

ARTICLE

THE PHILOSOPHER AS PARENT: JOHN DEWEY'S
OBSERVATIONS OF HIS CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE
DEVELOPMENT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF HIS
THINKING ABOUT COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Can John Dewey's experiments at the University of Chicago's Laboratory School teach contemporary inquirers about "learning by making?" This article warrants an affirmative answer to this query. Unlike intellectual historians who trace the source of Dewey's and his colleagues' 1890s pedagogies to their cultural biases, we contend that these experiments were substantially conditioned by pragmatic kinds of insights. Specifically, we argue that Dewey's inquiries into own his children's language development influenced the development of his early educational experiments as well as his later pragmatic communicative philosophy. On this view, the Laboratory School experiments anticipate Dewey's later thinking about communication. If so, rather than embarrassing educational pragmatists, Dewey's and his colleagues' work in the Laboratory School might offer new starting points for thinking about pragmatic education.

In an 1896 article for *Kindergarten Magazine*, John Dewey explained that the "child comes to school to *do*; to cook, to sew, to work with wood and tools in simple constructive acts; within and about these acts cluster the studies—writing, reading, arithmetic, etc."¹ With this statement, Dewey encapsulated a key principle in the elementary education pedagogy he was at that time developing at the University of Chicago's Laboratory School. This school, which Dewey founded in 1896, explicitly experimented with new pedagogical techniques. Ultimately, the Laboratory School's emphasis on occupations (e.g., cooking) would become the most distinctive aspect of Dewey's and his colleagues' experimentation with educational means. Simultaneously, Dewey and his fellow teachers were also experimenting with educational theory.

In the terms of the educational theory that Dewey and his colleagues were developing in the 1890s, the School sought to make education in "the studies" primarily, and not secondarily, a function of "constructive acts."² Today, Dewey's

and his colleagues' historical inquiry into what we have identified as *learning by making* can suggest new perspectives on Dewey's educational legacy. Whether approached as a means for responding to the narrow focus on discourse and discussion advanced by those who align Dewey with deliberative democracy, or, more speculatively, as a historical episode that anticipates contemporary "makerspace" pedagogies, the Laboratory School's way of subordinating studies to constructive acts offers an occasion to rethink Dewey's legacy. In particular, we would suggest that these pedagogical experiments contain good opportunities for reexamining Dewey's early educational approach to literacy and rhetoric.

Unhappily for those who see in the Laboratory School's experiments promising pedagogical principles, scholarship on Dewey's career has not recommended returns to his and his colleagues' early educational work. Recently, for instance, Thomas Fallace's *Dewey and the Dilemma of Race* criticized the Laboratory School's teachers' reluctance to "introduce students to letters, words, and numbers," attributing this reluctance specifically to Dewey's and his colleagues' ethnocentric ideas about race and human psychology.³ Notably, the judgments of other literacy scholars align with Fallace's characterization. Academics associated with the New London Group, to take an important example, have also tended to dismiss Dewey's approach to literacy learning as grounded in racism.⁴ Although they do not tell the whole story of Dewey's work in education, these assessments of Dewey's educational experiments discourage further investigation. As they suggest, if Dewey's educational experiments primarily reflect his and his colleagues' cultural biases, contemporary inquirers should not expect to recover from them useful contemporary methods.

Fallace's intellectual history contextualizes Dewey's 1890s ethnocentrism in what it describes as Dewey's development toward a wider pluralism, including in his thinking about race. In Fallace's view, Dewey's writings in the 1910s and 1920s reconstructed the ethnocentric assumptions about the cultural but not biological inferiority of nonwhite groups in which Dewey's early educational experiments had participated.⁵ While agreeing with much in Fallace's general account, we contend for a different perspective on Dewey's experiments with literacy and communication education in the Laboratory School. Specifically, through our own intellectual history, we identify in Dewey's contemporary attention to his children's language development an underacknowledged influence on his thinking about education in the 1890s. In interactions between his philosophy and parenting in this period, we contend, Dewey began to formulate the innovative philosophy of communication for which he would advocate most effectively in the 1920s. Likewise, we believe, Dewey's parenting also influenced his early approaches to education in the Laboratory School.

By introducing the possibility that Dewey's parenting experiences inspired Dewey's eventual philosophy as well as his Laboratory School experiments, we hope to reinvigorate contemporary study of the Laboratory School. More generally, we seek to advance attention to "the interaction between Dewey's lived experience and

the shaping of his philosophical [and educational] inquiry.”⁶ Craig A. Cunningham, David Granger, Jane Fowler Morse, Barbara Stengel, and Terri Wilson have wondered whether the “contemporary power of Dewey’s thought rests, at least in part, in . . . his willingness to cultivate, appreciate and appropriate the thinking of interesting women and odd ducks.”⁷ Particularly to offer Dewey’s Laboratory School experiments as part of what Jessica Enoch and Cheryl Glenn have called a “usable past” for literacy and rhetoric educators, we describe what we think Dewey learned about language from children—and specifically, his own children—and how that may have informed his thinking about language and communication.⁸ From these children, we believe, Dewey learned the beginnings of his pragmatic approach to communication. Accordingly, we assert that Dewey’s early educational experiments do not only partake of dominant late 19th century ethnocentrism (and racism); they can also stimulate efforts to rethink contemporary communication pedagogies.

In the sections to follow, we contend that Dewey’s early educational experiments, and particularly his and his colleagues’ experiments in literacy education, reflect pragmatic insights and ideas that he derived from his parenting. Working from Dewey’s contemporary writings (including his archived correspondence), we argue that Dewey’s inquiries into his children’s language development influenced the conception and development of his pragmatic communicative philosophy. On this basis, we additionally suggest that Dewey’s inquiries into his children’s language development influenced his mid-1890s educational experiments in the Laboratory School. Finally, we discuss these claims as they might warrant archival reconsideration of Dewey’s and his colleagues’ work in the Laboratory School.

