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Dewey and the American movement to homeschooling

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ABSTRACT

The last 10 years has seen a dramatic increase in the number of parents in the United States choosing to homeschool their children instead of sending them to public school. One report had the number increasing by 61.8% from 2003 to 2012, with the total number of homeschooled children reaching nearly 2 million (Snyder, T. D., and S. A. Dillow. 2015. *Digest of Education Statistics 2013 (NCES 2015-011)*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education). With more students withdrawing from public education to a more insulated environment (often due to religious reasons), there are concerns about the long-term ramifications this trend may cause. This paper addresses the degree to which a religious homeschooled education might be problematic within John Dewey's conception of education as laid out in *Democracy and Education*. For Dewey 'Common subject matter accustoms all to a unity of outlook upon a broader horizon' (Dewey, John. 1985. *Democracy and Education, Collected Works. Middle Works Vol 9*, 26. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press). I argue that persons raised in a virtual vacuum in which education is rooted within a particular faith may be less capable of serving as vibrant members of a democratic-based society.

KEYWORDS

John Dewey; homeschooling;
religious education;
democracy; citizenship;
public good

The last 10 years has seen a dramatic increase in the number of parents in the United States choosing to homeschool their children instead of sending them into the public grade school system. One report by the Institute of Education Sciences had the number increasing by 61.8% from 2003 to 2012, with the total number of homeschooled children reaching over 1.7 million in the United States alone (Snyder and Dillow 2015). The majority of parents choosing to homeschool assert that they do so because of a desire to provide a religious or moral instruction that they felt was lacking in the public school system. On the other side some, including some social workers, are sceptical of some of these claims, asserting that more often than not when learning that a child is homeschooled, it is perceived as a red flag that might indicate a desire to avoid truancy officers in the public system. Regardless, with more and more students withdrawing from public education to a more insulated and isolated environment, there is reason to have concerns about the long-term ramifications this trend may cause.

This paper, originally presented at the 2016 Cambridge University conference 'John Dewey's 'Democracy and Education' 100 Years On: Past, Present and Future Relevance, is primarily U.S. centric, addresses the degree to which a religious homeschooled education might be problematic when considered within John Dewey's conception of education as laid out in *Democracy and Education*, as well as his other influential works on the topic. If Dewey is correct when he says that 'Society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication', then the important place that education plays in this

transmission and communication should be addressed when considering the dangers of millions of young children largely sidestepping the main arena in which these acts take place (Dewey 1985, 7). While all communication may be in some sense educative, our school system is an important place for our society to develop by collectively communicating essential ideas while attempting to weed out undesirable tendencies, including racism and sexism. To this end, while Dewey recognises that there are many kinds of community lives that impact behaviour, including a range that stretches from gangs to churches, there is still a need for common ground. For Dewey, our schools can provide 'Common subject matter [that] accustoms all to a unity of outlook upon a broader horizon than is visible to the members of any group while it is isolated' (1985, 26). This appreciation for this common ground is essential, for Dewey states that it is education's task in a democracy 'to struggle against this isolation in order that the various interests may reinforce and play into one another' (1985, 258).

Our children's growth takes place within our education systems as well as in society itself, but we must remember that the 'social environment forms the mental and emotional dispositions of behavior in individuals by engaging them in activities that arouse and strengthen certain impulses, that have certain purposes and entail certain consequences' (Dewey 1985, 20). If a child's social circle is tightly restricted to only a few family members or to family and a slightly larger religious circle, then the degree to which the child is distanced from larger social influences is greatly increased. If the choice is between isolation and engaged involvement in larger circles of social intercourse, Dewey favours the latter. He remarked in his earlier essay 'Religion and Our Schools' that schools must take on the bringing together of 'those of different nationalities, languages, traditions and creeds, in assimilating them together upon the basis of what is common and public in endeavor and achievement' (Dewey 1977, 175). While Dewey does go on to add that this mission does have a religious element to it, in that the religious must grow out of the social, current movements to isolate children from the 'harms' of society, try to reverse that dichotomy to make society grow out of the religious. This shift in emphasis has great ramifications for the state, in part by undermining the very separation of church and state and placing children in a position that sees religion as in conflict with the state instead of as an institution protected within the state. History is filled with purges occurring after a society becomes dominated by a particular faith, and it is this exact kind of conflict that Dewey, and our Founding Fathers, were trying to prevent.

