

The Teacher as Investigator: Improving the Education of Migrant Students

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The problem of migration in our world is very complex. The ebbs and flows of migration constitute one of the many emergencies in our global and digital society. In this paper, I will try to analyze the scientific role of the teacher in a democratic school, according to John Dewey's educational theory, in relation to the increased presence of new migrant students in the contemporary school.

Keywords: Teacher as Investigator; Democratic School; Intercultural Education
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Introduction

One aspect of a democratic school is the scientific dimension of the cultural and didactic role of the teacher. In John Dewey's educational theory this problem is present, because in the Laboratory School in Chicago he experimented with the scientific method of the laboratory as connected to the educational ideal to build democracy.¹

In fact, the teacher is a "prophet" who realizes their role through an experimental method in the "laboratory school." The laboratory school is an expression of the experimental method in education.² In other words, the teacher must be involved in the religious, ethical, and scientific actions within the school linked to their scientific approach.³ Furthermore, the teacher is the most important protagonist in the relationship between democracy and education. "Philosophy is a general theory of education," because in the school the teacher can organize the different possibilities of each student to develop their *embedded powers*, planning and building democracy in the school and in the society.⁴

In this cultural perspective, Dewey clarifies the meaning of the teacher as investigator in *The Sources of a Science of Education* (1929),⁵ a brief and fundamental book, conceived in the year of the philosopher's retirement and in the same year of the second edition of *Experience and Nature*. This model provides important insight for democratic education to consider as it seeks to understand the meaning of intercultural education, especially for migrant/immigrant students,⁶ who are

¹ For more, see Giuseppe Spadafora, *L'educazione per la democrazia. Studi su John Dewey* (Rome: Anicia, 2015); Maura Striano, *Per una teoria educativa dell'indagine. Riflessioni pedagogiche sulla Logica di John Dewey* (Lecce, Italy: PensaMultimedia, 2015); Leonard J. Waks, *Education 2.0: The LearningWeb Revolution and the Transformation of the School* (London: Routledge, 2015).

² See John Dewey, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1990), EW 5: 54-83 and MW 1; Katherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards, *The Dewey School: The Laboratory School of University of Chicago, 1896-1903* (Atherton Press: New York, 1965).

³ See Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁴ Leonard J. Waks and Andrea R. English, eds., *John Dewey, Democracy and Education: A Centennial Handbook* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Giuseppe Spadafora, ed., *John Dewey, Democrazia e educazione* (Rome: Anicia, 2018).

⁵ LW 5: 1-40.

⁶ Hereinafter, migrant will be used to cover both temporary and permanent immigrants.

currently at the center of a debate in Italy about inclusive schooling.

1. *The Sources of a Science of Education: Science, Education, Democracy*

To understand the relation between science and democracy, Dewey's book *The Sources of a Science of Education* is fundamental. This book has been extremely successful in Italy. In particular, it has been so due to the interpretation of Aldo Visalberghi, who considered this cultural proposal central for establishing teacher training courses in Italian universities.⁷ In fact, in *Deweyan Thought* this text represents a turning point, since in the year in which Dewey retired, 1929, the philosopher published a new edition of the book *Experience and Nature* with a completely new introduction on the importance of the empirical method in philosophical research.⁸

In the same year, he published the short but meaningful text on the *Sources of a Sciences of Education* and in 1930 his brief autobiography *From Absolutism to Experimentalism*. In the *Introduction* to the second edition of *Experience and Nature* (1929), it is clear that empirical research must be oriented towards the construction of a scientific method also extended to philosophy. In fact, Dewey's proposal is the construction of an empirical method which can be applied to science and also to philosophy. Only in this way can experience, which is the center of human activity, be oriented towards the values of democracy and the common good.

In this perspective, the difficulty of establishing a science of education – which is a very complex unsolved question even for important authors of the past such as Durkheim and Piaget, for example – reveals a broader question about the meaning of science.

A science of education is difficult to be defined epistemologically because it is very complex to check and foresee the effect of educational “facts” and methods applied to the behavior of an individual during their whole life. Because of this aspect, a science of education presents three fundamental characteristics:

- First, it must solve educational problems in the specific context in which educational events come to be, especially in the educative relationship between the teacher and the student.