“AN INFERENCE FROM HIS CHILDREN”

In 1942, Dewey’s student Max Eastman remarked that it “is customary to regard Dewey’s educational theories as an inference from his instrumental philosophy, but more accurately they are an inference from his children.”⁹ In this and the two following sections, we contend that, like Dewey’s educational theories, Dewey’s pragmatic communicative philosophy also began at home.

In asserting our claim about *where* Dewey’s philosophy of communication began, we must also consider the question of *when* it began. Gert Biesta has identified *Democracy and Education* (1916) as the publication in which Dewey’s pragmatic account of communication first appeared, rejecting the notion that this work’s treatment of this subject was “the culmination of a line of thought that was already worked out in other publications.”¹⁰ Against Biesta’s assessment—and also against its way of privileging Dewey’s publications as the primary means by which Dewey “worked out” his thinking—we argue that Dewey’s experience as a parent in the 1890s stimulated some of Dewey’s earliest pragmatic thinking about communication. Specifically, in helping Dewey to reconstruct the idealist view of language that

he had developed in previous years in Ann Arbor, MI, Dewey's parenting led him to new, protopragmatic appreciations for language activity.

Before his move to Chicago in 1894, Dewey had extended his idealist thinking about psychology and ethics into two linked conceptions of language. First, in the context of his neo-Hegelian system of psychology, Dewey identified specifically poetic language as the highest expression of art's capacity to provide "a sense of those wholes which discover the interrelated unity of Spirit and can be clarified by reason."¹¹ Second, in the context of his increasingly experimental work on idealist ethical theory, Dewey identified in the "institutional development" of language a key agency for advancing the sociospiritual unity he called the "social organism."¹² In both of these directions, Dewey found himself especially enthusiastic about the social and spiritual potency of literacy practice.

After 1894, when Dewey moved from Ann Arbor to Chicago to take a position at the University of Chicago, Dewey's thinking about language began to develop in significantly different directions. In particular, as Dewey engaged with Chicago's academic psychologists, municipal reformers, and progressive educators, he lost much of his previous enthusiasm for literate activity. At the same time, drawing inspiration from William James's *Principles of Psychology*, Dewey and his colleague George Herbert Mead were attempting to "naturalize" contemporary idealism's accounts of language and communication.¹³ As we will see, in this period Dewey espoused language as "social communication," "not,"—or not "primarily"—"expression of thought."¹⁴ In a word, Dewey was beginning to develop his distinctively pragmatic account of language and communication.

Once developed, Dewey's communicative philosophy was innovative. Particularly central to this innovative thinking about communication, as Biesta has summarized it, is Dewey's insight that

common understanding is not a condition for cooperation. It is not that we first need to come to a common understanding and only then can begin to coordinate our activities. For Dewey it is precisely the other way around: common understanding is produced by, is the outcome of successful communication in action.¹⁵

On this view, as Dewey argued, language is not merely the subject matter of linguistic practice or reflection or a conduit for meaning in the quotidian sense. Rather, Dewey approached language in its "widest sense," a sense including not only speaking, writing, and gesture but also "rites, ceremonies, monuments and the products of industrial and fine arts."¹⁶ In adopting (and elaborating) such a viewpoint on language, Dewey, like Ludwig Wittgenstein, "show[ed] the impossibility of a private language."¹⁷ In addition, as Scott Pratt has argued, Dewey also tried "to show what is needed for a public language."¹⁸ Arguably, Dewey left for contemporary inquirers a stable platform on which to develop "a full-scale theory of discourse, a

philosophy of language, of the sort required for understanding how the symbols we use relate to the world in which we use them.”¹⁹ In any case, Dewey developed his own distinctive account of language and communication.

Change in Dewey’s circle of intellectual intimates—and particularly his deepening ties with Chicago’s municipal and educational reformers—can help to explain the way that Dewey’s approach to these phenomena shifted away from the emphases of his previous idealism.²⁰ Yet, these intellectual influences do not comprise the whole of the context in which Dewey began the process of rethinking communication. In particular, and as Dewey’s publications and correspondence from this period can suggest, also important was Dewey’s interaction with his children.

Dewey’s contemporary writings and correspondence hint at many influences on his thinking about language and communication in the mid-1890s. Yet, published and archival records of Dewey’s doings in 1894 do more than hint at the influence of his parenting on transitions in his thinking on these subjects. Most obviously, Dewey’s “The Psychology of Infant Language,” an article he published in *Psychological Review* in January of 1894, shows Dewey using data he gathered about his children to theorize language psychology. In particular, “The Psychology of Infant Language” shows Dewey thinking anew about language and its role in the individuation of individuals. Most suggestive of all his writings are John Dewey’s letters to Alice Dewey and his older children, Fred and Evelyn Dewey, who had begun a trip to Europe that John would later join.²¹ These letters detail John’s daily interactions with the family’s youngest child, a toddler named Morris who stayed with him in Chicago. Although written for the immediate purposes of sharing news and giving delight, these letters also suggest how Dewey’s parenting experiences affected his thinking about language and communication. Specifically, these letters suggest that Dewey’s parenting helped him see language activity as primarily concerned with agreement in action.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEWEY’S THINKING ABOUT LANGUAGE AND INDIVIDUALITY

