

THE SCHOOL AT THE
SERVICE OF SOCIETY:
CONSEQUENCES FOR THE
“NEW WORLD”

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Introduction

In this article I shall seek to demonstrate the remarkable contemporary relevance of John Dewey's pedagogic ideas, found in publications such as *My Pedagogic Creed*, *The School and Society* and *Democracy and Education*. Through a brief analysis of these works I will highlight how much Dewey believed in a school that is connected to society and which places itself *at its service*, contributing to the birth or consolidation of a democracy understood not just as a form of government, but as a *way of life*.

In view of this analysis and in light of the present pandemic caused by COVID-19, I will consider the importance today of the school. Following Dewey, I will take into account the role it plays in society, with all its needs, demands, and characteristics, both now and potentially. To this end I will point out how certain democratic principles, such as collaboration, cooperation, and above all civic responsibility might serve to face a sensitive situation, such as the one we are experiencing

today, and to what extent the school should encourage teaching and other educational processes that help consolidate such responsibility. Moreover, because the coronavirus pandemic is determining a “new world” made up of unprecedented ways of living and being together, in order to avoid being anachronistic and dysfunctional, the school must update and re-examine itself in an attempt to respond to the demands that the health emergency is posing.

With reference to the present pandemic and Dewey’s pedagogic theories, this work will conclude with a consideration regarding *civic responsibility* seen as one of the most important democratic principles to help mitigate the emergency presented by COVID-19. An attempt will be made to explain how important school is for the education of future responsible citizens, so that situations such as that of today, which require the contributions of everyone, can be faced appropriately.

1. The School as a “Social Workshop”

When discussing the pedagogic theories of John Dewey, reference to a school in a close relationship with society and capable of representing social reality in all its ways, both present and potential, is inevitable. One of his most important works, *My Pedagogic Creed* (1897), very clearly summarises the faith he has in education as well as the idea of a school that is *at the service* of society, contributing to its growth and improvement in democratic terms. Here the young Dewey defines a school as “a social institution, meaning a form of community.” Education was to represent “a process of living and not a preparation for future living”¹ in that attention was to be focused on the *social life* of the child and on his/her daily experiences, both scholastic and extra-scholastic. This is why “the true centre of correlation on the school subject” should not just involve subjects such as geography, history or literature “but the child’s own activities.”²

¹ John Dewey, *My Pedagogic Creed* (Chicago: A. Flanagan Company, 1910), 7.

² *Ibid.*, 10.

Therefore, according to Dewey the school was to be sustained by the social experiences of children, their interests and practical activities, thereby avoiding the school experience being just limited to reading a written text or listening to a lesson. To Dewey, a school only founded on textbooks meant reducing instruction and education to a collection of discoveries and past events that belonged to others and that undervalued children's experiences in the here and now.

However, in *My Pedagogic Creed* and more generally in his attempt to emphasise the relationship between school and society, Dewey states that among the main objectives of schooling, beyond that of the growth and education of the child, should also be the *progress of society*. If educating a child in democracy means encouraging free thinking, responsible citizenship, and mutual cooperation and collaboration the school has to be an agent of change not only for individuals but also for the entire community.

Two years later in 1899, Dewey published *The School and Society*, which among all his works on pedagogy seems to be the best known and most studied. The aim of this

book, as the title suggests, was that of depicting a school that operated in close contact with the outside world, encouraging its growth and improvement. A reading of this work makes it clear that according to Dewey everyone needs to be educated in social living in the most peaceful, civilized, and democratic way possible.³ In order to achieve this end it is necessary to avoid a cold and sterile school context where pupils are only encouraged to read textbooks and passively listen to the teacher, as this provokes a kind of “divorce of school from life.”⁴ Dewey therefore courageously dismissed the school situation of his period, which was far from the needs of society, and where the pupil was often faced with the “inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside the school in any complete and independent way within the school itself,” while he was “unable to apply in daily life what he” was “learning at school.”⁵ In the light of this criticism it

³ For more, see: Charles Howlett, *Troubled Philosopher: John Dewey and the Struggle For World Peace* (Port Washington, NY: National University Publications, 1977).

