

The Principles of John Dewey's
My Pedagogic Creed and
Its Application to Intercultural Issues of
Migrant Students

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Migrant student issues are becoming a fundamental problem in our global society even though it is very difficult to limit the increasingly complicated movement of people because of the economic gap between rich and poor countries. In this paper, I analyze whether the principles of democratic school can improve the possibility for intercultural inclusion in the classroom with migrant students. In particular, I examine the meaning of John Dewey's *My Pedagogic Creed*, the *Manifesto* of John Dewey's theory of education and its applications to the contemporary school to promote the intercultural inclusion of migrant students.

Keywords: Migrant Students; Immigrant Students;
My Pedagogic Creed; Intercultural Inclusion



Volume 7 · Number 2 · 2023 · Pages 98 - 108

Introduction

Democratic and inclusive schools represent a tendency within the contemporary debate regarding the school. In this context, an important aspect is determined by the intercultural educational relationship in the classroom, which is fundamental to improve the education and the social condition for migrant/immigrant¹ students.

In this paper, I will try to demonstrate that Dewey's theory on education can enhance the process of creating intercultural relationships with migrant students. In particular, I will focus on the concept of the uniqueness of the individual, which derives from John Dewey's theory of the "Reflex Arc." Subsequently, I will try to examine the book *My Pedagogic Creed* of 1897, considered the *Manifesto* of the Deweyan theory of education, which anticipates the important text *The School and Society* (1899, second edition 1915). This short book provides five principles, which can be adapted to establish a democratic school. It is essential reading for those seeking to understand the authentic possibility of schools based on positive intercultural educational relations in which migrant students can be empowered active members.

1. The Uniqueness of the Individual in The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology

From 1890 onwards, Dewey increasingly develops his reflection upon and interest in rethinking the subject-object relationship. The individual as a social organism is the central theme of his analysis, which is constantly linked to various aspects of social and political reality. Yet the consequence of the continuity between soul and body² and the social organism is determined by the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity.³ In particular, the texts that specifically focus on this topic are: *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology* (1896) and *The Significance of the Problem of Knowledge* (1897). These two contributions are, probably, the most significant key to understanding the

¹ Hereinafter, migrant will be used to cover both temporary and permanent immigrants.

² John Dewey, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1990), EW 1, 93-115.

³ 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: PensaMultimedia, 2015).

specific Deweyan position within the Classical Pragmatist tradition.⁴

In fact, the theoretical roots of education in Dewey have a deep matrix linked to the theory of the reflex arc, elaborated in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) by William James, which is inspired by Descartes' account of it. In this context, I would like to focus on the centrality of the question of the reflex arc, developed in Dewey's well-known essay, to analyze the relationship between the subject and the object that is combined with the idea of "motor coordination" of the nervous system. The issue of the reflex arc represents the basis for a general hypothesis that can constitute a foundation for scientific processes in the development of the individual.

In fact, the relationship between nervous structure and the nervous function goes beyond simple psychological reflection and becomes "an organizing principle" which tries to explain the stimulus-response relationship.⁵ The innovation that Dewey introduces is that this distinction is presented through the definition of the organic link between feeling, thought, and action. The connection between these components is considered an expression of "task divisions" not of separate entities.

The theme that I want to highlight, referring to William James' *Principles of Psychology*, is that the fundamental relationship between sensation, thought, and action is represented by the coordination of the various elements and not by the simple mechanical stimulus-response. Sensorimotor "coordination" means that the centrality of the relationship between the subject and the object is given by movement and action. Movement and action represent the nucleus of experience or, better put, the development and mediation of experience. The reflex arc determines the construction of the experience and, consequently, the awareness that the traditional soul-body dualism is based on a sensorimotor continuity.

Sensorimotor coordination is the foundation of the relationship between the subject and the environment and consists in the action that determines the adaptation of the individual to reality. In fact, the idea that Dewey proposes is to consider movement as a "sensory experience interpreted" in the same way as the flame that burns the child who touches it in the classic example that William James analyzes to justify the reflex arc theory.

⁴ For more, see Elizabeth E. Flower and Murray G. Murphey, *A History of Philosophy in America* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1977); Roberto Frega, *John Dewey et la philosophie comme épistémologie de la pratique* (Condé-sur-Noireau: L'Harmattan, 2007).

⁵ EW 5: 84-94.