⁷ Aldo Visalberghi, with Roberto Maragliano and Benedetto Vertecchi, *Pedagogia e Scienze dell'educazione* (Milan: Mondadori, 1978).

⁸ LW 1.

- Secondly, a science of education must be considered not only a unique science, but, overall, an interdisciplinary synthesis of different sciences, which consider the specific aspects of education, such as psychology, sociology, psychiatry, biology and so on.
- Thirdly, a science of education should realize its goals in practical acts, through the teacher's didactic action: between their creative insight and the application of the different sources of a science of education to solve the learning problems of each individual student.

In other words, to construct a scientific model of a science of education, it is necessary to analyze the educational problems from different sources, from specific and different research perspectives. Psychology, sociology, biology, philosophy, psychiatry, all examine educational issues from their specific perspectives, but *they become a science of education when they are applied during the teacher's activity to the student's specific learning problems*. The teacher is considered by Dewey an *investigator*. In other words, they are a scientist who is capable of understanding different aspects of a science of education, can apply them to solve learning problems, and understand deeply the personality of each student in the classroom.

This metaphor of science, represented by the model of the teacher as *investigator*, is closely linked to the professional work of a doctor, who applies the network of his knowledge and medical skills to the patient in order to give a diagnosis and a tailored therapy. Medical science, legal science, and engineering science depend on the application of different sciences by professional workers to develop specific tasks in these three different fields. They represent a network of sciences, like the sciences of education, a corpus of knowledges which become medicine, law, and engineering only when they are applied to solving specific problems.

In this essay, Dewey wants to represent the generalized characteristic of a science. In fact, science is made up in an epistemological perspective of different sources in an interdisciplinary way. According to the model of "productive pragmatism," science must solve problems: it represents *the method of intelligence*; the practical application very often is "wider than science," which means that practical action could give

unforeseen solutions to solve a possible problem through the model of the inquiry.⁹

From this perspective, it would seem that the enigma of a science of education has been solved by Dewey's proposal. In fact, a science of education would be the synthesis of the various sciences of education applied to solve specific learning problems. This is a good explanation of the meaning of science, which justifies the complete passage from *Absolutism to Experimentalism* found in Dewey's professional life.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the final conclusion of the book seems to contradict the solution to the problem. In fact, "the sources of educational science are any portions of ascertained knowledge that enter into the heart, head, and hands of educators. But there is no way to discover what is 'more truly educational' except by the continuation of the educational act itself."¹¹ Education is a process, which generates the values from itself. Thus, it is very difficult to check an educational process. Education is considered by Dewey an *endless circle or a spiral*, and therefore, it is very difficult to measure it. "It is an activity which *includes* science within itself. In its very process it sets more problems to be further studied, which then react into the educative process to change it still further, and thus demand more thought, more science, and so on, in everlasting sequence"¹²

A science of education, therefore, cannot be clearly established since science is included in the educational process. Hence, education in the general conclusion of *The Sources of a Science of Education* is considered a guide for the action of science in society. Education is the spirit of the scientific process to enlighten human experience, to help every individual to find the meaning of their own existence.

In this perspective, the school develops ever more as a scientific laboratory of democracy, and the teacher is considered an *investigator*, who helps each student to develop their embedded powers.

⁹ See Jim Garrison, Larry A. Hickman, and Daisaku Ikeda, *Living as Learning: John Dewey in the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: Dialogue Path Press, 2014).

¹⁰ See Neil Coughlan, *Young John Dewey: An Essay in American Intellectual History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975); Teodora Pezzano, *Le radici dell'educazione. La teoria dell'esperienza in John Dewey* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2017).

¹¹ LW 5: 39.

¹² Ibid., 40.

2. The Teacher as Investigator Improving Democracy in Our Complex Times

The meaning of this book is the application of science to solve human problems, which necessarily needs education to be modified. A central feature of this application is the role of the teacher in the democratic school.¹³

The teacher must have a scientific aptitude, and this represents, in fact, a human tool that permits the application of the method of intelligence to improve the democratic school.