⁴ Francis William Garforth., *John Dewey: Selected Educational Writings* (London: Heinemann 1966), 62.

⁵ John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1899), 89.

can be stated that *The School and Society* represented an attempt to bring about a “revolution” in education capable of transforming a child into a “sun about which the appliances of education revolve; he is the center”⁶ around which the whole educational process is organized.

The educational revolution theorized by Dewey basically envisaged the school transformed in effect into a *social workshop*, in which certain practical activities (such as carpentry, sewing, painting and cooking), carried out individually or in groups, accommodated the development of pupils’ intellectual and social skills. The latter, above all, prepared the child to meet and discuss with other people, a fundamental element in terms of the democratic evolution of society, since “a society is a number of people held together because they are working along common lines, in a common spirit, and with reference to common aims.”⁷

It should also be remembered that according to Dewey it was through pupils’ achievement of new and challenging experiences that the school was to contribute

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 27-28.

towards the development of free and independent thinking, avoiding the standardization of social guidelines, both psychological and behavioral.⁸ Furthermore, what seemed important to Dewey in a school at the service of democratic society was the *enhancement* of humanity in its *unique* and *unrepeatable* features.

I think it is also worth mentioning that the reciprocal relationship between school and society, a constant thread in Dewey's thinking, is also dealt with in some of his twentieth century works, such as *The Child and the Curriculum* in 1902. Here the author continues to level criticism at traditional schools by maintaining the importance of an educational community founded on the "freedom" and "initiative"⁹ of the pupil. Taking upon itself the task of the growth and improvement of man and the social community, the school achieves an educational

⁸ For more, see: Larry Hickman, *La Tecnologia Pragmatista di John Dewey* (Roma: Armando Editore, 2000), Chapter 2.

⁹ John Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1902), 14.

approach attentive to developing the mind, which Dewey considers “the only significant method”¹⁰ of education.

2. Education at the Service of a Democratic Society

Dewey’s interest in schooling that operates for the well-being of society did not end with the abovementioned publications. In his 1916 work *Democracy and Education*, Dewey returned to the relationship between society and the role of education, adding an objective to be pursued more explicitly than in his previous works: democracy.¹¹ In those days the democratic framework was undermined by the industrial revolution. This was determining an increasingly stratified society made up of the dominators and the

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ It should be remembered however that Dewey’s interest in democracy had developed before 1916. He had already published an extensive essay, *The Ethics of Democracy*, in 1888, in which he had tried to refute Henry Maine’s thesis in *Popular Government* that democracy was simply a form of government. Dewey disagreed with the British scholar and argued that to reduce democracy to a mere political structure was a serious mistake, intimating that on the contrary it involved a style of living more than being simply a form of government. John Dewey, *The Ethics of Democracy*, University of Michigan Philosophical Papers I, Second Series (Ann Arbor: Andrews & Company, 1888).

dominated, and for that reason it was potentially at risk.¹² However, the need for an educational institution able to act for the well-being of society, becoming an *ideal space* in which democracy can be *experimental*, was becoming increasingly clear in the American scholar's mind. The idea is plausible if one considers that in Dewey's terms democracy "is more than a form of government; it is ... a mode of associate living, of conjoint communicated experience,"¹³ "a way of life,"¹⁴ a way of living in the world and relating with others. Democracy therefore does not conclude with the achievement of universal suffrage or the creation of a constitutional charter.¹⁵ Congresses, elections, political parties, and debates represent *formal* elements of the democratic system, but do not characterize its essence, which instead resides with the citizens and their intellectual

¹² For more, see: Teodora Pezzano, *L'Organismo Sociale nel Giovane Dewey* (Cosenza: Periferia, 2010).

¹³ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (London: Simon & Brown, 2012), 94.

¹⁴ Giuseppe Spadafora, *L'educazione per la Democrazia. Studi su John Dewey* (Roma: Editoriale Anicia, 2015), 29.