The important issue of the reflex arc theory is that sensorimotor coordination overcomes the traditional distinction of philosophy between soul and body, sensation and idea, and spirit and matter. Human action is often a free choice of the individual who adapts to different situations.⁶ *The Significance of the Problem of Knowledge* was published in 1897 and republished, with slight modifications, in 1910 in *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy*, after the explication of the theory of the reflex arc. This work precedes the essay on the reflex arc. It started as a presentation in a seminar at the “Philosophical Club” of the University of Michigan probably held a year earlier. The philosophical theme of the theoretical-practical relationship is focused in on in an exemplary way.

Dewey, referring to Kant's well-known question “how is knowledge possible?”, clearly develops the question of the theory-practice relationship. The philosopher develops in this essay a long philosophical excursus, which starts from the founding idea of Socrates according to the principle “Know yourself” which denotes the importance of the ethical and practical origin of philosophy.

The relationship between the concepts of sensationalists and rationalists (which determined the well-known Kantian question “how is knowledge possible?”) reveals not only the close connection between sensation and reason, but, also, and above all, the importance of action as an indispensable process to define change in human conduct. This is the solution to the problem of the possibilities of knowledge, which in Dewey's reflection is realized in action, understood as the application of theory to practice.

The meaning of the problem of knowledge is expressed by a new method of reflection to clarify the relationship between theory and practice. This method of research is determined by the affirmation that the problem of knowledge must compare action in such a way that philosophy can become science by working on mere phenomena, abandoning speculative relations of a metaphysical nature.⁷

The meaning of the theory of the reflex arc, therefore, is related to the problem of knowledge. The solution that the theory of sensorimotor coordination determines is related to the importance of human action, as a possibility of connection between theory and practice. However, this means that the individual, while adapting

⁶ See Teodora Pezzano, *Le radici dell'educazione. La teoria dell'esperienza in John Dewey* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2017).

⁷ See Steven Fesmire, *Dewey, The Routledge Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 2014).

themselves to the changes of the environment, changes continuously, becoming unique and unrepeatable. The meaningful result of the reflex arc theory is the demonstration of the uniqueness and unrepeatability of the individual in its environment. For this reason, the theme of education and technology⁸ is essential in order to proceed to a detailed analysis of its meaning for future Deweyan research.

2. *My Pedagogic Creed: The Educational Manifesto for Building Democracy*

The texts, which are the initial not yet ripe fruits of Dewey's interest in education, are undoubtedly *Ethical Principles Underlying Education* (1897), and *My Pedagogic Creed* of the same year. They can be considered the educational *Manifesto* of Deweyan thought. *Ethical Principles* is a fundamental text in explaining the Deweyan interest in educational issues and the premise that determines the five principles of *My Pedagogic Creed*.

In other words, and this is my first significant observation, the development of individuality must be compared with the dynamics of the social environment, as it happens for a businessman who must develop their activity in a society by realizing the complexity of the social phenomena that determines economic life. Likewise, the school must educate the citizen considering the complexity of the human, logical-linguistic, emotional, economic relationships that one must face in the relational system with which one has a constant and intertwined relationship.

Adaptation is an expression of the possibilities for the development of human activity, which must be placed within the situations of social life and, above all, must be directed to the realization of specific goals of the future citizen "in the midst of a tremendous industrial and commercial development." "So far as education is conducted unconsciously or consciously on this basis, it results in fitting the future citizen for no station in life..."⁹ The school, therefore, is an institution that must open up to its social dimension, especially because the mental dimension of student learning must be linked to practical activity.

The construction of an ethics within the school means allowing the progressive growth of the student in relation to the specificities of social life. Precisely

⁸ For more see Larry A. Hickman, *John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990).

⁹ EW 5: 59.

for this reason, it is necessary that this construction be based on the principle that every educational and didactic method must develop the unexpressed powers of every student. To put into practice these possibilities it is necessary to link learning to doing, and, above all, to link form to content. In other words, ethics in the school is connected to the consideration of the school as an ethical construction of the social relations that develop in a democratic society. "What we need in education more than anything else is a genuine, not mere nominal faith in the existence of moral principles which are capable of effective application."¹⁰

In fact, what Dewey wants to clarify is the centrality of the action of the teacher who must promote the development of the student. However, what is the meaning of education in relation to instincts and impulses and the complexity and unpredictability of the educational process of the learner? This text tries to connect the interior action of the individual with the specificity and unpredictability of human education, highlighting the centrality of the educational process. To achieve this, it is necessary to develop an educational action that realizes the specific situation in which human action is organized. But the school certainly does not assess, in Dewey's view, the dimensions of instincts and impulses, nor the critical capacity of students to be able to choose their human conduct.

