

ADJUSTED NORMS:  
A DEWEYAN ANALYSIS OF  
EDUCATION AFTER THE  
PANDEMIC OF 2020-2022

RANDALL E. AUXIER  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale



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### **Introduction: A Permanent Silver Lining**

**T**here are many concerns about what sort of damage the pandemic has done and will still do to our education systems. I think that clearly there has been damage done, in the short-term, and also from the standpoint of our old habits associated with educational practice, which have been severely disrupted. We have lost a lot of people, including teachers and their students, to this cruel virus. And we have lost time and treasure. Students have missed crucial social experiences that are important rites of passage. They have entered college and were obliged to pass over a year without being socialized and adapted and oriented thereto, depriving them of major transitions, and the same may be said of students who moved from primary to middle school, and from middle school to high school. These disruptions and deprivations continue and may continue for some time to come. The pandemic has perdured long enough that some changes will become permanent.

There is no question that the delivery of education has suffered from our lack of preparedness to deliver it at a distance and under such conditions. But, and this may come as a surprise to many, I am confident that our feelings of concern for the future about altering those entrenched habits surrounding education are not entirely well placed. In fact, what is happening in education (especially from a Deweyan point of view) is *on the whole* a desirable change, and an overall change we would never have been able to implement without the pandemic. If this is the silver lining to the dark, cloud, then let it be so, but the cloud will pass, as the virus becomes endemic rather than epidemic (a process many experts say is well underway, with the omicron variant coming in as milder than earlier variants), and when the ridiculous politics, lies, and widespread bad behavior have become a memory, that silver lining will remain –*if* we are smart enough to seize this moment and make of it what we should: we should adjust our norms.

### **The Settled Situation**

In what follows, I set aside the great tragedy of lost life and economic destruction associated with this time not because I do not think it is important, but because we all understand the tragedy already, in a general way, and I have nothing to add. In this chapter I am going to focus on two ideas, that of adjustment, and that of norms, and using a Deweyan analysis of the problematic situation, I reframe the problem and suggest some solutions. I will conclude with three “surprises” that have been “adjusted” already (to use Dewey’s word<sup>1</sup>), relative to education, due to the pandemic. These adjustments are beneficial for reasons I will explain, and they ought to be maintained, tended, and extended, temporally, in their reach over all of the world’s cultures. They should open the path to some new norms.

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<sup>1</sup> I had the good fortune to direct a dissertation that closely examined this idea of “adjustment” in Dewey, and which summarized the scholarship on that idea. See Justin Bell, “Constraint, Moral Imagination, and Freedom: Evaluation of the Genesis of Value in a Deweyan Vein,” Southern Illinois University Carbondale (2011). The importance of this idea came up in our joint sessions during the writing of the dissertation and we were able to have several long and mutually beneficial discussions about this idea in Dewey.

Since the term “adjustment” is central to my argument, we should see how Dewey understands it:

The structure and course of life-behavior has a definite pattern, spatial and temporal. This pattern definitely foreshadows the general pattern of inquiry. For inquiry grows out of an earlier state of settled *adjustment*, which, because of disturbance, is indeterminate or problematic (corresponding to the first phase of tensional activity), and then passes into inquiry proper, (corresponding to the searching and exploring activities of an organism); when the search is successful, belief or assertion is the counterpart, upon this level, of re-integration upon the organic level.<sup>2</sup> (LW 12, 40)

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<sup>2</sup> Citations of John Dewey’s works are to the thirty-seven-volume critical edition published by Southern Illinois University Press under the editorship of Jo Ann Boydston. In-text citations give the series abbreviation followed by volume number, and then the page number. For example: (LW 10, 12) is page 12 of *Art as Experience*, which is published as volume 10 of *The Later Works*. Series abbreviations for *The Collected Works*: EW *The Early Works* (1882–98), MW *The Middle Works* (1899–1924), LW *The Later Works* (1925–1953).

Adjustment is different from “adaptation,” in that the idea of adaptation has become deeply associated with the biological world and survival pressures. It is about “re-integration upon the organic level.” The pressures leading to adjustment are not nearly as pressing as those rewarded by adaptation, which are survival pressures. The pressures leading to “adjustment” are in fact largely a matter of social (and even individual) directionality, and even if individual and group survival are implicated in adjustment, the idea is that adjustments are more within our use of intelligence than are biologically measurable adaptations. Every adaptation is an adjustment, since the social sphere envelops the biological sphere, and whatever falls beyond the social sphere can be called “chance,” but not every adjustment is an adaptation, in the biologically recognized sense. Adjustment is largely voluntary and the pressures leading to adjustment are often not recognized, or, if vaguely understood, not easily formulated into clear propositions. But when a problematic situation inspires inquiry, the success of that inquiry does lead to “belief or assertion” of solutions that *can* be formulated in warranted propositions.

*Settled* adjustment is what we have had in our educational systems, in developed countries, basically since the Second World War. The effort to spread education to developing countries has been focused on getting to those places what the developed world already had, in the way of institutions and practices. The educational norms we “settled” into during this period were heavily influenced by Dewey, but we went only part of the way toward the kind of educational system that he believed is needed to create democracy *as a way of life*. The practices of euro-centric modern democracy were not easily fitted to the traditions and practices of many non-developed settings around the world. The great flaw in the assumptions made by Deweyan exporters of educational practice and theory was that it would be suited to any setting and would lead the people toward “progress” as measured against a European standard of how people ought to live. The “re-integration” on the organic level is far from being achieved, since the settled adjustments were more bound to time, place, and particular cultures than the exporters realized. We ended up with half-adjustments scattered helter-skelter all over the world.

The settled situation (in the US, and eventually other developed countries) also began to stultify in the late 1960s in many places, especially in the US, as the progressive ideas and hopes for the children of the post-war boom in births came under the strain of Cold War fears and increasingly centralized political power. The education system(s) began to fail. The idea of “the public good,” and that education was a central part of that idea, had been shared by the generation who *led* the efforts in the Second World War (not the young people who fought, rather their officers and decision makers). That was Dewey’s generation, and their progress (and its discontents) were inherited by those younger people who actually did the fighting. But *their* children, the Baby Boom, who benefitted from this idea of the public good, failed to internalize it. They became selfish, privileged, ignored their communities, and did not want to pay taxes.

There was insufficient political will, from this generation, to maintain and to update the education system (along with the infrastructure, mass transportation, and a host of other public goods, such as libraries, public parks, intelligent city planning, and the list goes on). Instead they



built houses in the suburbs and built investment portfolios, electing anyone who would cut their taxes. I wish that I were speaking only of the US, but in fact this is the neo-liberal agenda that spread throughout the developed world, Blair to Berlusconi, Bush to Macron, imposing, country-by-country this free market fundamentalism (as Cornel West calls it) on every economy. The privatization of everything, including education, came along with the agenda.