Dewey’s early 1890s *Thought News* periodical project had sought broad changes in journalism as a key manifestation of language’s “institutional development.”²² By contrast, 1894’s “The Psychology of Infant Language” advanced a different approach to its subject that focused on the role of language in the development of individuals. In particular, whereas Dewey’s ideas about language and the social organism in Ann Arbor had pointed him to the need for mass linguistic “action” (writing, editing, and the founding of new kinds of newspapers), Dewey’s approach in “The Psychology of Infant Language” pointed him toward the importance of understanding differences in individuals’ language development. In particular, Dewey’s focus on individuality and language development in his article forecasts a key aspect of

Dewey's pragmatic account of language and communication: its emphasis on "how individuals [come] to see themselves within the social relations and social understandings of their times, particularly through learning of gesture and language."²³

Based on the account he gave in "The Psychology of Infant Language," Dewey had been observing his children's language development since 1889.²⁴ However, it was not until the 1893 publication of an article by Frederick Tracy that Dewey published his own report on this subject.²⁵ Tracy published his article on children's language development while he was a fellow at Clark University. In it, Tracy primarily asserted a "principle underlying the development of child-speech from the psychic point of view," noting especially the way in which "primitive utterances . . . are associated with ideas . . . until finally the instrument of language is completely under control, and becomes the adequate medium for the expression of thought."²⁶

Dewey's article responded directly to Tracy's publication, but it ignored Tracy's explicit attempts to draw "general conclusions . . . from the material at hand."²⁷ Dewey was apparently disinterested in Tracy's attempts to "set down . . . empirical laws" and to achieve "general statements" about language development.²⁸ Instead, Dewey focused on Tracy's data, supplementing it with the observations he had made of Fred, Evelyn, and Morris. Ultimately, Dewey was most overtly interested in advocating an alternative program for language study. To this end, Dewey proposed a different method for studying language development than Tracy had implemented.²⁹

Dewey also suggested a hypothetical description of language development. The key to this description was Dewey's idea that language development is the progressive refinement of sense. Tracy's account of children's language acquisition focused on how children's "ideas" came to "clothe themselves . . . in words."³⁰ His view of language was basically empiricist, in agreement with thinkers like John Locke, who considered language a means of "transmitt[ing] the private feelings of the speaker to an audience" and who conceived language on the model of "separate and distinct minds transforming their private thoughts into audible and public speech."³¹ Dewey showed himself more interested in the relation between language development and individuals' consciousnesses. As Dewey argued, the reason to study language development is to understand language as a means for "attaching interest and distributing attention."³² By contrast, Tracy had argued that the "most interesting" aspect of children's language development in the third six months of life was the "gradual 'clearing' of childish concepts, as indicated by the steady circumscription of the application of names."³³ Specifically, Tracy described how "[w]hen a child calls the moon a lamp, or applies his word *bô* (*ball*) to bubbles, oranges, or other round objects," "it is evident that one great striking resemblance has overshadowed the differences in the objects."³⁴ For his part, Dewey argued that the "tendency to apply the same term to a large number of objects ('ball' to ball, orange, moon, lamp-globe, etc.)," should not be understood as a child abstracting the "roundness" of these objects.³⁵ Instead, Dewey argues, the "roundness" of the

ball “suggests to [the child] something which he has thrown, so that the moon is something to throw—if he could only get hold of it.”³⁶

In “The Psychology of Infant Language,” Dewey did not explicate his differences with Tracy over their contrasting views of language and its functions. However, Dewey did focus explicitly on his differing ideas about the *process* of language acquisition. Working from collected observations, Tracy had described what he took to be the basic course of language development in children under two years. Amending Tracy’s account, Dewey presented children’s language development as a process in which words incorporating the sense of many parts of speech—e.g., nouns, verbs, and interjections—became differentiated into words that have distinct senses. In explaining this understanding, Dewey began with Tracy’s finding that children’s minds probably privilege “concepts of activity.”³⁷ Dewey suggested that words used by young children often include, for the child, complex associations of sense. Referencing his observations of Morris’s vocabulary at 12 months, Dewey noted that of Morris’s 17 total words, “only the four proper nouns”—“papa,” “mamma,” “grandma,” and “Freddy”—“are, psychologically speaking, names of objects.”³⁸ The other 13 words, Dewey suggested, cannot so easily be assigned to any particular part of speech. As Dewey explained,

Water is a verb as well as a noun; door is *always* accompanied by gestures of reaching, and an attempt to swing the door back and fro; “daw” is apparently a request, an expression of expectation of something good to eat and the name of a thing all together; bottle certainly has adjectival and verbal implications as well as nominal. At present I should regard it as a complex, “nominal-adjectival-verbal,” the emphasis being on the noun, while six weeks previously it was, say, “verbal-adjectival-nominal.” “Stop”; “no, no”; “burn”; “see there,” etc., are equally interjections and verbs. “Thank you” is at times a request for something, and is almost invariably said when giving an article to any one else.³⁹

Based on these observations, as well as his reading of Tracy’s findings, Dewey suggested a hypothetical description of language development as the refinement of linguistic sense. This is, Dewey explains, “the gradual *differentiation* of the original protoplasmic verbal-nominal-interjectional form . . . until words assume their present rigidity.”⁴⁰ In Morris’s case, “bottle” initially meant all of “drinking” and “bottle-like” and “bottle.” As he developed, however, Morris would come to use words like “bottle” as adults do—that is to say, as a noun that indicates a closed container of liquid.