This perspective renders the meaning of *My Pedagogic Creed* the expression of the *Manifesto* of the Deweyan educational project. As is well known, this text is a declaration, divided into five articles, of a future work program, in which a specific religious tension is highlighted and inspired by the religious character of John Dewey, inherited from his mother, a fervent Protestant pietist congregationalist. Indeed, the religious aspect of the text demonstrates how education, through the programmatic dimension, becomes an extremely rooted moment in Dewey's theory.¹¹

The five articles of the text deal with the following topics of education: what education is; what the school is; the subject matter of education; the nature of method; the school and social progress. These five points represent a consequential process expressed by the relationship of the soul-body continuity, by the centrality of action in the theory-practice relationship, and by the ethical construction of human conduct in the school and outside the school. Education is the heart of the problem. It is

¹⁰ Ibid., 82.

¹¹ See Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press), 1-13.

therefore considered as the deepest expression of the relationship that exists between the individual and society and, precisely for this reason, it must be based on the possibilities that each individual has to develop their own potential.

The overall principle that the first article dedicated to education is that a well-educated individual must be considered a social individual, and that society is an organic set of individuals. "I believe that the individual who is to be educated is a social individual and that society is an organic union of the individuals."¹² The second article of the Deweyan Educational *Manifesto* provides a principle that is inherent to the concept of the school. The reference to the school is linked to the concept of education as a social process. School is the physical, cultural, and spiritual place where the concept of education as a social process develops. But, above all, it represents the place where the social dimension of education develops, which expresses the transformation of the individualistic ends of each person into specific social ends. "I believe that education, therefore, is a process of life and not a preparation for future living."¹³

In this perspective, the teacher must not only be a transmitter of knowledge or an architect of the student's ethical behavior, but they must represent the expression of community life. The teacher's task is to encourage the development of school life. In fact, once Dewey focuses on the issue of education, what represents the decisive problem of the educational question is expressed by the topic of education (third article) and by the nature of the method (fourth article). "I believe that the question of method is ultimately reducible to the question of the order of development of the child's powers and interests."¹⁴

The social dimension is the center on which to define the specific school curriculum. There is, in other words, extremely significant knowledge for the student's education, such as science, history and geography, that will be the reference points of the curriculum to which the Deweyan school will also be inspired in the future. This is also proposed in *Democracy and Education* (1916). But the crucial point of the question in *My Pedagogic Creed* is that the focal meaning of the training is determined by the centrality of experience. Experience represents the epistemological foundation on which to build the curriculum beyond the progression of disciplines.

¹² EW 5: 86.

¹³ Ibid., 87.

¹⁴ Ibid., 91.

The central theme of the school curriculum, therefore, is the concept of experience, which must be considered the medium through which the student can develop their potential and, moreover, can express those attitudes that present a continuity with the real world that they will encounter during and after school. “I believe that education thus conceived marks the most perfect and intimate union of science and art conceivable in human experience.”¹⁵

Precisely for this reason, the nature of the method is fundamental for clarifying the overall meaning of educational action, and to build the democratic character of the school. The “nature of the method” is based on the design of the school that must always be adapted to the needs of the pupil. The fundamental aspect of the activity is determined by the interest that represents the signal of the growing potential of each individual. The project of a democratic school, therefore, is linked to the construction of a school based on learning understood as a social activity established by human experience. In fact, the final goal proposed by the Educational *Manifesto* is expressed by the school linked to social progress, which is the principal focus of the fifth and final article.

In this perspective, the teacher is a social promoter and, at the same time, the “prophet of the true God and guides him in the true kingdom of God.”¹⁶ “I believe that every teacher should realize the dignity of his calling; that he is a social servant set apart for the maintenance of proper social order and securing of the right social growth.”¹⁷ This religious ideal establishes the most important aspect of the teacher’s didactic action.

3. An Intercultural School to Improve Migrant Student Education

According to this interpretation, education gives an overall sense to the path of Deweyan thought, and *My Pedagogic Creed* can be considered the *Manifesto* of Deweyan educational research, as well as the laboratory of his philosophical, educational, and political reconstructions. All this happens precisely because this text brings out the centrality of the experience of every individual who must be put in a condition, just as the Socratic saying affirmed, to “know thyself” through the

¹⁵ Ibid., 94.

