the insight and stature of Dewey – someone able to speak with authority not just to the academic world or political leaders, but to the wider community of citizens who still value what education represents. Such a voice would be a welcome counterweight to the short-sighted expediency which now drives so much educational policy.

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