For these teachers are the ones in direct contact with pupils and hence the ones to whom the results of scientific findings finally reach students. They are the channels to which the consequences of educational theory come into the lives of those at school. I suspect that if these teachers are mainly channels of reception and transmission, the conclusions of science will be badly deflected and distorted before they get into the minds of pupils.¹⁴

The teacher as *investigator* can improve the possibility of the school to become a new laboratory of democracy and peace. However, what are the fundamental consequences of the teacher as *investigator*, to better clarify the sense of Deweyan research, and how can the theme of science be linked to the problem of intercultural education in the classroom with migrant students? This is particularly meaningful in our difficult times in global and digital society, characterized by the Pandemic and the recent Ukraine-Russia and Israel-Palestine wars.

The application of the method of intelligence in school, through the teacher as *investigator*, determines three important issues, which improve the quality of democracy in the classroom, and consequently, the quality of democracy and social justice in contemporary society.

First, there is the method of intelligence, which is applied through the teacher as *investigator*. It determines the concept of school to be based on critical and reflective

¹³ See Dan Goldhaber and Emily Anthony, *Can Teacher Quality be Effectively Assessed?* (Seattle, WA: The Urban Institute, 2004).

¹⁴ LW 5: 24.

thinking. The student's learning must be oriented towards understanding an undetermined situation, which must be progressively clarified. The significance of the democratic school, through the method of intelligence, must link different aspects of science, history, and geography to define an open education of the student, based on the knowledge of their experience, which represents a "technological culture."¹⁵

Secondly, the model of the teacher as investigator demonstrates that the teacher, through their didactic and scientific competence must analyze the educational situation not of the classroom as an aggregate, but of each student in the classroom. The teacher's didactic action must be based on the connection between their creative insight, the competences in the sciences of education, and in the specific subject-matter.

In this cultural perspective, the school must be a school for all and for each student, which is not an abstract formula, but the vision and the mission of the inclusive school. The teacher as *investigator* must orient each student to express their embedded powers, to discover a possible life project, and the sense of their action in human life. The teacher's action is similar to the professional life of a gardener: they must prepare with care and scientific competence the learning environment, in which the student's learning must not be passive, but productive, based on constructivist theory, and on the idea of learning-by-doing progressively improving the educational process.

Thirdly, a school based on the teacher as *investigator* must consider the learner as immersed in "technological culture," represented today by digital didactics and artificial intelligence. The human experience is *poietic* and will be more and more linked to the intertwining between humanistic culture, digital cultural, and the space of the metaverse.

Therefore, we need to rethink technology and artificial intelligence in a humanistic way. This could be an important path to construct the school as a laboratory of democracy and peace.¹⁶ The different challenges of our near future:

¹⁵ For more, see Larry A. Hickman, *John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990); *Philosophical Tools for Technological Culture: Putting Pragmatism at Work* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Cf. with the need for new philosophical schools/communities: Eli Kramer, *Intercultural Modes of Philosophy, Volume One: Principles to Guide Philosophical Community* (Boston and Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2021).

uncontrolled demography and migration, ecological problems, sustainable development, and intercultural education in the classroom, incites us to think that the only possibility for salvation is to orient science and technology to pursue a happy civilization far from the possibility of the mass destruction of humankind; to consider our experience as the expression of a technological culture can give us a sense of hope for the future. How can we imagine a democratic society without the bottom-up impulse that school can give to economic and social development? The only possibility for hope and salvation is that techno-sciences are treated culturally, oriented toward a more just society and political decisions, and can thus permit us to overcome geopolitical ideologies and orient humanity to build peace based on social justice.

Due to this, an application of the teacher as *investigator* is the possibility to construct an intercultural model in the classroom. If teachers and their school organization can include migrant students in their classrooms, then democracy can advance in a meaningful way also in society.

3. The Teacher Investigator Establishing a New Intercultural Paradigm: A Democratic School

The recent flows of mass migration in our contemporary global environment do not represent a new aspect of society. The important phenomenon of social change linked to migration has always existed. In the last decades, especially after the end of the Cold War and with the global economic and digital change of society, migration movements have become essential for understanding the processes of civilization.