¹⁶ Ibid., 95.

¹⁷ Ibid., 95.

development of instincts and impulses in human habits that only democracy can realize and develop.

Today, the question of how to handle the mass flows of human migration is fundamental as they are spread everywhere and are very difficult to limit. This issue will be one of the epistemological and political problem on which the geopolitical order will be defined in the near future. From this perspective, the future of the school will be based on an intercultural and transcultural atmosphere, which will be the ideal for the democratic and inclusive school. The five principles of *My Pedagogic Creed* could be an important reference to construct the school of tomorrow and enhance the possibility to include and empower migrant students in the school.

In particular, it is essential to focus on the importance of the influence of the school to improve democracy in society. In fact, the first problem of migrant student inclusion is the possibility to define their possible project of life, occupation, and social relation, just to orient these future citizens in the society in which they choose to work and live.¹⁸ In the last decades, we have been living in a deep cultural debate about the crisis of democracy. In fact, there is the theory of post-democracy¹⁹ which is becoming one of the political meanings of contemporary society, especially after the dramatic experience of Covid and the recent wars in Ukraine and in the Middle East.

Democracy, to avoid becoming a society controlled by strong and occult powers instead of the sovereignty of the people, needs to project a possible, even if utopistic, ideal for human social development. It is one based on justice²⁰ and achieved through the action of the school and education. Accordingly, the school must be *a social laboratory of justice and peace* based on the five principles of Dewey's *My Pedagogic Creed*, and in this perspective the intercultural education of migrant students must be pursued by teachers and school organizations.²¹

What can we consider an important intercultural relationship that can improve the inclusion of migrant students in their schools? As I have previously

¹⁸ See Massimiliano Fiorucci, *Educazione, formazione e pedagogia in prospettiva interculturale* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2020).

¹⁹ See Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2004).

²⁰ For more, see Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001); Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²¹ See Massimiliano Fiorucci and Marco Catarci, *Il mondo a scuola. Per un'educazione interculturale* (Rome: Edizioni Conoscenza, 2015).

theorized,²² there are three possibilities for an intercultural educational relationship, which demonstrates the importance of political education to determine the possibility to manage migrant student education in this particular historical period.

The first possibility could be represented in a classroom by the presence of migrant students, who have the difficulty or the impossibility to begin a dialogue or an educational relationship with other students. For instance, certain kinds of Jewish and Muslim students for political and religious reasons can have great difficulty in constructing an intercultural relationship. In this case, very hypothetically and very difficult to realize, a successful didactical action can achieve reciprocal respect and this goal can be very important to construct a possible democracy in the classroom.

A second possibility could be the case in which the migrant students in the classroom can have a possibility of dialogue, to build a transactional construction (according to the concept of transaction in Dewey's thought) of ideas and experiences, depending on the curriculum, which must be based on the organization of knowledge and competences in the school. This is a very common mode of intercultural dialogue in the school. The relationship between students and, in particular, migrant students very often consists in an agreement of values and knowledge, which depend on the content and the method utilized by the teachers.

As a third possibility for intercultural relationships, we have to consider the construction of a new knowledge, of a transcultural platform in which the cultural, ethnical, and religious values of each student could be transformed into a new culture, more expanded and more enriched with respect to the original one. This third possibility is very difficult to achieve. These three possibilities constitute some ways to construct an intercultural dialogue with migrant students in the classroom. This dialogue would not be possible without the application of the principles of the democratic school as described in *My Pedagogic Creed*. In particular, the child-centered school, the relation between school and social progress, and the contents and method adapted to the classroom can give migrant students a good chance to become active citizens.

The migrant students' inclusive education, of course, is only one aspect of a broader question, which consists in facing the challenge of mass migration in the

²² Teodora Pezzano and Maria Rosalba Lupia, *Questioni pedagogico-educative e sviluppo sostenibile* (Rome: Anicia, 2021).

world, and, in particular, in the Mediterranean Sea.²³ Nevertheless, without an intercultural and inclusive school, we cannot build the laboratory of democracy and peace, which is fundamental for the future of humankind. In this perspective intercultural education constitutes the human bridge to overcome the possibilities of violence and war in our contemporary society.

²³ See Eli Kramer's article in this issue of *Dewey Studies*.