This neoliberal nightmare,<sup>3</sup> then, was the backdrop for a “settled adjustment” as it grew outdated and non-functional. Some people refer to this backdrop as “late capitalism,” although that moniker seems overly hopeful as I see it. I see no real signs of anything ahead except more capitalism. One must work with its structures unless one aims at a revolution, which is not Dewey’s approach, in any case. There was a problem with education earlier, no doubt, but it was not the *shared* problem it now is. The wealthy and

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<sup>3</sup> See Barbara Stiegler, “*Il faut s'adapter*”: *Sur un nouvel impératif politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2019). Stiegler’s sense of the reflexive “s’adapter” is very close to what I mean by “adjustment” in this chapter. I was able to confirm this in conversation with her. She also wrote the very important tract, *De la démocratie en pandémie: santé, recherche, éducation* (Paris: Gallimard, 2021).

powerful had what they wanted by the end of the Cold War, and they had no intention of sharing the benefits of their wealth with anyone else. They preferred to put their money behind the police and the military to keep the rabble in line, in debt, or in prison. And, I would argue, no one was ever going to be able to *do* anything about this settled situation. Education was awful and no one could do anything about it, since the wealthy and powerful would not.

Then came the pandemic.

### **The Thesis**

I have described, I think, a problematic situation that was settled, chronic, and unsolvable in the terms of the culture and its so-called “democracy” in the 80s, 90s, and 2000s up until 2020. But, as Dewey said, we don’t so much solve philosophical problems as outgrow them. Many social problems are the same. This is to say that the norms governing the situation in education *as a whole* were entrenched and difficult to adjust. The pandemic changed the situation, opening paths for recasting the problem that *existed before*, but were not live options.

I will provide a broad discussion of the background of the crisis in education and the meaning of “democracy” from a Deweyan standpoint. This discussion involves a thorough examination of Dewey’s theories and some comparison between the experience of his time and our own. As the discussion proceeds, I will clarify the key terms and ideas that come from Dewey, and show how their meanings have changed but can still apply to our current problems. This, which is the longest part of this paper, will move all the way to the ontology of the “situation” for Dewey.<sup>4</sup>

From there I will pass to brief and fairly obvious discussions of the three norms I believe have undergone “adjustment.” Of these adjusted norms, first I will discuss the

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<sup>4</sup> Much has been written on the ontology of the situation in Dewey scholarship. For my part I am most in line with the recent work of Paul Cherlin, although he misses certain connections to process philosophy that would greatly improve the advances he has made in framing the ontology of the situation. Deweyans are not often talented at ontology (their principal concerns are more practical), and hence, much of what has been published is not very helpful. See Paul Cherlin, “The Metaphysical Grounding of Logical Operations: John Dewey’s Theory of Qualitative Continuity.” *Contemporary Pragmatism*, 17:4, (2020); and “John Dewey’s Theory of Emergence: Culture, Mind, Consciousness, and Cognition.” In *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture*, 4:3. <http://eidos.uw.edu.pl/john-deweys-theory-of-emergence/>.

re-invigoration of parental and family involvement in the education of children. Second, I will discuss the technological upgrade that is being carried out across the socio-economic spectrum. Third, I will discuss how this large public investment alters the basic financial relations associated with education, which affects communities beyond the domain of “education,” considered as a “primary institution” in a sense to be explained.<sup>5</sup> The point is that if one wishes to change a culture, one must change the way education is undertaken as a part of that culture. Changes can be introduced in other ways, of course, but those that are most within our control, intentional and planned, come from our design of educational practices and institutions.

Much of what I have to say applies to the situation across the world, but since my main experience is with the

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<sup>5</sup> The sense of the words “primary institutions” I use here is set out by Thomas O. Buford in his books, *Trust, Our Second Nature: Crisis, Reconciliation, and the Personal* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009); and *Know Thyself: An Essay in Social Personalism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011). I have summarized and criticized the approach in “Are Institutions Persons? Buford and the Primacy of the Social Order,” in *Persons, Institutions, and Trust: Essays in Honor of Thomas O. Buford* (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2018), pp. 127-133.

practices is in the US, I will take that point of view and leave it to readers to analogize what I say to their own local and national situations.

### **A Pause for the Cause**

The COVID-19 pandemic is of a sort that could have been foreseen, and indeed, it was anticipated by a few, if not by most. It is well understood that some nations were able to quash the illness effectively and fairly quickly, while the US (among other nations) struggled terribly with repeated spikes and outbreaks. In terms of its lethal consequences, no one can make light of the effects of the pandemic. With deaths exceeding six million worldwide as I write this, and cases exceeding 400 million, there can be no question of the magnitude of the disaster.

Yet, for comparison, the 1918-1919 influenza epidemic killed far more people worldwide (some 50 million). John Dewey lived through this terrible outbreak and had interestingly little to say about it, although he had much to say about the First World War, which, as bad as it was, killed fewer than half as many people. Historians have

noted that there was very little coverage of the flu pandemic in the press. Yet, its effects were in the neighborhood of ten times worse than our current pandemic, in raw numbers. The relative to percentage of the world population affected, almost unimaginably worse. Something about war seems to make disease seem more like a part of the natural course of events. War is our choice and so we feel we can stop it. Disease, especially back in that time, provides us with an opportunity to face our limitations in a less controlled fashion.

In the US, there were 675,000 deaths from the Spanish Flu in 1918-19, while the present pandemic has now exceeded that raw number (approaching a million as of February 2022), for us, the impact is comparable in some ways, but not in others. A death is a death, the loss of an irreplaceable life. Raw numbers do count. As with the rest of the world, in the US the Spanish Flu was barely even reported in the newspapers. There were no TV and radio reports, of course. COVID-19 has dominated our news in every possible medium. Our awareness of its ravages is many orders of magnitude greater than the pandemic from

Dewey's time. We have mobilized ourselves to try to stop COVID-19 far beyond the efforts made in 1918. Very little was done to fight the Spanish Flu. People just died. It was endured with stoic fortitude, as many epidemics before had been. People did not measure the economy down to the last detail as we do today, so there is not much way we can estimate the cost of closed businesses, and the like, but it must have been worse in 1918-19, since the proportion of people who were sick and who died, relative to the total population, was quite a bit higher.<sup>6</sup> Let us pause to consider it broadly.

There were 103.2 million people in the US in 1918; the flu killed .05% of the US population (many nations were more deeply affected). That is, by comparison, about twice as many deaths per capita as the current pandemic, as of fall 2021. There is considerable argument about the economic effects. The economy was not nearly as large in 1918, and

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<sup>6</sup> Here is a paper saying the economic damage was not that much: <https://voxeu.org/article/1918-influenza-did-not-kill-us-economy>, accessed May 31, 2021. Here is one that says it was devastating: <https://www.thinkadvisor.com/2020/04/01/the-1918-flu-pandemic-hit-gdp-hard-economists/>, accessed May 31, 2021.

the outside-the-home workforce did not include as many women then (so the public workforce was a smaller percentage of the total population, by a very great margin). The data for comparison for economic impact must be extrapolated and created, since the numbers we track now were not tracked then, and that process allows for a lot of manipulation. The differences in scale, however, are the main factors to consider. The current US population is well over three times what it was in 1918, and the cases and mortality rates were roughly two times higher then, *in raw numbers* in 1918. Of those, the persons struck down in 1918-19 were a vital part of the work force, since the flu took a far higher percentage of males in their prime, while COVID-19 preys on the old and infirm to a much greater degree. In short, the 1918-19 pandemic was far worse.

These proportions suggest that our responses to the two pandemics reflect greatly altered sensibilities. This can be seen as a good sign. Perhaps we take disease more seriously now, and are less defeatist in the presence of such a challenge. Perhaps we take human life and human death more seriously than our great-great grandparents did. I



think there is a good deal of evidence for that idea. The total amount of suffering and misery endured by the human race might have, in some sense, decreased. There can be very little question that education and upward economic mobility are both more widely available in the world now than back then. Just a historical pause for the cause.