It is worth noting that Dewey’s foray into infant psychology held out the promise of strengthening a key plank in Dewey’s contemporary ethics. Indeed, this study promised to affirm individuality “in fact,” as he put it in the *Study of Ethics*.⁴¹ We are each born to our capacities, Dewey then believed, and our challenge is to develop better understandings of them. Indeed, Dewey thought that the study of

ethics is nothing less than the scientific analysis of such capacities and their possibilities. Armed with a historical understanding of personal capacities as well as an analysis of what such capacities might eventually become, Dewey held that ethical agents could develop better moral practice. In Jennifer Welchman's summary of Dewey's theory, "the moral scientist was (1) to describe and explain just what ideal personal capacities had historically been realized by human agents and (2) to suggest ways ideal personal capacities (and so persons themselves) could be more freely and fully realized."⁴² Dewey apparently hoped that language study could prove, as the *Study of Ethics* had merely supposed, that the "capacities of a child . . . are not simply of a child, not of a man, but of *this* child, not of any other."⁴³

If Dewey's studies of his children's language development promised to strengthen the ideas about individuality supposed by his contemporary ethics, they also anticipated his (and George Herbert Mead's) later focus on how shared language activity shapes individuality. Dewey's study of his children's language development was designed to clarify how individuals come to experience themselves (and their world) as they do. This kind of project—William James called it the study of "psychogenesis"—was much in vogue in the United States in the 1890s.⁴⁴ For his part, Dewey had a specific agenda for his thinking about how individuals come to see themselves as individuals. "I believe the tendency in all psychological investigation, at present, is to attempt to get a uniform mathematical statement, eliminating individual differences," Dewey explained in "The Psychology of Infant Language."⁴⁵ Yet, "for pedagogical and ethical purposes," Dewey continued, "it is these differences which are, finally, most important."⁴⁶ Dewey's study of language development did not seek, as had Josiah Royce's thinking about psychogenesis, an explanation of how "finite selves came to believe in the world of objects."⁴⁷ Rather, Dewey was interested in how an individually unique mode of speech (e.g., as revealed in "the varying ratio of adverbs and pronouns on one side and nouns and adjectives on the other") "must denote a very different psychological attitude—different methods of attaching interest and distributing attention."⁴⁸ In other words, even in 1894 Dewey was beginning to grasp how shared, social language activity shapes the development of humans as singular individuals.

AGREEMENT IN ACTION

In the whole of Dewey's correspondence from the summer and fall of 1894, only a small selection of passages suggest that Dewey was pursuing a scientific study of his children's language development. Indeed, far from portraying Dewey as a clinical observer, these letters rather give the impression of a man who was experiencing "a powerful awakening of his loving emotions" and who, "with the rest of his family abroad," showered "all of the loving care and attention that [he] had in limitless store . . . on Morris."⁴⁹ The many pages devoted to Morris provide a compelling portrait of a father falling deeply in love with his child, and they suggest why Dewey might

have been shattered emotionally by Morris's death in Europe in 1895. (As Evelyn Dewey recounted in a biography of their father, Morris's death was "a blow from which neither of his parents ever fully recovered."⁵⁰)

For contemporary readers, foreknowledge of Morris's death gives the letters a tragic quality, which colors especially the loving accounts of Morris that John wrote down in them. Yet, in addition to the poetic sorts of experiences these letters offer to readers, there are also available insights of a more prosaic nature. The letters make abundantly clear, for instance, Dewey's pride in his son's intelligence. They also convey the close proximity in which Dewey lived with his son.⁵¹ This close association gave Dewey fertile experiential material for use in his contemporary reflections on language development as well as other topics.⁵² But John's and Morris's close association may also have affected John's subsequent thinking about language and communication. As Dewey's letters can suggest, his doings with his son inspired him to linger repeatedly on the relationship of language to what he would later call "social cooperation."⁵³ Separately from his contemporary ruminations on language, psychology, and ethics, it seems, Dewey appreciated watching his son discover how language affects group activities.

Beyond many conventional expressions of John's pride in his son's intelligence, some of his proudest observations of Morris speak to the latter's facility with language. On 18 November 1894, John remarked that Morris "almost never does a thing of any kind without telling it or asking a question about it; if he doesn't do it *alonde* [*sic*]; you hear him talking to himself."⁵⁴ This remark summarizes much in Dewey's letters' observations of Morris, and it suggests the positive regard in which Dewey held his son's speaking activity. The previous month, John had offered a portrait that was similar in its approbation for Morris's communication. In addition, however, this later letter particularly stressed the social or community dimension of Morris's speaking. In it, John describes Morris's actions and words as two parts of the "centre" of social life Morris made of himself at the rooming house:

He is one centre of action & glee, talking, playing & laughing with no inter-
mittence. He not only attends to the conveniences of life, but goes after the
pot himself, puts it out of the closet &c. He talks so much it is impossible
to keep any track of his words. Gma told him this morning that his bottle
was on the bed; He said "Milk in it, I s'pose." When I began writing he
was sitting beside me with his doll, a little pail of water & a piece of paper
busily engaged in washing the doll's face. He had brought the pail to me, &
instead of saying 'want water' he said pap "want papa to reach". A minute
ago he heard the bell ring, jumped || down & said "Go see popm (post-
man), be raight back" & he is now ^in^ [w. caret] the hall, calling with all
his might to various members of the Morse family.⁵⁵

This passage attests to his father's pride at Morris's verbal facility. But it also emphasizes the way in which John saw Morris's speaking as thoroughly integrated with his various activities. Commenting on his surroundings, interacting with his family

members, and hailing other members of their little community, Morris in John's depiction is experimenting with words as means for shaping shared behavior.