Of course, the larger distinction between religion and religious laid out in *A Common Faith* (Dewey 1986, 9) enters into our conversation as well. Religious homeschooling is often sanctioned by and ordered around a particular religious institution. This arrangement runs the risk of emphasising what Miedema (1995, 67) called the 'institutionalized forms of ... church life, and dogmatic sets of convictional belief'. Miedema, writing 20 years ago, felt that the growth of secularisation had brought an end to the 'obvious influence of the churches on society' (70), but the culture wars of the 1990s and 2000s, the response to September 11, and two George W. Bush terms as President of the United States have seen the pendulum slightly reverse course, as the institutions and believers of religion have pushed back against that trend. I assert that homeschooling is one significant part of that reversal.

In his essay 'Secularism, Secularization, and John Dewey', Hickman (2009) talks about religious trends in the United States and compares them to Dewey's viewpoint. Hickman concludes that 'religious expression involves choice not only of affiliation, but also of interpretation of scripture and doctrine within a particular affiliation ... religious expressions are numerous and diverse' (21). This emphasis on the importance of choice, however, can be greatly undermined when one is raised from birth in a virtual vacuum in which all of their education is rooted in a particular faith, often without exposure to other religious points of view. Persons raised in this way may be less capable of serving as vibrant members of a democratic-based society. As Dewey himself said, 'the great danger which threatens school work is the absence of conditions which make possible a permeating social spirit; this is the great enemy of effective moral training' (1985, 368). Of course, this harm must be considered alongside the possibility that hundreds of thousands of children are being educated

with a scientific perspective that sees the earth as Young Earth Creationists do, for they believe the planet is less than 10,000 years old.

Dewey's own thoughts on religious education were clearly stated in 'Religion and Our Schools' (1908; in Dewey 1977) when he said that he was not in favour of allowing religions to segregate our schools along divisions of faith. In that text, however, Dewey is not just talking about schools, but the larger questions surrounding the separation of church and state as a whole. He asserts that it is the diversity of religious traditions that each belief can 'make its own way' (Dewey 1977, 169) yet each religion is also concerned about the degree to which religious ties could give competing denominations too much position and power, threatening their own faith's right to existence. The United States, coming to exist after hundreds of years of post-Reformation conflict, benefited by what Dewey calls 'the State Consciousness' in that we believe the idea that 'the state life, the vitality of the social whole, is of more importance than the flourishing of any segment or class' (Dewey 1977). The increasing movement to try and pull children out of the social whole by embedding them almost exclusively within a religious mindset casts doubt on the degree to which this idea may endure moving forward.

One of the central points that we must be aware of is the important role that education plays in Dewey's conception of a healthy democracy. Early in the text (Dewey 1985), he outlines the three central functions of schools:

simplifying and ordering the factors of the disposition it is wished to develop; purifying and idealizing the existing social customs; creating a wider and better balanced environment than that by which the young would be likely, if left to themselves, to be influenced. (27)

This level of social control is intended to allow for the creation of certain mental dispositions in these future citizens, including an awareness of our interconnectedness as well as a sense of responsibility. The stakes could not be higher, for Dewey famously asserts that 'society determines its own future in determining that of the young' (1985, 46). The nature of the later generation is determined in part by the planning and foresight of the former, and this progressive movement over the generations Dewey calls 'growth'. Because of what is at stake, Dewey seems to favour a level of planning that is not haphazard and random, but instead, collectively draws on past behaviours and events to point human development forward. Of course, it is the children themselves who grow, but that growth occurs within the context of an environment that both stifles and hinders that progress or attempts to nurture it.