### **Out-sourcing**

I think we have really changed. Our encounters with death are different from our predecessors, both for better and for worse. We now push death away from the personal and toward the institutional and professional “processes of death.” In 1918, almost everyone knew how to prepare a human body for burial; it was “family praxis,” passed down from back when we inhabited the savannahs of Africa. Now, only professionals know how to do this, and in many places, we are required *by law* to have this encounter with death “outsourced” to professionals.

*And the same thing has happened to education.* We do not, as a society, carry out this important social process in the home anymore. Obviously, some families have come to

believe that such outsourcing is not healthy for their children, and the failing schools have led to a growing homes-school alternative, especially among religiously ideological people.<sup>7</sup> I will address this later. But as a society, we still outsource our children for education with as little thought as we give to outsourcing our loved ones for burial preparations. We didn't know how to do it ourselves, so we let those who "know" take care of our social requirements.

It is worth pausing, I think, to consider how our total loss of family praxis regarding death is analogous to our very different responses to 1918 and 2020 in education as well. The earlier pandemic was worse, by a fair stretch. But people *knew* death then, intimately, in a way we don't now. One thinks of all those who died in this current pandemic *alone*, with family not allowed to be present. We don't prepare the body of the beloved for eternal rest, and we are not even with them as they lay dying. It feels very wrong. Should we not feel the same sort of vacancy when we ask

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<sup>7</sup> The current definitive history of homeschooling is James G. Dwyer and Shawn F. Peters, *Homeschooling: The History and Philosophy of a Controversial Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

Johnny or Jenny what they learned in school today? If not, why not? Do they not, in some sense, go to face what is ultimate utterly alone?

I therefore suggest that we have also lost family praxis with regard to education. Our children are sent to the educational institution as lone individuals, only returning to family at the end of the day. What do they *really* experience in between? Their parents don't know, the children don't really, *can't* really share it, except in outline over supper (if the family still has that ritual), and often not even then. The school buildings look like prisons and have become ever-present strangers inhabiting our neighborhoods, surrounded by massive fences and sometimes barbed wire. We don't know the inside and we don't want to. They are like so many funeral homes, except that the funeral home is in our future while the school building is in our past. We are glad we don't have to go back there, and we candy-coat the memories to ease the alienation we learned there. There is something *ultimate* in education, just as in death. You know it in your bones, so to speak. Should it be out-sourced?

### **Be Careful What You Wish For**

Yet, with all that has been disrupted from our developing practices, this pandemic could have been far worse. Many millions of jobs were partially or wholly preserved because they were, in an emergency, transferable from the usual workplace to the home. The technology that makes this transfer possible is relatively new –high-speed internet and reliable teleconferencing applications, at least in the parts of the world that can afford this technological infrastructure. Twenty years ago, the disaster would have been much worse, for everyone. Even prosperous nations still would not have possessed the resources to make the sudden transition, let alone to re-purpose manufacturing so quickly and to re-direct medical research to discovering a vaccine.

Perhaps you will infer that in another ten or twenty years, the effect would have been lessened for more nations. That may be true, but I doubt it. Had the pandemic come later, the effects might still have been similar to 2020, since the prosperous nations have never been inclined to make the investment in developing countries that would be necessary to widen the reach of the information age and its

technologies. It wasn't going to happen any time soon. I see no reason to think that conditions would be better in the developing world than they were in 2019 unless the pandemic had forced the development of technological infrastructure. Developed nations are selfish in this way, and would not help poorer countries unless it served self-interest. Technologically advanced countries lack the political and social will to make the transformation of this so-called "civilization," and its benefits, a general possession of humanity. Indeed, my thesis has much to do with the problem of political and social will.

To state the thesis bluntly, democracy, as John Dewey understood the term, did not become a way of life over the century that has passed since he most completely articulated that idea. Indeed, we humans were no closer to the ideal in 2019 than in 1916. Greedy neoliberal corporate capitalism, enforced by techno-militarism, is not Deweyan democracy. But due to the pandemic, *we are now* somewhat closer to what Dewey had in mind. If I believed in causation, I would call this pandemic the *cause* of our democratic improvement as a race. Since I don't believe in the idea of "causation"

(except as purpose-bound selective emphasis on various aspects of the past), but I do believe in the reality of “cause,” something one might serve loyally, I shall invoke the word: the common, shared “cause” of our progress recently, is the way the pandemic has obliged us to do what we would not have done without it. We have adjusted our norms in ways that bring the aim of democracy as a way of life somewhat closer. How much closer? I will conclude with some observations about that.

### **A Little Perspective**

This examination will be limited to the broad contribution of education to our common democratization. Clearly, however, another salutary effect of the pandemic has been to draw attention to the inadequacies of our healthcare infrastructure, and to motivate people to consider again the issue of access to healthcare for the least advantaged members of society. The protocols for the distribution of the vaccine and boosters, at public expense, were actually a step forward in our humanitarian quest –the vulnerable in the US (whether due to calling and vocation, or age and

infirmity) received help first. Astonishing. It is almost humane. Granted, the lies of politicians and pundits have retarded the efforts at vaccination, killing many thousands of people needlessly. Progress among humans always meets with resistance from the ignorant and easily frightened ones. But the effort to stop the dying was well-organized and fair, even if testing providers and big pharmaceutical corporations have, shall we understate, made a shameful profit.

Perhaps there will be at least some political and social will, now, to address these humanitarian issues that simply did not exist in many places before now, since there is some momentum for it. The Biden infrastructure bill, now being disbursed, is concrete evidence of that increase. Especially in the US. In our towns and cities, we became aware during the pandemic that, for example, a lot of our neighbors were hungry and near desperation, and we started to pay attention to feeding them with thousands of local programs, public and private. Yet, 25,000 people die of hunger every day worldwide, and at its worst, so far, COVID-19 deaths have topped out at 17,531 for one day (January 27, 2021),

being the worst day so far.<sup>8</sup> Typically, the rate is far lower. Our growing humanitarian consciousness has not quite rebalanced our priorities to the degree needed, since deaths from hunger seem not to rise to our consciousness and are far easier to prevent than COVID-19 deaths, food being more available than vaccines. Thus, as bad as the pandemic has been, it has awakened us to the task of re-arranging our priorities and making a start at tackling problems we let slide for far too long –even if that doesn’t quite include such preventable evils as world hunger. We still have a long way to go before we will be able to understand that hunger is worse than COVID-19 by a good bit. The worst day of COVID-19 doesn’t approach an average day for hunger. It’s always good to keep things in perspective.

### **A Massive Upheaval: A Problematic Situation**

I think that Dewey would be quick to recognize how this pandemic posed a *shared* “problematic situation,” more

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<sup>8</sup> See World-o-meters graphs: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/worldwide-graphs/> accessed February 16, 2022.



widely shared than any problem in our recent history (perhaps since the end of the Cold War, which was certainly everybody's problem). The technical meaning of a "situation" and a "problem" are much debated in the Deweyan scholarship, and I have had plenty of opportunity to express my own views on these matters in the past. In summary, a situation for Dewey does both practical and ontological work. It is the most basic temporal unit of "events" in his understanding of time. Situations are nested durational epochs that define experiences, both ones that include reflection, and unreflective aesthetic experiences. For my purposes, the durational epoch that is the pandemic "situation" is, as of now (late winter 2022), open-ended, but there is talk of a shift from epidemic to endemic, a problem we manage rather than one that manages us. The 1918-19 flu pandemic ended as the flu became endemic, gradually, over several years. Something similar will happen with COVID-19. Yes, it mutates, as the flu does, and we will probably have surges, but as vaccination practices "adjust," in the technical sense, we will be able to draw a line between

the pandemic and the endemic future of this situation.<sup>9</sup> It is fair to draw the line between pandemic and endemic as being different (if related) “situations.”