In particular, every global aspect of our world, such as rapid population growth, especially in *low-income countries*, the economic gap between rich and poor countries, “the clashes of civilization” between different religious visions of reality,¹⁷ and climate change, are probably linked to a “polluted” mode of economic development, which in turn has determined these uncontrolled mass migrations. These economic and political questions are very difficult to solve and probably will be fundamental in the near future for building a new geopolitical order between the different economic and political powers and to rethinking a new possible history,

¹⁷ See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

which has not really “ended,” as Francis Fukuyama proclaimed after the end of the Cold War.¹⁸

But the importance of education in the school could be a major resource to promote a democratic school in which migrant students can be accepted and involved in the inclusive societies in which they choose to live. As a result, the Deweyan concept of the teacher as *investigator* could be considered a basic resource for including immigrant students in the classroom in order to promote democracy. The reason for its importance is determined by the idea that the teacher must not only be a transmitter of knowledge, but must also be a promoter of an educational project for the education of the diversity and uniqueness of each student in the classroom.¹⁹

According to this anthropological and educational perspective, to promote an effective intercultural education between different ethnic and religious differences in the classroom, it is necessary to study more in depth the personality of every migrant student. The scientific approach of the teacher, tied to their particular creative intuition, can determine the achievement of the educational processes for migrant student inclusion.²⁰

The educational problem is the scientific analysis of the different potentialities of migrant students related to their cultural background and to their learning particularities. This is the most difficult intercultural aspect to pursue. In fact, before developing a particular educational and didactic approach to construct an effective intercultural environment, it is necessary to analyze the learning standard of each immigrant student present in the classroom. Therefore, scientific investigation of the teacher is needed to improve the dialectics between teaching and learning in the classroom.²¹ Only in this way can the teacher as *investigator* apply their competences.

The different models of the intercultural study, which have been developed in a different intercultural context, do not adequately consider the importance of personalized didactics in understanding the possibility of the intercultural educational

¹⁸ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Detroit: Free Press, 1992).

¹⁹ For more, see Todd Lekan, *Making Morality: Pragmatist Reconstruction in Ethical Theory* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003).

²⁰ See Massimiliano Fiorucci and Marco Catarci, *Il mondo a scuola. Per un'educazione interculturale* (Rome: Edizioni Conoscenza, 2015).

²¹ See Howard Gardner, *Changing Minds: The Art and Science of Changing Our Own and Other People's Minds* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2006); Massimo Baldacci, *Curricolo e competenze* (Milan: Mondadori, 2010).

relationship. In fact, the French model of assimilation, the Anglo-Saxon model of multiculturalism (especially the Canadian one), and the concept of the American melting pot, do not consider in a meaningful way the importance of the personalized analysis of the whole personality of each student to promote possible intercultural education in the classroom. Therefore, the Deweyan scientific approach of progressive education through the didactic and cultural action of the teacher as investigator could be an interesting social response to include migrant students in the classroom.

In this particular historical period, it is very difficult to build a model of school based on the scientific approach, to construct an education adapted to the different needs of immigrant students. This approach can provide the reasons which have determined the dramatic choice of immigrant students to leave their countries and to establish a new project of life.

The school is a “laboratory of democracy” as Dewey affirmed, and a scientific approach in didactic action can help teachers uncover the personality of immigrant students, in order to understand:

- a. the cultural background of every migrant student;
- b. their educational needs;
- c. their embedded powers.

In this way, the education of immigrant students can be oriented toward a global attitude of active citizenship, a citizenship which can maintain the cultural heritage of their country of origin but, at the same time, respect the law and the social organization of the country in which they choose to live.

Today, mass migrations represent one of the fundamental challenges of humankind. The permanent state of regional wars (which probably depend on capitalism, as based on the trading of weapons), the endemic poverty of the majority of the world’s population, the uncontrolled population growth in poor-income countries, and unforeseen impacts of climate change can be limited only by a new political and international order. But an international educational plan, promoted by world organizations could limit terrorism and social struggles in democratic and autocratic countries, especially in this global-digital world in which the logic of people is changing in a complex way.²²

²² See Randall Auxier, *Logic from Images to Digits* (New York: Linus Learning, 2021).

Education must be considered the only possible utopia for a peaceful world and only a scientific approach linked to an empathetic attitude of teachers in a better mode of school organization can help to establish in the future an authentic democracy. This would be a democracy in which the development of human rights can be linked to the respect for different races, ethnic backgrounds, and gender expressions.

In this perspective, Dewey's thought is an essential point of reference, because democracy must be considered a natural tendency of every human being, which only education related to the science and technology can unveil and orient to pursue happiness and the common good.