One of John's anecdotes particularly emphasizes the wonderment he apparently experienced at Morris's doings with language. In the midst of a complaining letter to Alice, John inserted the following lines:

Morris showed one of his supernatural gleams of intelligence yesterday. When I was || finishing my letter to you he climbed up in my lap. As quick as I had written the address on the envelope & sealed it he began "I want to go to the post-office." Of course, the operation had been gone thro' with some-time before but I hadn't the remotest idea when or how he got hold of it.⁵⁶

At the time of John's writing, Morris had recently passed his second birthday, and, as John's letters document, he had been speaking in sentences for some time. Morris had also demonstrated himself capable of expressing his intentions in complex verbal statements. Despite these accomplishments, Dewey was apparently baffled by his son's anticipation of their trip to the post office. John acknowledged that he and Morris had undergone "the operation"—of sealing and addressing a letter and then delivering it to the post office—"sometime before" (that is to say, previously to the event being described). But John professed himself not to have "the remotest idea when or how [Morris] got hold" of the meaning of this operation (so that he could anticipate one of its phases based on the completion of a previous phase). Given the frequency of John's letter-writing activities, it does not seem surprising that Morris could achieve and act on this kind of understanding. Yet, something in the interaction fascinated Dewey. In other words, Dewey saw in this apparently ordinary exchange something deeply significant—and interesting—to himself.

Was there in John's wonderment at Morris's "gleam of intelligence" the germ of those accounts of language and social cooperation that featured prominently in his later pragmatism? In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey best explained his idea that the "heart of language is not 'expression' of something antecedent, much less expression of antecedent thought. It is communication; the establishment of cooperation in an activity in which there are partners, and in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by partnership."⁵⁷ In that book, as in other works, Dewey offered examples to help readers understand his view of language.⁵⁸

In *Democracy and Education*, one illustration of how language shapes cooperative activity recalls his post office anecdote. Specifically, in a digression on "how language works," Dewey explains that

The baby begins of course with mere sounds, noises, and tones having no meaning, expressing, that is, no idea. Sounds are just one kind of stimulus to direct response, some having a soothing effect, others tending to make one jump, and so on. The sound h-a-t would remain as meaningless as a sound in Choctaw, a seemingly inarticulate grunt, if it were not uttered in connection with an action which is participated in by a number of people. When the

mother is taking the infant out of doors, she says “hat” as she puts something on the baby’s head. Being taken out becomes an interest to the child; mother and child not only go out with each other physically, but both are concerned in the going out; they enjoy it in common. By conjunction with the other factors in activity the sound “hat” soon gets the same meaning for the child that it has for the parent; it becomes a sign of the activity into which it enters.⁵⁹

Dewey goes on to argue that “the sound h-a-t gains meaning in precisely the same way that the thing ‘hat’ gains it, by being used in a given way. And they acquire the same meaning with the child which they have with the adult because they are used in a common experience by both.”⁶⁰ As Biesta puts it, “common understanding is produced by, is the outcome of successful cooperation in action.”⁶¹

For the present argument, the notable feature of *Democracy and Education’s* example is the main characters: the mother and her infant. Admittedly, these figures are not in any obvious way ciphers for Dewey and his son. Yet, there are in Dewey’s published example some clear parallels to John’s story about Morris and the post office. Both narrations involve a parent interacting with a child who is acquiring language. Both also linger over the significance of an utterance in relation to shared activity. The most suggestive parallel, however, concerns the action of both stories—that of “going out.” In Dewey’s published example, he remarks that “Being taken out becomes an interest to the child; mother and child not only go out with each other physically, but both are concerned in the going out; they enjoy it in common.”⁶² This, in outline at least, is much the same in John’s story about Morris and the letter. Having enjoyed trips to the post office “sometime before,” Morris wanted to repeat this enjoyment with his father. Paraphrasing *Democracy and Education*, we can say that by conjunction with the other factors in activity, the utterance “I want to go to the post office” got the same meaning for Morris that it had for John. On this view, Dewey was, in 1894, already in possession of one of pragmatic communicative philosophy’s key insights.

LANGUAGE, INDIVIDUALITY, AND ACTION IN THE LABORATORY SCHOOL

As we have argued, Dewey’s parenting led him to insights that anticipate the distinctive features of his pragmatic philosophy of language and communication. In one direction, Dewey’s parenting experiences helped him to appreciate how shared language use shapes individuals’ individuality. In another direction, Dewey’s parenting experiences helped him to appreciate how language activity is primarily concerned with agreement in action (or cooperation). In addition, Dewey’s parenting affected his contemporary thinking about language and communication in education.

On the view represented in Dewey’s later writings, of course, there is nothing “supernatural” at all in Morris’s having learned a distinguishing verbal sign of his and his father’s enjoyed activity. Indeed, Dewey would later insist on the specifically

natural quality of just this kind of achievement.⁶³ In 1894, however, Dewey did not completely grasp—nor did he necessarily want to grasp—the account of language and communication that he would later develop. In 1894, Dewey had mostly abandoned his earlier efforts to philosophize about discourse as the social organism’s sensorium, and what remained of his enthusiasm for language activities’ social functions he apparently channeled into the study of his own children’s language development. As we have seen, one of the insights he gained through the studies reported in “The Psychology of Infant Language” was that social language activity shapes individual psychology. Originating in his parenting experiences, that insight would become a key part of his (and Mead’s) later thinking about language and communication.

In the middle and later months of 1894, Dewey’s attentions were clearly shifting away from language-focused inquiries, and his contemporary thinking seems very far indeed from the attention to discourse that returned to his philosophy so spectacularly in *Experience and Nature*’s chapter on “Nature, Communication and Meaning.” Nevertheless, there is in Dewey’s attentions to his children’s language development an intimation of his later thinking about language and activity. In particular, his wonderment at Morris’s intelligence, like his sensitivity to Morris’s experiments in social communication, hint at a dawning sense of awareness that shared, cooperative behavior matters primarily in language. Much later, Dewey argued that “a sound or mark of any physical existence” is “part of language only in virtue of its operational force; that is, as it functions as a means of evoking different activities performed by different persons so as to produce consequences that are shared by all the participants in the conjoint undertaking.”⁶⁴ Much in this latter conception seems anticipated in Dewey’s observation of Morris’s achievement.