It is interesting, however, to notice that the 1918 pandemic seems not to have risen to the level of a wholly shared problematic situation in the same way our present pandemic has. Governments and science did not cooperate then as they have now, due to the war, and there is a very different communication and medical science situation. Our present day is less troubled and far more cooperative (as hard as that is to believe). But here is an eventuality upon which, I dare say, all Deweyans can agree: If this pandemic is not a “problematic situation,” what *is*? This one is exceptionally interesting for Deweyans precisely because of its reach, and the huge amount of inquiry it has begotten, which makes it a shared or common problem, requiring collective response on a scale we really haven’t seen before

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<sup>9</sup> A typical flu season will have a few hundred million cases and, in a bad year, leave 50,000 people dead. Currently that many people die every two weeks from COVID-19, so there is some distance between the two situations. My statistics come from: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_States\\_influenza\\_statistics\\_by\\_flu\\_season](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_influenza_statistics_by_flu_season), accessed February 16, 2022.

in human history. The scale of the cooperation is new –not of the problem, but of the extent to which the problem has been *cast* as a *problematic situation*.

The mark of this worldwide “casting” is seen in the amount of inquiry it has motivated. The Spanish Flu motivated very little inquiry by comparison. COVID-19 has been the motivating force of an unprecedented level of inquiry, and not just in the scientific community but in nearly every level of government, of business, of the arts and entertainment, and the list goes on. And much of that inquiry really has followed a Deweyan pattern –a democratized science, or, beyond science proper, what he called the “attitude” of science. The politicization of the science in the US has been the exception, not the rule, and it is surely due mainly to this foolish policy that cases and deaths in the US were far worse than they had to be. But interestingly, looking at deaths per million people, the nations that have fared the best are widely different in terms of democratic development. One finds fully developed democracies like New Zealand, far less democratic mega-states such as China, and less developed democracies such as

Laos and Tanzania doing better than other countries.<sup>10</sup> The presence of a pandemic, as with war and other catastrophes, is often better handled by more centralized governments than it can be by slow-moving Deweyan-style democracies.

Yet, there is worldwide *inquiry* being undertaken, much of it cooperative across nations that do not usually work together, and it has revitalized scientific communities, and other communities – education included – as a result. It is also clear that manufacturing and commercial industry has had an opportunity not seen since the Second World War to direct operations toward the needs of the public rather than to their mere desires for profit (although profit has certainly been available). Supply chains in food and housewares and over-the-counter medicine have been rethought, re-secured, and have even grown as we have turned our attention away from baubles and trinkets.

Some aspects of this transformation are temporary, and we shall surely slouch once more toward our

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<sup>10</sup> I draw these figures from Statistica:  
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1104709/coronavirus-deaths-worldwide-per-million-inhabitants/>, accessed August 21, 2021. One is not inclined to trust China's reporting.

consumerist Gomorrah soon enough. But some of what has happened in the commercial sector will last, and will provide an opportunity for furthering economic democracy. In the US there is finally legislation in many states to end the exception to minimum wage for wait-staff in the restaurant industry. We are so much more aware, these days, of economic vulnerability in certain sectors than we were before the pandemic – service workers, the “gig economy,” seasonal and tourist-related work, the travel industry, and so on. People see more clearly the importance of shopping locally, etc., and the food service industry will be altered in the US forever, since, for example, those who have been subjected to unfair wages in our “tipping” practices will, I think, be raised up permanently as a result of this problem. These are collective solutions to problems we did not fully acknowledge or define very clearly.

### **At Home**

But, moving closer to our main themes, families have been obliged to spend so much time together that real communication has become necessary. The family dinner

returned to households which had lost or never acquired the practice. Cooking had a new revival. Shared space in the home has had to be re-thought, and hundreds of millions of home improvement projects have been the result. The home has become a lived space, not a fragmented refuge. Many families, across the economic spectrum, took the money they would have spent on dining out and entertainment and travel, and used it to transform their homes. Childcare became a shared community exchange in many places, keeping extended families at closer reach and creating new community bonds among those with complementary needs and resources.

Something interesting has also occurred in public spaces, including those associated with education. We have become aware of how we *share* the air, physical surfaces, and really the world itself. That awareness is a welcome awakening to the obvious. And speaking of a shared world that is now in our consciousness and making its way into our consciences, the earth itself “took a breath” during this time. The reduced driving relieved the relentless press upon the earth, and very quickly nature began to repair itself, in

ways environmentalists have hoped, and now in ways they have been able to study. Where before there was speculation about how nature might repair itself if we would only let it breathe, now there is evidence.

The list goes on. But all of these responses to the problematic situation have drawn out our creativity.

### **The Down Side of the Up Side**

Yes, admittedly, domestic violence and murder went up, even while other violent and property crime went down. We are worried that our lack of actual social contact with neighbors and the cancellation of so many civic functions has impoverished our sense of living *with* our neighbors. The political upheavals of 2020, in the US especially, would not have been as they were except for the down side of the up side. We were restless, there was cabin fever. We were both too eager to get out, and not cautious enough when we did. Yet, we are perhaps too cautious of one another to be genuinely social, and we are not making new friends and acquaintances as we should. We spend too much time online; our news bubbles have become dangerous mental

prisons. If the pandemic went on long enough, I don't doubt that it would endanger our very sense of community, as a shared, organic, and potentially harmonious collection of "publics" (in Dewey's sense). But the vaccinations came along before that happened, for which we should thank not the divine, but the very human researchers who labored day and night, and the governments and private corporations who facilitated that labor. One might say that corporate greed, for once, worked. It's the up side of the down side of the up side.

And along those lines, in some places there has been a leadership crisis that brings profound and deep-seated divisions in a society to the surface. Those divisions already existed, but now are plain to see. Given that these divisions already existed and were not being addressed, it is not altogether bad that they have come to clarity in the public mind and the press. Racism, greed, self-interested politicians and demagogues, lying and incompetent leaders of all sorts, unreliable media, and the thin places in our social fabric are all on full display. But I think it is probably better to know the configurations and severity of our underlying



differences and weaknesses than to pass over them with the mere hope they will not destroy our peace and happiness (and with no plan for improving our deepest forms of hatred, greed, and incompetence).

Even the down side, then, has an up side. We know what, where, and who the problems are. And democracy, in Dewey's sense, is better for it. So it may be the right moment to recall some of Dewey's words about democracy in this sense.