¹⁵ For more, see: John Narayan, *John Dewey: The Global Public and Its Problems* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 32.

and reasoning capacities.¹⁶ It follows however that democracy understood in these terms requires an education in critical thinking and in “co-operation,” which upholds listening “to one another rather than suppressing the other’s voice,”¹⁷ and a way of living that includes the well-being of everyone and guarantees social harmony.¹⁸

Therefore, democracy as a *way of life* would encourage community life focused on solidarity, mutual respect, altruism, tolerance, civic responsibility and the enhancement and expression of the uniqueness of humanity’s potential. Thus, school has the duty to be sensitive to these ideas and contribute to their fruition, constituting what Dewey considers “the liberation of a

¹⁶ For more, see: Fausto Finazzi, “Educazione Democratica, Partecipazione Sociale e Libertà del Discente,” *Pedagogia più Didattica*, n. 3 (October 2017).

¹⁷ Larry Hickman and Giuseppe Spadafora, *John Dewey’s Educational Philosophy in International Perspective: a New Democracy for the Twenty-First Century* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009).

¹⁸ Regarding peace, it should be remembered that Dewey was opposed to any form of totalitarian regime and the “militarization of schooling.... He opposed the authoritarian practices of military training.... To Dewey, education should be a creative and self-developmental process” and not mere conformism. Charles F. Howlett, Audrey Cohan, *John Dewey, America’s peace-minded educator* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), 99.

greater diversity of personal capacities which characterize a democracy.”¹⁹ Moreover the American writer was convinced that by moving away from an authoritarian education, which is transmitted and based on rules and rigid conduct, one could determine a “new” education, based on *active involvement* of the pupils and able to prepare them for democratic living.²⁰ In 1929 this certainty prompted him to write an article entitled *Democracy in Education*. This work aimed at further clarifying the importance of a school that operated for democratic society and nurtured pupils’ minds,²¹ on the grounds that “freedom of action without freed capacity of thought behind it is only chaos.”²² Indeed, according to Dewey educating minds to think independently would not only encourage the consolidation

¹⁹ Alison Kadlec, *Dewey’s Critical Pragmatism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 127.

²⁰ John Joseph McDermott, *The Philosophy of John Dewey: The Lived of Experience*, vol. 2 (New York: Capricorn Books, 1973), Chapter 6.

²¹ Dewey had already spoken of education of thought – in particular *reflective* thought - in *How We Think*, (1910). John Dewey, *How We Think* (Boston: D.C Heath & Co., Publishers, 1910).

²² John Dewey “Democracy in Education,” *The Journal of the National Education Association* (December 1929): 287.

of democracy, but would also increase the sense of *responsibility* that the democratic system requires, allowing everyone to experiment with what it means to be a *creator* of their own ideas and being *responsible* for the reasons behind their actions.

3. Democratic Society as an Ethical Commitment:

Risks of the Present Pandemic

Dewey's faith in democracy made him see it as the ideal *instrument* to best face any form of social change. That at least is what emerges in *The Public and Its Problem*, published in 1927. Here Dewey remembers that democracy represents a form of living, one which is not limited to within a polling station and the enactment of a law and stresses the idea that it represents an *ethical commitment*. By virtue of this commitment *everyone* must have the right to actively participate in issues and social change, as well as to express oneself and co-operate for the well-being of the community.

In my opinion, this 1927 work symbolizes the attempt to reiterate how much the democratic community

requires pro-active individuals positively disposed to social relationships. It is no coincidence that this was emphasized in the first half of the twentieth century, a period marked historically by a proliferation of totalitarian regimes in Europe and the advance of capitalism in America. These were phenomena that were threatening the essence of Dewey's democracy, heading towards its "instability" and "disintegration,"²³ as well as feeding *unwillingness* in terms of social participation and blocking the furthering and consolidation of the democratic spirit.²⁴ Indeed, in the eyes of Dewey "indifference" and "apathy"²⁵ were substituting typical political participation in democracy, thereby limiting principles such as "fraternity," "liberty," and "equality" to mere, vacuous "abstractions."²⁶ The American scholar, once again demonstrating the far-sightedness of his thinking, tried to condemn this serious situation by trying to focus

²³ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1927), 116.

