

CO-EDITOR'S  
INTRODUCTION  
Section Three:  
BASIC EDUCATION

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**D**ewey reminds us that democracy is more than a political system: it is a social idea that enables us to harmonize our lives. Dewey's faith in democracy as a way to build relationships of trust and reciprocity has animated children's education (K-12) internationally, both in nations that provide universal adult suffrage and those that do not. The articles in this collection respond to the challenges facing liberal democracy today by exploring both the causes of this crisis and ways to address it through the application of Dewey's theory in basic education (K-12).

Maura Striano and Giuseppe Spadafora provide readers with an overview of Dewey's theory of education as a driving force for social change, and the role that schools may play in the cultivation of collective forms of reasoning. Striano and Spadafora describe the attack on Capitol Hill as a manifestation of distrust for democratic institutions, spawned by social and economic policy that has reduced our ability to organize ourselves in "collective realities". They

propose making the classroom the location for our rediscovery of community, in line with Dewey's thinking.

In addition to fostering a sense of community in schools to counteract social atomization, in line with Striano and Spadafora, Mark Mason argues that teachers should provide "education for inclusion". This approach requires us to identify the axes along which goods are differently distributed, such as socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender, (dis)ability and location. Mason flags up international failures of leadership that are fueling animosity and social segregation around the world, and argues that exclusion is perhaps the greatest threat to liberal democracy today.

Ann Nononymous calls for a different form of education altogether: one which teaches children to understand how countries outside the US undermine democracy both directly, through election interference and influence, and indirectly through the use of social media to polarize voters and reduce public confidence in fair elections. The scale of attack on liberal democracy is, says Nononymous, enormous, and is funded by autocracies

across the globe. Nononymous' analysis implies that the sense of alienation and exclusion identified by Striano and Spadafora and Mason is being deliberately cultivated by governments who are hostile to democracy.

According to Jeong-Nam Kim, James Grunig, and Patrick Ortez, it is our tendency towards regressive problem-solving that makes us vulnerable to the influence of politically manipulated social media described by Nononymous. Kim et al argue that we filter out information against our pre-arrived solution in favour of evidence supporting it. This results in the proliferation of information bubbles and conspiracy theories that are readily exploited by autocracies to undermine our faith in democracy. Communication technologies, say Kim et al, enable cheap and free communication, but do not establish common foundations for people to reason and collaborate around social problems. As a result, the communal associations posited by Dewey as foundational for successful democracy are being undermined globally. To remedy this situation, Kim et al advocate education that makes us aware of *how* we are thinking.

Suitt, however, identifies a problem with the conceptualization of thinking in schools today that risks undermining the solution proposed by Kim et al. Drawing on Dewey's critique of the quest for certainty, Suitt says we are reluctant to confront problems in our society that might be addressed through positive action. Instead, we favour dreams of the ideal society over engagement with actual social issues, and imagine that these dreams need to be safeguarded in our schools. Citing the example of the Loudoun County school board's misgivings over critical race theory, Suitt argues that the America Dream can only be realized through "collective, intelligent action" that confronts and addresses the issue of racism. According to Suitt, protecting the "dream" of America as the land of opportunity by shutting down debate over systemic racism hinders the possibility of social action that might transform this dream into reality.

Michelle Tourbier tells us that, currently, 15 states in the US are seeking to ban the teaching of critical race theory in schools. Tourbier proposes that educators might draw on Dewey's theory to foster classroom debate on how "flights

of fancy” often underpin political beliefs. By encouraging children to reflect upon utopias (for example the American Dream) and helping learners to imagine more emancipatory worlds in place of our own, says Tourbier, educators may help address the crisis in liberal democracy by fostering a sense of collective agency.

This task is not likely to be easy. Carla Briffett Aktaş and Koon Lin Wong point out that the weakening of our tolerance of diversity is making it difficult for educators to cultivate the “conjoint communicated experiences” advocated by Dewey. To address this problem, Aktaş and Wong recommend the application of Nancy Fraser’s (2007) social justice theory in classroom settings. This approach enables students to practice socially just interactions in preparation for their adult life by taking part in curriculum planning; working in small groups to promote respectful dialogue, and sharing their knowledge. “Shuffling the power” in schools in this way, says Aktaş and Wong, may permit majority and minority students to connect with their schooling.

Natalie Shaw goes even further, urging us to rethink the concept of school itself in order to free up educational possibilities that are currently stifled by the pursuit of outcomes, quality standards and “the next ranking of basic skills mastery”. Shaw reminds us that “education as it currently stands will not save us” from the crisis in liberal democracy. If implemented, Shaw’s recommendations would result in a profound “shuffling of the power” in schools that, she claims, would benefit pupils and society, and Shaw invites us to ponder why this is not happening.

Cara Furman and Cecelia Traugh quote Dewey’s belief that a healthy person or culture must be able to grow. For students in the US who are perceived to be different, or who cannot conform, say Furman and Traugh, this growth is being stunted through the inhumane use of “exclusion, isolation and physical regulation”. The silencing and shunning of alternative voices in schools is an assault on democracy, and Furman and Traugh call upon educators to resist this violence through the use of Descriptive Inquiry - an approach grounded in care for the child. Providing examples of problematic classroom behavior, Furman and

Traugh demonstrate how educators may develop a humane response to children who are “different”.

A similar interest in the growth of healthy persons and culture is evident in Di Wang’s account of the implementation of Dewey’s educational theory in schools in China. Wang defines democracy after Darhrendorf (2003) as the power of the people to achieve change in society without violence, and she explores why Dewey’s writings on education for democracy are enduringly popular in China. According to Wang, child-centredness in the Chinese context mainly refers to respecting the child as a whole person. Like Traugh, Wang recognizes that the desire for conformity may suppress the expression of individuality in schools. Nevertheless, Wang argues that by emphasising child-centredness in education, it is possible for young Chinese citizens to learn to respect each other and resolve problems peacefully and creatively.

Greenhaigh-Spencer compares Dewey, Dennett and Halberstam’s theories of failure, arguing that all three philosophers ground their conceptions of failure in processes of reflection and the creation of a common

subjectivity - a “we-ness” that emerges through experiencing failure together. Trying and failing, these theorists tell us, is part of being human - a hopeful process that generates new ways of knowing. Rather than seeing failure as a source of shame, educators might help students see failure as a source of insight and the driver of evolution. The crisis of liberal democracy, says Greenhaigh-Spencer, might be fruitfully explored through theories of failure that point towards the birth of new ways of knowing and acting together.

Finally, Michael Pritchard gives us cause for optimism. Pritchard reminds us that, for Dewey, reasonableness - a social disposition in which we are responsive to other people’s perspectives - is an important virtue. Drawing on the work of Vivian Gussin Paley, Pritchard argues that young children start school with a capacity for moral inquiry that may be developed through reflection on moral problems. The success of Paley’s approach offers us hope: if students are helped to cultivate their innate capacity for moral reflection, the crisis of liberal democracy may be a failure through which we rediscover

our capacity for reasonableness, regenerate our sense of community, and renew our humanity.

The authors of this collection of papers on K-12 education offer guidance on how this capacity for moral reflection might be achieved in classrooms around the world today. The role of basic education has, it seems, never been more vital.