### **Deweyan Democracy**

Dewey associated democracy with "society," in a special sense. He said:

Since democratic society repudiates the principle of external authority, it must find a substitution in *voluntary disposition of interest*; these can be created *only by education*. But there is a deeper explanation. A democracy is more than a form of government; it is

primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint, communicated experience.(MW 9, 93).<sup>11</sup>

He continues, adding the characteristics of “the widening of the area of shared concerns, and the liberation of a greater diversity of personal capacities.” This widening, he says, breaks down “the barriers of class, race, and national territory that kept men from perceiving the full import of their activities.”<sup>12</sup>

This brief passage describes democracy as a way of life, not merely as a political option from a wide field of such practices that will support political democracy. Only education can do this, he says. There is no other path. It is rare for Dewey to be so adamant and exclusive about paths to various ends, but in this case he is. Democracy as a way of life, and its political institutions, can be created *only* by education. Granted, communism, fascism, and anarchism

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<sup>11</sup> My italics. My attention was directed to this passage by Robert Fiedler.

<sup>12</sup> Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, MW 9:93.

can also be seen as ways of life, and they certainly have had their forms of education.

But it is interesting that, as Jacques Ellul pointed out, all of the modern forms of the state claim in some way to be democratic: “The fact that communist authoritarian regimes also have chosen democracy as the springboard of propaganda tends to prove its propagandistic value.”<sup>13</sup> One can call almost anything “democracy” and create a corresponding education system. Obviously Dewey has something more specific in mind, something that overcomes barriers of race and class and even nation by the expansion of the moral sphere. By these standards, we don’t currently have any Deweyan democracies in the world, but some places approach it more closely than others. The US is very far from the kind of expansion of its sphere of moral concern of the sort Dewey is describing, but part of the failure has been a refusal to acknowledge “shared concerns,” and this is the key factor undergoing “adjustment” during the pandemic.

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<sup>13</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, trans. K. Kellen and J. Lerner (New York: Knopf, 1972), p. 243.

### **Democratic Education as Inquiry**

As regards education, one must distinguish between teaching students *about* democracy (e.g., civics classes), teaching democratically as a method (the democratic habits and deportment of the teachers), and the relationship between democracy as a way of life and education as a necessity of democratic culture (including politics). It is the latter with which I am concerned here. One assumes that where the “mode of associated living” is thoroughly democratic, the problem of what and how to teach will be, if not solved, then well addressed as an on-going and open challenge.

I am not one of those who believes that democracy is the final end of all human social evolution, but only that it is, as Churchill reportedly said, the worst form of government on earth, except for all the others.<sup>14</sup> One can

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<sup>14</sup> Apparently what Churchill said, in context was: “Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried

teach people the principles of democracy in an utterly undemocratic way, just as one can teach totalitarian principles in a democratic way. And, as Ellul notes, one can teach “the myth of democracy” such that the lesson “in no way prepares its listeners for democracy but strengthens their totalitarian tendencies.” One might cite Donald Trump’s cult following as having embraced the myth of democracy with nothing whatsoever to make it democratic in Dewey’s sense above.

If we can agree that we are engaged in worldwide inquiry based on a shared problematic situation, and that this problem has expanded the sphere of our shared concern (which is what I hope to have accomplished thus far), then the question turns to inquiry, and to the idea of adjustment. Dewey says:

The structure and course of life-behavior has a definite pattern, spatial and temporal. This pattern definitely foreshadows the general pattern of inquiry.

For inquiry grows out of an earlier state of settled

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from time to time.” Addressing the House of Commons, November 11, 1947

adjustment, which, because of disturbance, is indeterminate or problematic (corresponding to the first phase of tensional activity), *and then passes into inquiry proper*, (corresponding to the searching and exploring activities of an organism); when the search is successful, belief or assertion is the counterpart, upon this level, of re-integration upon the organic level. (LW 12, 40)

So, successful inquiry ends in assertion (of a warranted type). Regarding this passage, Justin Bell says, “inquiry in Dewey’s sense is no cold deliberate calculation, but is rather a human organism’s holistic means to gain control over itself and parts of its environment. Inquiry does not occur in a vacuum, ignoring the emotional needs of the organism.”<sup>15</sup> Part of the reason that our pandemic of 2020-22 motivated worldwide inquiry is because our sense of life, our emotional connection to it, has changed since 1918. Is it too vague to say that our “sense of life,” perhaps even the “value

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<sup>15</sup> Bell, “Constraint, Moral Imagination, and Freedom,” doctoral dissertation, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2011, p. 78.

of life” has settled into a different adjustment since 1918? Perhaps, with some further qualification.

To connect this to the central tension of life, its precariousness, I think it is fair to say that we now have a “settled adjustment to life,” our “sense of life,” that treats it as less precarious, as more within our control than people did in 1918. I think they were more accepting of death, especially by disease, than we are. In short, we care differently and probably more than our great-great grandparents could afford to care. Too much was beyond their control. There was no penicillin, no polio vaccine, no public health policy, no regulations for clean air and water, very little to regulate the safety of the workplace, and the list goes on. In 1918, no one knew that the flu was a virus, and the idea of a vaccine never crossed their minds. Most people date the development of these changes from the Progressive Era, and Dewey was one of the most prominent forces behind it.

In short, I am suggesting that the program of inquiry initiated by Dewey and his progressive allies *worked*. Slowly, painfully, democracy as a way of life has spread throughout

the world. The cost in fighting totalitarian and authoritarian life has been very, very high. But today it is not easy to imagine the Germans or Japanese ever becoming undemocratic, even if the Russians and Chinese present a different story. That development is still underway, but almost every nation in the world either is or has been in its recent history, some sort of democratic republic. We have adjusted, even if we are still adjusting.

Regarding the latter, Bell says:

The project of remaining capable inquirers is ongoing and requires continual re-creation and adjustment to keep constrained imagination from devolving into restrained imagination. Thus, people are never unencumbered in an original state and are also always social in their continual, lifelong development.<sup>16</sup>

Constraint, Bell argues, is a condition of excellent inquiry, but restraint is the encroaching norm of “settled adjustment”

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 186.



that has become a drag on imagination. It seems that such education as we are advocating here is a lifelong project and its end or aim is to make us always better inquirers. Meanwhile, the critique is aimed at settled educational practices. From this we may infer that education for democracy as a way of life means producing better inquirers in every generation, and we cannot afford to restrain imagination. Have we done these things since Dewey's time? And does the present both reflect that achievement and promise more in the future? I think the answer is definitely yes. Let us examine the specific adjustments, in outline, and then conclude with some reflections on the future of education as a practical plan, based on gains made during the pandemic.

### **Norms: The Inertia of Habit and Custom**

Having discussed "adjustment," I need to say a word about "norms," our other key term. When we think of the differences between the sort of educational praxis that develops *personality* (the "greater diversity of personal capacities" Dewey mentions in the passage above), and leads

to democratic habits (as we might aptly term the “settled adjustments” we have discussed, but not yet stultified, rather as dynamic and functional), we can frame some ideal norms that take in what we would like to accomplish for individuals and for the democratic society through education. These ideal norms will stand in contrast to present practices that could be improved, if we both understood how to improve them and had the collective will to do so. Entrenched interests from whoever is being well-served or at least not too badly served provide a kind of inertia that prevents or slows needed change. People with new ideas are shunted aside by the workings of habit and custom.

Dewey’s critique of habit, indebted to Peirce, James, and a number of other thinkers, especially the psychologists of his generation, is most fully articulated in *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922). Along with James H. Tufts, Dewey takes on the problem of custom in the 1908 and 1932 *Ethics*. Generally speaking, it is these works I am drawing on for my summary. Dewey sees custom as a problem, settled adjustments that have long ago lost their vitality and

generative reasons. For the most part customs “work,” in the sense of heading off some kinds of problems, but they do so at the cost of maximum inquiry.