Education for Dewey should foster the democratic life that includes as Alexander (1995) phrases it 'a commitment on the part of the state to equality of opportunity, especially with regard for opportunity for education ... realizing as much as possible every individual's capacities to live a fully human life ...' (77). Dewey's sense of democracy, according to Alexander, 'is the collective project to create a civilization that fulfills the Human Eros' (Alexander 1995). We prosper as individuals when we realise the importance of the group environment in fostering our achievement.

Accomplishing the goals of education mentioned above is no easy task, and Dewey mentions on multiple occasions the difficulty of becoming a teacher. He states that 'teaching is the method of an art, of action intelligently directed by ends ... Study of the operations and results of those in the past who have greatly succeeded is essential' (Dewey 1985, 177). Dewey expands on this art several pages later, when he talks about the need for the teacher to have the material at their fingertips, so that the teacher is not spending time trying to think through the lesson, but can instead devote their time to observing the student's understanding and response to what is being covered. What is important says Dewey is the subject matters' 'interaction with the pupil's present needs and capacities' (Dewey 1985, 191). While a person of average intelligence might feel they are able to master the subject matter of the first two or three grades, being able to understand how to best help the student grasp and apply that material is a much more rigorous task.

This is one of the central problems that I think Dewey would identify in the movement to home-schooling. Most parents taking on these tasks have little to no training in the art of education. Some

children may be lucky enough to be homeschooled by a parent with a background in education but one suggestion is that this is the exception and not the rule. For example, recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics seems to show that many parents are simply not equipped to take on this task, as 270,000 of the 1.7 million children homeschooled in 2012 were being taught by a parent with a high-school degree or less, with 614,000 (over one third) of the children's parents not even having a bachelor's degree (National Center for Education Statistics. 2014. Table 206.10: Number and percentage of homeschooled students ages 5 through 17).

The qualifications of the teacher versus the parent are just one factor to consider. For Dewey, 'It is the business of the school to set up an environment in which play and work shall be conducted with reference to facilitating desirable mental and moral growth' (Dewey 1985, 204). This may be true for any government system, be it totalitarian or democratic, but for Dewey, 'Democratic society is peculiarly dependent for its maintenance upon the use in forming a course of study of criteria which are broadly human' (Dewey 1985, 200). This curriculum must be seen as a social responsibility of and centered on an awareness of 'the problems of living together ... to develop social insight and interest' (Dewey 1985). Everything should tie back in some way to social worth.

We must remember that it is possible that some homeschool teachers may be as qualified as public school teachers, it is also possible that a homeschooling curriculum could be geared in such a way as to address the needs of existing within a community life. While this is possible, some doubts remain. According to Dewey, the motive of instruction is not just about preparation for getting a job (which is important) or about learning basic skills (which are also important), but instead:

The chief motive for consciously dwelling upon the group life, extracting the meanings which are regarded as most important and systematizing them in a coherent arrangement, is just the need of instructing the young so as to perpetuate group life. Once started on this road of selection, formulation, and organization, no definite limit exists. (Dewey 1985, 189)

For Dewey, one of the best results that come from the social environment of a public school is the fact that it compels one to learn about other people, as well as other subjects. Isolation behind walls of religious division may prevent this, for it undermines the balance between in school learning and out of school learning. This is emphasised by the National Center for Education Fast Facts data that points out that, in 2012, 83% of students homeschooled were white, with an overwhelming majority of these same parents citing a concern for the 'environment of other schools' as the chief reason for home-schooling (Fast Facts: Homeschooling. (n.d.). National Center for Education Statistics). While home-schooling may have the benefit of allowing for active contact and participation with people in the home environment, all children should have this to some degree anyway, and if this is exclusively the environment that students are raised in, their experience is markedly out of equilibrium, for as Dewey said 'the learning in school should be continuous with that out of school. There should be a free interplay between the two' (Dewey 1985, 368).