²⁴ For more, see: Narayan, *John Dewey*.

²⁵ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problem*, 122.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

minds and actions towards the safeguarding of democracy. As is clear to see, World War II, which broke out a few years after the publication of *The Public and Its Problem*, shows how Dewey's worries were well-founded and how democracy really was at risk.

Having said this, one could ask if democracy understood as an ethical commitment is still in danger today, above all in a period marked by the coronavirus pandemic, which has changed lifestyles almost throughout the whole world.

The present health emergency caused by COVID-19 has spread suddenly and like all invisible unknown enemies has been able to knock the world off balance in an immediate and silent way. After an initial period of diffidence, of underestimating the gravity of the situation and almost distaste for it, a period of alert and fear was entered, generating mutual aversion and transforming almost all our individual and collective habits. Particularly in Europe, where the virus spread several months before it did in the USA, an increasing fear about this unknown adversary has been experienced, determining in some cases

a sort of “hunt for the plague-spreader” which has provoked disinclination for social life and community building. Dewey’s fears expressed in *The Public and Its Problem* therefore seem to have a basis more than ever today: if Dewey’s democracy is to be understood as a *way of life*, meaning a way of living in the world through cooperation, mutual respect, and coming together, there is the danger that the spread of the epidemic puts all this to a hard test. However, looking for a “scapegoat” in order to identify blame for the health emergency would do little other than weaken a democratic system that is increasingly “illusory” and already undermined by incidents of a racial and discriminatory nature.²⁷

However, it seems clear that the day to day health situation is creating a “new world” made up of unprecedented ways of communicating, getting together, working, and schooling. In short it involves a different situation from the usual one, and more than any other situation requires an education in democracy that calls for

²⁷ For more on Dewey’s view of this situation in his own context, see: John Dewey, *Problems of Men* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946).

co-operation, a sense of public spirit, and above all *civic responsibility*.

In the following section I will deal with the theme of civic responsibility, highlighting the remarkable contemporary relevance of Dewey's pedagogic ideas.

4. The Contemporary Value of Civic Responsibility

The theme of responsibility that will now be exposed can be connected to democracy as a lifestyle and ethical commitment in the Deweyan way, since responsibility can be defined "a sense which is peculiar to human beings,"²⁸ on the grounds that everyone is responsible for their own behavior and the effect it has on others and their surrounding society. Being responsible therefore means experiencing interpersonal relationships marked by *reciprocity*, and thus to regulate one's own needs and requirements and take into account those of the *other*. It involves something that more than ever, in the midst of a

²⁸ Faith Töremen, "The Responsibility Education of Teacher Candidates," *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice*, n. 11 (Winter 2011): 273.

world health emergency, possesses remarkable educational relevance.²⁹

To go into more detail, Dewey expressed himself clearly on the idea of civic responsibility in his 1932 *Ethics*, clarifying the need to form a “moral personality, its character and its responsibility,”³⁰ essential ingredients for a *really* democratic society. Such ingredients require not so much an education and training as a solitary experience that only uses textbooks, as much as a direct relationship with one’s peers fostered by periods of discussion and practical activities.³¹ Therefore, in order to achieve all this, “schools are among the first places that individuals encounter in the process of assuming responsibility besides their family.”³²

²⁹ For more, see: Antonio Bellingreri, ed., *Lezioni di pedagogia fondamentale*, (Brescia: ELS La Scuola, 2017), 397-401.

³⁰ John Dewey, *Ethics* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1932), 127.

³¹ With regard to this it can be stated that according to Dewey moral conceptions have a social origin, in that humans are organisms that live in a social structure, which they can influence and of which they can constitute the essence of, even in a moral sense. For more, see: Vivian Trow Thayer, *Formative Ideas in American Education* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1965), 268.

³² Töremen, “The Responsibility Education of Teacher Candidates,” 273.

Dewey however was aware of how difficult it was to achieve a school and education of this type and how in society there was a high presence of people who preferred private rather than public interests. Such individuals believe that “collectively organized action is to be looked upon with suspicion, since to them it involves invasion of the realm of personal liberty.”³³ In *Individualism Old and New* he addressed the criticism of an America marked by deep individualism and enslaved by capitalist interests.