Such a problem as is posed by “customs” finds some resolution through the development of law (in the modern sense), which forces public reflection upon custom and helps it to find its proper level of application. In a homogeneous social group, the laws may be relatively unreflective, being not much more than a formalization in language of the group’s *sensus communus*. But in complex, pluralistic, modern societies, the process of reflection upon custom must operate at a higher level of generality, seeking to be permissive of differences in observed praxis while excluding forms of praxis that tend to the detriment of harmony and progress for communities and larger forms of association (such as counties, states, and nations). We see modern law and earlier custom coming into conflict, as, for example, in resistance to lock downs and mask mandates. People in the US are not accustomed to being told what to do at the level of personal attire, and are not easily adjusted to great restrictions on their movements and associations.

It is not easy to frame laws that include what is vital in custom and habit while excluding what is detrimental to the whole society. Public health seems to require new rules, and that they be kept. Our settled customs do not easily accommodate these new rules. Customs become customs precisely because they tend toward the conservation of groups that do not necessarily look to be integrated with other larger groups. In short, such conservation is the dominant norm that custom upholds, and individual and small group habits are normed in accordance with their power to promote the customs from which they descend. The individual and communal imagination, therefore, forms around the norm of conservation of the group. It can be very limiting. But, as I cited from Dewey earlier: “Since democratic society repudiates the principle of external authority, it must find a substitution in *voluntary disposition of interest*; these can be created *only by education*.” We repudiate external authority precisely *because* of our democratic customs, as Jefferson called them, the “habits of liberty.”

It is no accident that much of the conflict among these sets of norms, customary and ideal (as motivated by the goal of public health) have come to be focused on the public schools and what the rules (even the laws) will require in this instance of pandemic. Vaccination mandates are nothing new, having been required for all school children for several generations. But COVID-19 has the interesting characteristic of placing children and young people in a low-risk category – the opposite of the usual cases where children have greater risk. Thus, a new and difficult discussion has occurred surrounding what is owed to teachers and staff who run greater risks precisely because children can be carriers who don't get sick. The solution in the short term was generally to hold school online and at a distance. That solution has had numerous positive effects on education overall (as I will discuss shortly), but it is not seen as a long-term option. Perhaps it should be part of our long-term thinking. When we change our habits, our customs slowly follow.

The conservative power of habit and custom are not to be wholly despised, of course, but where they prevent

change to systems of practice that may have been serviceable enough in the past, but no longer serve, then habit and custom must be challenged. Plenty of people, individually and in groups, have both challenged this inertial power and have experimented with new and different praxis during the pandemic. But to change anything on a grand scale requires a problem that binds people to itself and to each other, and which presses upon them the urgency of collective, creative inquiry. The pandemic has done this, and it is a moment we should seize before the opportunity for creative adjustment passes. Let us examine the disruption of habits and how this process has begun to alter what had become customary in public education. There is an analogue associated with private education, but I will set that aside as being more or less obvious to anyone who wants to make analogies from my discussion of public education.

### **The First Norm: Parental Involvement**

Something that was not obvious to me until the pandemic occurred was that we had developed a custom of farming out our children to “specialists,” educational “professionals,”

where they were spending most of the day in the hands of experts (supposedly) who would see to their education. Even though (and perhaps because) this was my own experience, it never occurred to me to question whether this was the best we can do. This was so “normal” that it never occurred to me it even was a “custom.” Yet, for my entire life I have heard people associated with professional education say (and often complainingly) that the single biggest problem and the key factor in successful early education was in getting the active participation of parents and families in the education of the children. The teachers knew they could not do this job alone. It just isn’t wise to leave the whole process to “the experts.” What the experts are doing has to be reinforced by encouragement and actual help at home.

In spite of our widespread recognition of the importance of this cooperation between professional educators and families, it had already become customary when I was going through school (1960s-70s) to formalize this kind of contact – there were parent-teacher conferences, the Parent-Teacher Association, and the dubious institution of the “report card.” This latter rather

pernicious form of communication reduced the learning process to a series of marks in various subjects, and including an evaluation of the behavior of the child. Predictably, these customs came to form a kind of consciousness among all involved that led to an escalating emphasis upon the *signs* of the educational process rather than the process itself.

Sometimes the pressure to get the best “sign” was just carrot and stick: I received \$5 for every A, nothing for a B, and there could be punishment, like being grounded, for a D or F. I knew kids who were whipped for getting C’s. But “grade consciousness” spread and spread until it became a cultural pathology, due to the various doors that opened or closed depending on grade point average. Apparently the problem is even worse in other countries, such as Japan. This almost perverse substitution of the sign for the process led to a testing culture in which the achievement of the signs became the end and purpose of the process, rather than merely a sign of progress. Eventually education came to be formed almost wholly around these abstractions, robbing teachers of the autonomy to address their pupils according



to individual insight into their needs, since they had to “teach to the test.”

Like most people, I knew all of this while I was going through it, vaguely and in dissociated parts, and then more or less just accepted it during my adult life, before the pandemic. But now I have, from need, adjusted, in practice and idea, and I encourage others to do so. I now see the custom of farming children out to experts as a *contingent* practice. We don't have to do it in the way that has become customary. If every home has a space for learning, a high-speed internet connection, and at least one involved parent or guardian, the amount of “farming out” need not be *as great a portion* of educating our children as it has been in the past.

The pandemic created the political and household will to provide the space for learning in the home and to secure the electronic infrastructure for the needed technology (the Biden infrastructure bill is, one would hope, only the beginning). States, municipalities, local and other service providers, school boards, and finally the federal government mobilized their resources to help the under-

served populations. Bringing high-speed internet to everyone in the US, on the New Deal model of the REA (Rural Electrification Administration) did the same with electricity between 1935 and 1980 as the new plan will do with high-speed internet, and far more quickly, I expect. That kind of investment would never have happened without the pandemic. More on this shortly.

But the other side of that investment depends on what we *do* with the technology, whether we seize the opportunity it provides to solve, finally, the problem of parental involvement. Parental involvement became increasingly irrelevant in our past settled adjustment, as the leveling effects of this complex of customs took hold of the entire process. Funded and unfunded mandates from the government placed upon school boards, administrators, and ultimately teachers a great pressure to conform to standards far too removed from the real classroom to address the way that the culture and the children themselves were changing. Education became increasingly disconnected from both the culture and the family. The sins inflicted on children by these amalgamated customs equal or surpass those of the

traditional (rote memorizing) education Dewey criticized as he attempted to form an alternative. It is time to reform the reforms. One can point to the shocking college admission scandal of the recent past, for which several celebrities in the US ended up serving time for fraud, committed on behalf of their children, as they sought to gain admission to several different elite universities. This is the rotten fruit of the testing tree. We can do better.

### **Two Surprises**

The surprise that awaited us all when COVID-19 arrived on the scene was threefold, in outline at least. I will cover two of these in this section briefly, and close this effort with a more detailed examination of a third surprise that poses a truly difficult challenge.

The first is that parents, of necessity, became directly involved in the education of their children. They weren't prepared and often weren't happy about changing their habits. It was made necessary by the fact that the pandemic required children to finish the 2019 school year from home, and that it continued through 2020 and into 2021. That was

long enough to create new habits. This was initially a scramble because parents had obviously arranged their work-lives such that the schools did the babysitting as well as the educating. Suddenly someone had to be home with the younger children and had to help them get connected with their teachers and school. The situation was certainly a hardship, especially for those single parents who had very few options for making the adjustment. Yet, as time passed, people helped each other, schools were flexible about getting the job done.