Dewey’s early parenting experiences also affected his contemporary thinking about pedagogy.⁶⁵ Although full consideration of his parenting’s influence on his 1890s pedagogical ideas is not possible here, Dewey’s contemporary pedagogical writings strongly suggest this influence’s importance. Specifically, Dewey’s “My Pedagogic Creed” (1897) confirms that Dewey had applied to his educational thinking the insights about language and the development of individuality he indicated in “The Psychology of Infant Language.” Regarding Dewey’s pedagogical application of the developing insights about language and cooperative behavior suggested in his 1894 correspondence, Dewey’s 1895 *Plan of Organization of the University Primary School* provides similar indications.

In general, “My Pedagogic Creed” summarizes Dewey’s contemporary thinking about education. In particular, Dewey articulates his contemporary intentions with respect to language and communication education.⁶⁶ In this article, however, the influence of Dewey’s 1894 thinking about language is not most visible in the sections where Dewey outlines his “occupation”-oriented approach to language pedagogy. Rather, this influence appears most clearly in Dewey’s opening section, on “What Education Is.”⁶⁷ In that section, Dewey attends to psychogenesis as the stimulation of a child’s

emergence “from his [*sic*] original narrowness of action and feeling and to conceive of himself [*sic*] from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs.”⁶⁸ Dewey explicitly connects this process of individuation with children’s language learning. “For instance,” he observes, “through the response which is made to the child’s instinctive babblings the child comes to know what those babblings mean; they are transformed into articulate language and thus the child is introduced into the consolidated wealth of ideas and emotions which are now summed up in language.”⁶⁹ In this statement, language activity functions as a key means for children’s individuation.

If “My Pedagogic Creed” can indicate the presence of Dewey’s early thinking about the individuation of individuals in his contemporary pedagogy, Dewey’s 1895 *Plan of Organization of the University Primary School* provides similar indications about the influence of his thinking about communication and social cooperation. In general, this *Plan* defined “the general spirit” in which the Laboratory School’s work was to be undertaken.⁷⁰ More specifically, this *Plan* outlined the school’s approach to what Dewey called the child’s “expressions.” Inveighing against empiricist views of language as “expression of thought,” Dewey specifically argues that

The child does not realize an activity save as he [*sic*] feels that it is directed towards others and calls forth a response from others. Language, for example, whether speech, writing, or reading, is not primarily expression of thought, but rather social communication. Save as it realizes this function, it is only partial (and more or less artificial) and fails, therefore, of its educative effect, intellectually, as well as morally; its complete, or organic, stimulus being absent.⁷¹

Dewey gave a somewhat clearer and more detailed account of this theory of expression in his 1896 article addressed to drawing teachers, “Imagination and Expression.”⁷² Even in his 1895 *Plan*, however, Dewey was overtly applying, in his notion of “social communication,” his developing understanding of communication as primarily a means for modulating social cooperation.

From the point of view of intellectual history, more remains to be demonstrated about the influence of Dewey’s early parenting experiences upon his early pedagogical experiments. In particular, practical confirmation for this influence that we have sketched can also be pursued in the many extant records of the Laboratory School’s activities. As we have discovered in our ongoing researches, across the many kinds of documents preserved from the School’s early years, there exists considerable evidence that Dewey’s nascent ideas about language, individuality, and social cooperation informed the work that Laboratory School teachers carried out with their students. In one particularly rich example, for instance, students engaged in what we might now call “maker space” pedagogies in order to *make a space*—a “clubhouse”—for the benefit of the School’s debate and photography clubs.⁷³ In the clubhouse project, the Laboratory School’s teachers overtly stimulated students’ “emerg[ence]” from their “original narrowness of action and feeling,” encouraging them to conceive themselves “from the standpoint of the welfare of the group.”⁷⁴

Likewise, in their elaborate planning discussions for and reflections upon the clubhouse's construction, teachers and students practiced speaking, writing, and gesturing not as "expression of thought" but instead as "social communication."⁷⁵ These anticipations of Dewey's later pragmatism in his early pedagogical experiments suggest that, in records of these endeavors, contemporary educators might find clues to new sorts of pedagogies. Indeed, to the degree that the Laboratory School can be productively likened to contemporary educational experiments, these records may hold important clues for reconstructing contemporary pedagogies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL INQUIRY

In seeking to warrant expanded inquiry into Dewey's and his colleagues' Laboratory School experiments, we do not deny their limitations.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, neither do we believe that these experiments only reflect their limitations; in addition, they make available tools that may be useful in contemporary circumstances. In keeping with understandings of archival and intellectual history practiced in our own field, rhetoric and composition, study of past trials can open new possibilities in the present. In this particular instance, against the dominant sense in our field that Dewey's pragmatism privileges discourse and, particularly, conversation as society's most critical educational and political agencies, these early pedagogical experiments can suggest that Dewey valued discursive activities primarily as extensions to productive, embodied, collaborative, material inquiry. In this way, for example, Dewey's Laboratory School experiments can make available specifically conceptual tools for thinking through present problems.

Renewed inquiry into Dewey's and his colleagues' Laboratory School experiments might also yield new viewpoints on contemporary educational practice. When researchers in our field called for reflection on literacy education and contemporary "makerspace" movements, for instance, we responded with a discussion of the Laboratory School as an anticipation of—and departure from—practices characterizing contemporary makerspace pedagogy.⁷⁷ Historical comparisons of these kinds, we believe, can deepen more abstract considerations of Dewey's educational legacy. By warranting study of Dewey's and his colleagues' practices, in short, we seek to authorize not only further study of Dewey's ideas but also of his concrete, historical inquiries.