The one-sided isolation mentioned above is not just a problem in terms of homeschooling, but also in terms of the growing number of Fundamentalist Christian private schools. Feinberg (2010) talks about this trend in his essay 'Teaching Religion in Public Schools: A Critical Appraisal of Dewey's Ideas on Religion and Education' Feinberg sees Dewey's desire to not spend time on religious doctrines in an educational setting, in line with the separation of church and state, to be problematic, in that it is precisely that line of thinking that is in his opinion pushing people away from the religious free zone of public school (2010, 269). Feinberg instead turns to what he calls 'a more nuanced understanding of religion' that seeks to offer 'academically oriented courses about religion' (2010, 271). He draws on one school's example of offering two semester long electives on Eastern and Western Religions. These courses, he asserts, might achieve goals of increased knowledge and increased tolerance. While Dewey might thoughtfully consider the idea, I doubt, however, the degree to which these courses would satisfy the minds of the parents leaving the school system (it might even make matters worse in their view), for many of these, parents seek not just a single

course on religion, but instead desire to have all disciplines taught through the eyes of their particular faith. Instead of teaching a biology that includes a section on Darwin and Natural Selection, they very well might prefer a course in Christian biology. An example of this is uncovered in a Guardian article (Stewart 2013) which discusses a science curriculum that ‘used It Couldn’t Just Happen, which wasn’t really a science textbook. It was really just an apologetics textbook which taught students cliché refutations of evolutionism’.

While this paper has argued that a turn away from the American public school system to home-schooling would run counter to Dewey’s philosophical ideas, we must remember the sad reality that the American public school system, especially in light of the No Child Left Behind policy, may only do marginally better at accomplishing the educational tasks at hand than parents in the home. Dewey was certainly aware of the need for education reform, talking about the issues facing the education system in the ‘The Educational Situation’ (in Dewey 1976). While the scale and the stage may have changed, the need to transform education from ‘a wooden device for instructing little children of the lower classes in some of the utilities of their future callings’ towards a democratic and political equality that offered ‘a more profound aspiration towards an equality of intellectual and moral opportunity and development’, still exists today (Dewey 1976, 288). To that end, Dewey highlights five groups of problems that he believes are most pressing for our educational system, including the responsibilities of high schools in transitioning between elementary and college levels, how that transition must prepare students both for college and for life in general, and how time should be spread across the many disciplines that need to be taught.

All of these problems exist still to this day, Putnam (2015), discusses in his recent *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, that Dewey is at the forefront of the school-community approach that uses closer ties between the two for the benefit of all (253–254). To take one of Dewey’s five problems as an example, an important step in the transition between high school and college may be fulfilled; Putnam seems to indicate, by the community college system. As a product of the Progressive Era, community colleges offer many advantages, chief among them easier access and lower cost. While there are disadvantages as well, Putnam laments the drop in funding for these institutions and seems to indicate that this lack of funding is greatly hampering their mission.

If education at all levels is to be a public enterprise in the United States, decisions must be made about the degree to which we are willing to invest in that public resource. Education must continue to strive against pressures of artificial uniformity, for democracy, as Dewey reminds us, must always strive for intellectual freedom. That freedom, however, must exist within the context of a social life that strives to work together to be together and that recognises that we the people prosper when our efforts are united with an awareness and appreciation for the common good. Dewey himself was aware of the dangers that arise when education becomes a business that is no longer focused on the application to student life. Metzger (2015) talks about this very problem in her recent book *A Prison Called School: Creating Effective Schools for All Learners*, and some of her suggestions have a very noticeable Deweyan slant to them. When she writes, for example, that what is called for is a transformation of the school system in which ‘we must remember that the system exists for the student, not the adults and not the system ... schools must create learning environments and experiences that empower and equip learners for school and life success’ (188). Hearing this, I see comparisons to Dewey’s call for lifelong learning that improves individuals and society.

If, in the final analysis, John Dewey offers an important message when he says that the end of education is to improve society – to help our children make better lives and a better world than we had, then we must re-double our efforts. By efforts, I do not simply mean throwing money or time at the problem, but thoughtfulness. Whether one leaves the public school system for religious reasons or for secular ones, separation from the whole undermines one’s ability to maintain a future relationship with that whole. In conclusion, I believe that Dewey would agree with me in saying that we are not making better citizens through homeschooling.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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