We were aware that parents had no idea how to help the children with their lessons. They are not trained teachers. They are often twenty or more years removed from their own schooling. Their memory of what they learned is vague, and of course there is much to learn that would not have been a part of the standard education from two or more decades back. That disconnect probably isn't good for a culture or a democracy. Yet, in order to meet the challenge, parents basically had to go back to school themselves. That can be, and so far has been, a very good thing. Parents with multiple children are having to learn

multiple grades and their content at the same time. Older children have been drawn into helping younger children. The gradual effect of the problematic situation has been not only the constant involvement of parents in the education, but the creation of an entire generations of parents who actually know what their children are learning. That cannot possibly be a bad thing.

These new habits must be encouraged and maintained. We must arrange for schooling after the pandemic to be carried out, in part, remotely, from the home, with the parents. The motive would no longer be public health, it is the public good. This level of involvement would never have come into existence voluntarily, but it must now be maintained voluntarily. As Dewey said, we “must find a substitution” for external authority “in *voluntary disposition of interest*.” Today’s parents are already doing something we have been wishing for all along. We must convince them of the wisdom of maintaining it. The dispositions, Dewey says, “can be created *only by education*.” In other words, we must maintain this new norm

voluntarily until the children now being educated under it have become parents. We must make it the new “normal.”

A second surprise was that, due to the home-schooling movement, in the US at least, which has been spurred both by the failure of confidence in the public education system and the chronic argument over the relation between church and state, the materials and networks and much of the experimentation already existed in the US. The public (non-religious) *standards* for such schooling were *already in place*. There was no need to develop, suddenly, a set of common guidelines and standards. Parents and other responsible adults have been in a position to choose, recently, how much of their children’s education they can be responsible for, and a wide array of training for home teaching is available, both in print and in free video instruction.

That is not to say that we don’t need to do more to develop this aspect of our common education, but only to point out that when it was suddenly needed, the main solutions were already in place in the US. I doubt that home-schooling is as common in other countries, but in this case

the widespread difficulties with public education in the US, especially failing inner city schools, had already given rise to many alternatives and creative solutions. Perhaps for other countries where home-schooling is unknown, the struggle to adjust was greater. But now the challenge is to make this home-supported aspect of public institution into a custom. As with the first point, the process has to be voluntary, and so we can raise consciousness as to its importance and do our best to insure that the parents who are becoming involved pass this practice to the next generation.

### **The Third Surprise**

A third surprise provides also the greatest challenge but perhaps also the best opportunity. Getting the technology to the homes that did not have it caused a rather sudden re-organization of financial priorities. It probably never could have happened without the pandemic. School boards, administrators, teachers, and communities have been having the same budgetary arguments for many decades, and the federal government has been a hindrance rather than a help in the US. Left behind in this entrenched

struggle for resources has been, in most places, truly upgrading the technology needed to send high school graduates into the world technologically literate. Only wealthy school districts and private schools could do it.

Yet, something happened over the last twenty years that changed the financial situation. Where once technological resources tended to be the centralized possession of institutions and large businesses, increasingly the distribution of these resources, as prices came down, has come to be the possession of the individual household. At first only the affluent could afford the newest technologies, then the middle class followed, and the working class, and single parents came along more slowly. But by the time the pandemic arrived, the main households lacking these important resources were the working poor, some inner-city neighborhoods, and rural communities that lacked the resources to bring the technology to households, and even they had smart phones. This situation has changed and will continue to change, as I have noted. I have noticed that my own students who come from the tougher neighborhoods of Chicago use their cell phones as computers. It isn't ideal,



but it isn't nothing. One could say the free market provided this decentralization, and if so, then let it be granted that free markets can do some good in the world, even if they usually serve only greed and profit.

But what few people have noticed is that this process has broken up the entrenched battle-lines when it came to funding the schools. The infusions of funding from states, municipalities, school boards, counties, and even the federal government have come in new (and vast) pools that no one is especially tasked with overseeing. Because of the urgency of the situation, corruption has probably been minimal. People got what they needed wherever it could be had. There was unusual cooperation between business and the public, and even with individual households. The entrenched sides cooperated too – teachers unions, school boards, administrators, and parents all agreed on something (that the children must have school, somehow), and now, since the technology is largely in place, and will improve, it remains to be seen how this decentralized immediate situation may affect the way school funding occurs. I have

to take a few paragraphs to explain, for readers of this book who are not from the US, how funding has been done here.

### **The Property Tax Dilemma**

In the US, education is locally controlled and funded mainly by property taxes within the districts where the schools are organized. These funds are supplemented by state and federal government in very complex ways. The good side of having public education funded by property taxes is that it ensures local control over the schools. I think local control is essential, and I think this may be an uncommon view considered in a global context. Ideally, however, I think that the populace of a given place is likely to be involved personally with its children and to tend to their futures in ways that remote and massive government bureaucracies cannot. Local control of education is, I think, in agreement with Dewey, crucial to a democracy. Most countries don't have it, and they should change. When helping to construct a modern education system in Turkey, Dewey insisted on local control of the schools. It gives communities a real investment in democratic process, and important practice in

making these decisions. The school board itself becomes an incubator of community and higher leadership. It obliges communities to meet together and to solve their shared problems in a context that matters to them personally, namely, the welfare and future of their own children. Local control of education is democracy in seed. Dewey always favored the New England “town meeting” as a model for democracy, and the local school board is very similar.

But local control has been eroded by funded and unfunded mandates from the state and federal governments, and due to an unfortunate history with white supremacy, it has been impossible to allow local control to remain unsupervised. The reason the federal government became so deeply involved in education in this way was due to our refusal to bring equal educational opportunity to African American children and to the poor. If we had done this voluntarily, the federal government would not be involved today. As Dewey says, democracy depends on people being willing to do *voluntarily* what more centralized governments compel in their populace. To refuse equal opportunity to some citizens is undemocratic behavior, which comes from

ignorance, a failure of education. It is difficult to compel democratic behavior. It must be encouraged by and through education.

The US Supreme Court said in 1954 that a segregated education system is inherently unequal (which is surely true, given long-term economic disparity and the practice of funding schools from property taxes). Local communities refused to obey the courts. Counties, municipalities, and whole states refused. This refusal eroded local control, since the racism being locally enforced was unacceptable to the courts and to the executive branch of the US government. Eventually the legislative branch also outlawed this kind of discrimination, but local government still refused to comply. The result was increasing centralization of education. The federal government has since used a carrot-and-stick method, not unlike the report card system, to compel local governments to move toward equal opportunity in education. It doesn't work. Here is why.

If the federal government dangles billions in funding in front of the states in exchange for conformity with certain standards set by the federal government, then states behave

as if this pot of cash relieves them of *their* responsibility to educate their own people in their way, and from their resources. Federal money meant a tax break at the state level. The states became administrators of federal money and enforcers of federal policy. Local control has been strangled on the one hand and bribed into conformity on the other by hundreds of distribution formulas, depending on how well they meet certain mandates and achievement standards.