Returning to the present situation characterized by the proliferation of COVID-19, it is possible to state how a school at the service of a democratic community and attentive to the education of responsible citizens is more than ever essential. For this to happen there already has to be an education in *civic responsibility* and therefore in active citizenship, like the one promoted by Dewey, in the first years of school. With this aim, he offered a perfect opportunity to realize it. So, this case was argued in the book *The School and Society*, where Dewey presented and promoted his laboratory school. In such a school, manual

³³ Ibid., 354.

activities, mainly those carried out in groups, could increase solidarity, respect for difference, and be used to experiment with the importance of mutual cooperation, and keep away narcissistic behavior based on indifference.³⁴ Indeed, it is no coincidence that within Dewey's vision there is the conviction that the "only way to cope with a changing world is through the establishment of adequate social forms and institutions such social *form* should be democratic because democracy... gives humans the best chance to participate intelligently in the changing social."³⁵

The contemporary relevance of Dewey is therefore particularly evident in this period, which marked by profound uncertainty, constant change, discrimination, and the pandemic demands democratic values like solidarity, cooperation, and responsibility. Indeed, the democratic situation described by Dewey would facilitate the measures taken to combat and contain the spread of COVID-19, such as the use of masks in public places, washing, and

³⁴ Luigina Mortari, *Educare alla cittadinanza partecipata* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2008), Chapter 1.

³⁵ Svend Brinkmann, *John Dewey: Science for a Changing World* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers 2013), 1.

disinfecting hands, respect for social distancing, and being tested after contact with people potentially infected. However, mistrust towards other people and neglectful observance of the guidelines established by the governing bodies show how far we are from the *authentic* democracy as envisaged by Dewey and how a sense of responsibility on the part of citizens is lacking.

All this represents a real *educational emergency* for present day schools. Today more than ever an educational process should be planned that encourages responsibility and allows pupils to experiment with what it means to *look after* others, cooperating *together* to pursue common aims. It is clear schools rarely carry out this task. Consider the competition that is fed in response to written and oral tests, instances of bullying that are not identified, considered, or appropriately dealt with, and the numerous classroom lessons that limit learning to a passive activity to be carried out solitarily. An educational institution of this type, aside from being far from the needs of present-day society, is completely *anti-democratic*.

The message that teachers and managers should understand therefore is how insufficient it is to make pupils study the dramatic and disastrous consequences of totalitarian regimes, wars, and the abuse to which humanity has been victim in the course of time, in an anti-democratic educational atmosphere. This is why it is desirable for pupils to experience first-hand what it means to create a community and what the real meaning of democratic principles represents. As already mentioned, this can be boosted by participation in practical and group activities, encouragement of peaceful exchange, negotiation of ideas during periods of discussion and by respecting the rules that guide the relationships between peers and that govern activities, both individual and group. This is how the school could contribute towards the advancement of a democratic society when placing itself at its complete service, helping eradicate the risk that democracy is reduced to a mere theoretical abstraction confined within weighty volumes and constitutional charters. It would be a question of realizing in the minds and souls of the new generations an authentic form of civic sense, which would move each

person to respect social rules – both dictated by the COVID-19 emergency and by everyday common sense – not to avoid being sanctioned or denigrated by society, but rather having everyone animated by the desire to contribute to the balance of social reality.

I am aware that to establish a school at the service of democratic society represents a long and complex process, but if it is true that from every negative experience one can learn something, I believe that our schools have to acknowledge the failings of society and try to address them. It is therefore necessary to reconsider the prerogatives of the school, redesigning how it operates, as well as understanding that the health emergency which is still underway is also a social emergency that the school, in order to contribute to the wellbeing of the community as envisaged by Dewey, can – or more accurately “has to” – face. Apart from a different way of schooling in which we see the substitution of classroom lessons with the use of computers, the internet, and online platforms, there is the need for a *new way of educating*, which considers the present-day

demands of the community, and safeguards and consolidates
the *essence* of democracy.