Finally, we believe that further study of the Laboratory School's experiments can augment current work to articulate "Deweyan" kinds of ideals for contemporary education. In "John Dewey, W. E. B. Dubois, and a Rhetoric of Education," for instance, Keith Gilyard has recently articulated a vision for what he calls the "parameters" of an anti-racist schooling agenda fashioned by Dewey and Dubois.⁷⁸ Notably, in this attempt to frame large-scale ends for contemporary American education, Gilyard draws primarily on Dewey's 1897 "My Pedagogic Creed." If scholars accept Fallace's contention that Dewey's educational thinking in 1897 was primarily "ethnocentric," they will fail to fully appreciate the possibilities in Gilyard's projections. By contrast, if scholars do take on the problem of investigating the complex

ideational and practical history that led up to Dewey's expression of his creed, they will be better positioned to respond to Gilyard's call to "revisit and attempt to revise fruitfully our liberal, progressive, and radical education traditions."⁷⁹

NOTES

1. EW 5:245. All references to John Dewey's published works are to *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston and published by the Southern Illinois University Press in Carbondale and Edwardsville (1969–1991). All such citations take the form of two capitalized letters indicating that the reference is to either *The Early Works, 1882–1898* ("EW"), *The Middle Works, 1899–1924* ("MW"), or *The Later Works, 1925–1953* ("LW"), followed by two sets of arabic numerals separated by a colon. The first numeral indicates the specific volume in which the cited work appears, and the second numeral indicates the page number or numbers where the citation is to be found.
2. Ibid.
3. Thomas Fallace, *Dewey and the Dilemma of Race: An Intellectual History, 1895–1922* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011), 171.
4. See, e.g., Courtney Cazden, Bill Cope, Norman Fairclough, Jim Gee et al., "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures," *Harvard Educational Review* 66, no. 1 (1996): 68.
5. Fallace, *Dewey and the Dilemma of Race*, 7.
6. Craig A. Cunningham et al., "Dewey, Women, and Weirdoes: or The Potential Rewards for Scholars Who Dialogue Across Difference," *Education and Culture* 26, no. 2 (2010): 28.
7. Ibid.
8. Cheryl Glenn and Jessica Enoch, "Drama in the Archives: Rereading Methods, Rewriting History," *College Composition and Communication* 61, no. 2 (2009): 337.
9. Max Eastman, *Great Companions: Critical Memoirs of Some Famous Friends* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959), 269.
10. Gert Biesta, "'Of All Affairs, Communication is the Most Wonderful: The Communicative Turn in Dewey's *Democracy and Education*" in *John Dewey and Our Educational Prospect: A Critical Engagement with Dewey's Democracy and Education*, ed. David T. Hansen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 26–27.
11. Thomas Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 37.
12. Dewey, *Lectures* 1:130. All references to John Dewey's class lectures are to *The Correspondence of John Dewey, 1871–1952*, edited by Donald F. Koch and published online by the IntelLex Corporation of Charlottesville, Virginia (hereafter *Lectures*).
13. Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature*, 122. For an alternative perspective on the role that James's thinking played in Dewey's attempts to naturalize idealism, see John Shook, *Dewey's Empirical Theory of Knowledge and Reality* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000).
14. EW 5:226.
15. Biesta, "'Of All Affairs,'" 31. Other scholars have suggested that earlier publications show Dewey in the process of working out his thinking on communication. Sleeper, for instance, argued that "discourse" was already the "sine qua non of experience in the logic of experience set forth in the *Studies [in Logical Theory]* and *Essays [in Experimental Logic]*," suggesting that Dewey had already developed some of the most distinctive parts of his thinking about communication thirteen years before *Democracy and Education* appeared. Ralph

Sleeper, *The Necessity of Pragmatism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 118. Thomas Alexander, to take another example, identified “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology,” published 20 years before *Democracy and Education*, as Dewey’s most important step in the direction of the theory of communication shared in his later works. Alexander, “John Dewey and the Roots of Democratic Imagination” in *Recovering Pragmatism’s Voice: The Classical Tradition, Rorty, and the Philosophy of Communication*, ed. Lenore Langsdorf and Andrew R. Smith (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 139.

16. LW 12:51–52.

17. Scott Pratt, “A Sailor in a Storm: Dewey on the Meaning of Language,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 33, no. 4 (1997): 853.

18. Ibid.

19. Sleeper, *The Necessity of Pragmatism*, 5.

20. Dewey’s 1894 correspondence can suggest how Chicago’s municipal and educational reformers might have influenced his thinking about language and communication. All references to John Dewey’s collected correspondence are to *The Correspondence of John Dewey, 1871–1952*, edited by Larry A. Hickman and published online by the InteLex Corporation of Charlottesville, Virginia (hereafter *Correspondence*). See, e.g., Dewey to Alice Chipman Dewey, 9 October 1894 (record 00205), in *Correspondence*; Dewey to Alice Chipman Dewey, 15 November 1894 (record 00229), in *Correspondence*.

21. Of Dewey’s biographers, Jay Martin gives the most detailed account of the Dewey family’s 1894 separation; of John’s and Morris’s reunion with Alice, Fred, and Evelyn in Europe; and of Morris’s demise in Italy in 1895. Jay Martin, *The Education of John Dewey* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 158–74, 179–83. See also George Dykhuizen, *The Life and Mind of John Dewey* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), 79; Steven Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 229–30.

22. Dewey, *Lectures* 1:130. On Dewey’s involvement in the *Thought News* affair, see Neil Coughlan, *Young John Dewey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 87–112, and Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 51–58. On Dewey’s thinking about writing and discourse in this period, see Jeremiah Dyehouse, “Theory in the Archives: Fred Newton Scott and John Dewey on Writing the Social Organism,” *College English* 76, no. 3 (2014): 252–272.