The result is McSchools – schools on the assembly line model of McDonald’s restaurants. But no one *cares* about McSchools or feels ownership for the results. They cook little macs into bigger macs that merely conform to health department and standardized test requirements. It seems preferable to widespread racism, but that hasn’t abated and communities find ways to re-draw the color line constantly – if only this deviant creativity were directed to something constructive. It goes without saying that underperforming McSchools have problems with employee turnover, working conditions, and educational nourishment of the customers. The children are fed the

most generic McCarbohydrates and McSugars and arrive in the world educationally McDiabetic.

The situation has diminished teacher autonomy and ignores individual differences in communities. The McSchool deprives communities of a sense of pride and aspiration in their own schools and levels everything out into un-special sauce. Students become mystery meat, ground up into test-taking machines, or left behind on the floor as scraps by that process. Alienation rules. The whole up-side of having schools funded by property taxes (local control and its democratic benefits) is neutralized and even eliminated. And the problem, that the poor schools remain poor, gets worse because the property taxes create less revenue in poor neighborhoods, while the rich neighborhoods are richer; this still isn't addressed.

Clearly this approach doesn't work. You get a dirty unsafe McDonald's in your poor neighborhood, and a clean safe McDonald's in your affluent neighborhood, and nothing is worth eating at either place. Raise your children on this fare and you get malnourished children. Pooling property taxes and re-distributing the wealth alienates the

middle class without doing much to address the cultural sources of poverty. People see it as coercion and refuse to invest their energies and hopes in the education being undertaken in their own neighborhood. It becomes a disincentive for both poor and wealthy schools to become something unto themselves, have their own character, aspirations, and room for creative practice.

I believe the problem of making schools generic is a problem in many developed countries. But most would not have the entrenched financial arguments that are suffered in the US, especially due to the inability of the US to face its own racism in some honest way. I think most other countries centralized control of their schools without considering the benefits of local control. It should be rethought, especially now. So that is a brief overview of the US version of the problem. But it has been suddenly altered by the pandemic.

### **What to Do?**

The first challenging thing is that the entrenched sides must recognize and seize this altered moment and seek ways to avoid slipping back into the way things were before the pandemic. Right now, most everyone is putting the children first, for a change, and everyone is in the mood to look at new ways of doing things. If we allow this moment to pass without re-configuring the old formulas and mandates, we will not have gained what is available to us from this historical moment. We must re-think how we fund and carry out education, from the role of the state and federal governments, all the way through the school board, the administrators, and teachers. These jobs must be re-defined.

This is a huge challenge, but I will conclude with just one suggestion that could affect the funding picture, and also serve the goals I have explained earlier in this paper – that the parents remain involved, that a part of our standard habits include home schooling, and that we cease treating education as outsourced baby-sitting with benefits.



My suggestion is school partnering, in triads.<sup>17</sup> It is done in some places already, normally pairing schools, but I don't think that is the best idea. Dyadic relations are unstable. So let me expand what is normally done, and suggest some new norms. Partnering can begin now, in pre-school, so this plan could be implemented over the course of fifteen years and need not disrupt the path of current students. Voluntarism about the current adjustments need only hold for those students who have already adapted to it.

But in my way of thinking, every wealthy school should be paired with one troubled school (underfunded), and one middling or ordinary school, and these triads should be geographically proximate, close enough for active exchange. Each school should be the locus of certain desirable programs —music, art, sports, vocational ed., etc., and the resources should be assigned according to what is needed to have excellent programs of the sort chosen by the joint board of the three schools.

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<sup>17</sup> This idea is an application of Royce's idea of the "community of interpretation," adapted in triads from Peirce's semiotics. See Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1913), especially volume 2.

Most importantly, in the US, the triad of schools should have only one sports program, although the various teams (football, basketball, softball, golf, etc.) should be located in different campuses. This plan prevents the duplication of expense in having, for example, a football team at all three schools. It will build tri-school spirit and solidarity, over time, lead to better cultural understanding across race and class, and it will bring interest into the struggling community from the more affluent communities—a sense of common needs and goals. This kind of partnering will lead, in time, to investment in marginal neighborhoods by wealthier neighborhoods, as the communities become intertwined and not as isolated from one another. The children will form friendships across the usual boundaries that will, in time, become partnerships in business, community leadership, and will engender trust where it is now wholly absent.

Pooling resources will make it possible to bring back special programs that have been discontinued in poorer schools due to lack of funding. New faculty should be hired into the threefold school group with the understanding that

they may move among the three schools as need requires in the course of a day, or a week, or by online meetings, and so forth. As the programs grow, faculties in various subjects and disciplines can function more autonomously to set and to achieve goals for their triad. Teachers should be encouraged to innovate in their classes, not conform.

Existing faculty could sign on voluntarily for the threefold arrangement or finish their careers under their current arrangements, but should be incentivized, financially, to join the new program as the first group of tri-students comes into their grade levels. This will tend to disincentivize the entrenched part of union-administrator-school board warfare. If pay and working conditions are negotiated for the whole triad, the envy, resentment, and despair that faculty currently experience will be abated. If a teacher has a tough group of kids and a difficult class, that doesn't have to continue every day, or year after year. This arrangement would also prevent school boards in affluent districts from being overly protective of their privilege.

Should such an arrangement be mandated? Probably not, since that is undemocratic and would breed resentment.

Rather, governments (county, state, municipal, and federal) should form “coalitions of the willing.” Surely there must be at least a few unselfish affluent schools in the US. Mandates and compelled action from above have never worked in the US. There is no reason to think this plan would be an exception to the failures of the past. The most one could hope for is to incentivize such a program so enticingly as to create willing and even enthusiasm on the part of the parents, teachers, and administrators.

One might ask “how would such enthusiasm be generated?” I have an idea. If the triad program came with the commitment on the part of government to funding entirely new athletic facilities in all three schools, to accommodate the teams the three schools would field together as a triad, plus the construction of new theater, art, and music facilities, that incentive might be enough to generate serious discussion among communities to form their own triads. The promise of state-of-the-art technology infrastructure for both the community as well as the school, and specialized programs for triads that qualify might be added. These specialized programs could include evening

and adult education, and local community colleges and other institutions could become partners in continuing education and self-enrichment programs held in the nice, updated school. It is important that the community comes to the schools, sees first-hand what is happening, knows the inside of the buildings. If such a plan were followed, whole educational systems could rebuild their aging (even crumbling) facilities while addressing certain social problems.

In short, we can use education to create economically integrated communities, save money and reduce duplication, have better programs, enhance local control and involvement, restore teacher autonomy, create community pride, and balance educational opportunities for those who have less. We can do all of this and run things on the basis of the property tax system, and over time, tax revenues will increase as the struggling communities gradually do better. There is no need to raise anyone's taxes to implement a system like this. Oh, and this plan would cut administrative costs by eliminating duplicative positions and effort. And this plan may retain the better teachers, so

many of whom leave education for less difficult careers in business or service industries. It may also make possible a more professionalized guidance and psychological/physical health division.

In conclusion, my point is that all over the world we stand at a moment which Dewey might call the “teachable moment.” Our old settled adjustment and norms have been disrupted, which involved some suffering for all, but we do not have to go back to the way things were. We can move into a more intelligent future, recognizing that the changes we have already made place us within reach of changes we have long needed, but have had neither the will nor the means to make them. I cannot help believing that the adjusted norms I describe are both practical and desirable. If only there was a secret to creating the voluntary cooperation that must accompany democracy as a way of life. Education is the only way, Dewey says, but that takes a generation or two. We have to be willing to envision it, and then grow into it.