23. Charles Bazerman, *A Theory of Literate Action: Literate Action* (Anderson, SC: Parlor Press, 2013), 93. For his part, Dewey credits this innovation in his thinking about language and communication primarily to Mead. See, e.g., Jane Dewey, ed., “Biography of John Dewey” in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. Paul Schilpp and Lewis Hahn (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press), 26.

24. In the article, Dewey refers to an observation of son Fred’s vocabulary “at 19 mos. old.” EW 4:66. Fred Dewey was born on 19 July 1887, so Dewey would have performed this observation in May or June of 1889.

25. Frederick Tracy, “The Language of Childhood,” *American Journal of Psychology* 6, no. 1 (1893): 107–138.

26. Tracy, “The Language of Childhood,” 133.

27. Ibid., 112.

28. Ibid.

29. In brief, Dewey described children’s language development as a process in which words incorporating the sense of many parts of speech—e.g., nouns, verbs, and

interjections—become differentiated into words that have distinct senses. Referencing his observations of Morris’s vocabulary at 12 months, for instance, Dewey noted that of Morris’s 17 total words, “only the four proper nouns”—“papa,” “mamma,” “grandma,” and “Freddy”—“are, psychologically speaking, names of objects.” EW 4:68. The other 13 words, Dewey suggested, cannot so easily be assigned to any particular part of speech.

30. Ibid., 126.

31. Max Black, “Dewey’s Philosophy of Language” *The Journal of Philosophy* 59, no. 19 (1962): 508.

32. EW 4:69.

33. Tracy, “The Language of Childhood,” 117.

34. Ibid.

35. EW 4:69.

36. Ibid. When a young child calls the moon a “ball,” adults are likely to interpret such an utterance as evidence that the child understands that the moon, like a ball, is round. Yet, Dewey argued, a child’s utterance can be less a statement about reality than an intervention into present activity. For the child, “ball” means something like, “Hey! Let’s look right there! That is throwable! Let’s throw that!”

37. EW 4:67.

38. EW 4:68.

39. Ibid.

40. EW 4:69.

41. In Dewey’s contemporary ethical theory, the genuineness of variations in specifically individual psychologies was a key claim to be defended. Language study, as a form of what Welchman calls Dewey’s “moral science,” offered one way to defend that claim. Jennifer Welchman, *Dewey’s Ethical Thought* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 99. John’s changing ethical theory shaped his ideas about the moral significance of scientific studies, including his study of Morris’s language acquisition. Arguably, these changes made language study not only personally but also intellectually and morally interesting to him.

42. Ibid.

43. EW 4:45.

44. The study of psychogenesis especially occupied the prominent American idealist Josiah Royce, who sought in psychology an explanation for how “we ‘derived’ our forms of experience and categories of understanding from the real world of absolute self.” Bruce Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1860–1930* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 190. In thinking about this phenomenon, Dewey explicitly differed with Royce. See EW 4:198; Dewey to Alice Chipman Dewey, 13 September 1894 (record 00188), in *Correspondence*.

45. EW 4:69.

46. Ibid.

47. Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy*, 194.

48. EW 4:69.

49. Martin, *The Education of John Dewey*, 159.

50. Jane Dewey, ed., “Biography of John Dewey,” 24.

51. In caring for Morris, John was hardly without help; Lucina Dewey, John’s mother, cared for Morris extensively, as did, apparently, both paid caregivers and other adults in the rooming house. Nevertheless, John was significantly involved with Morris’s care, especially in the evenings, when he coped with Morris’s bottles, his “watering,” and his wetting the bed.

52. See, e.g., EW 4:167n15.

53. LW 1:6.
54. Dewey to Alice Chipman Dewey & children, 18 November 1894 (record 00231), in *Correspondence*.
55. Dewey to Alice Chipman Dewey & children, 7 September 1894 (record 00186), in *Correspondence*.
56. Dewey to Alice Chipman Dewey & children, 29 October 1894 (record 00215), in *Correspondence*.
57. LW 1: 141.
58. In *Experience and Nature*, for instance, Dewey offers as an example the case of persons “A” and “B,” who communicate about (and cooperate in) the plucking of a flower. LW 1:140–143.
59. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 18–19.
60. *Ibid.*
61. Biesta, “Of All Affairs,” 31.
62. MW 9:19.
63. LW 12:49–50.
64. LW 12:54.
65. See, e.g., Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 95.
66. See, e.g., EW 5:89; EW 5:91.
67. EW 5:84.
68. *Ibid.*
69. *Ibid.*
70. EW 5:224.
71. EW 5:226.
72. EW 5:192–201.
73. Krysten Manke and Jeremiah Dyehouse, “Before the Digital: What History Can Teach Educators about Makerspaces, Literacy, and Rhetoric,” *Digital Rhetoric Collaborative*, accessed April 16, 2016, <http://www.digitalrhetoriccollaborative.org/2016/04/15/before-the-digital-what-a-history-can-teach-educators-about-makerspaces-literacy-and-rhetoric/>.
74. EW 5:84.
75. EW 5:226.
76. Most obvious among the limitations of Dewey’s and his colleagues’ Laboratory School experiments are their pedagogical limitations. Indeed, Dewey himself even recognized their efforts’ failures to develop students’ “skills in communication and expression.” LW 11:195. See also Katherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards. *The Dewey School: The Laboratory School of the University of Chicago 1896–1903* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1936).
77. Manke and Dyehouse, “Before the Digital.”
78. Keith Gilyard, “John Dewey, W. E. B. Du Bois, and a Rhetoric of Education” in *Trained Capacities: John Dewey, Rhetoric, and Democratic Practice*, eds. Brian Jackson and Gregory Clark (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 126.
79. Gilyard, “John Dewey, W. E. B. Du Bois, and a Rhetoric of Education,” 137.

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