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Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, John Puckett. *Dewey's Dream: Universities and Democracies in an Age of Education Reform.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007. xiv + 160 pp. $18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-59213-592-9.

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Solving the Dewey Problem

Upon John Dewey's death in 1952 at the age of ninety-two, *New York Times* education correspondent Benjamin Fine wrote that Dewey's influence on American education could "never be erased." According to Fine, the 1894 publication of Dewey's *School and Society* had launched a "reconstruction of the American educational system" that had continued ever since. As Fine saw it, Dewey's beliefs that "the child is more important than the subject" and that "schools should be based on democratic, not authoritarian principles" had now become conventional wisdom in the nation's schools. Looking to the future, Fine predicted that Dewey's legacy would be lasting: "Education in this country can never return to the pre-Dewey era, any more than science can return to the pre-atomic period, or medicine to the pre-penicillin days." Fine concluded his tribute by assuring readers that evidence of Dewey's influence could already be found "in every classroom in the nation."[1]

Fifty-five years later, Dewey's name can still be found in many education textbooks and course syllabi, and a Google search of "John Dewey" turns up some two million hits. Dewey may not have been forgotten all these years later, though in public schools his presence is perhaps less palpable than Fine would have hoped. According to the three authors of *Dewey's Dream*, this is because Dewey saddled future educators with a rather frustrating "Dewey Problem." The "problem" is that Dewey failed to "specify and demonstrate empirically the practical means needed to realize his utopian vision" (p. ix). As the authors see it, early in his career, Dewey articulated pioneering ideas about the need to transform public schools into truly democratic, community-oriented institutions, but after 1902, "he himself did almost nothing to extend and develop his ideas along those lines" (p. 43). In other words, the pragmatist Dewey was at once too vague and too detached when it came to the difficult work of putting his theory into practice.

Dewey's Dream is both a tribute to the philosopher and a critical assessment of his work that concludes by describing one potential solution to the "Dewey Problem." Co-authors Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, and John Puckett, all professors at the University of Pennsylvania, divide their book into two parts: the first offers a critical analysis of Dewey's life and writings about democracy and schooling, and the second describes Penn's attempts to put Dewey's ideas into practice by developing university/public school partnerships in Philadelphia. The authors unabashedly offer their book as a "democratic manifesto designed to help transform America into a truly participatory democracy," and, to be sure, *Dewey's Dream* reads as a work of scholarly activism that expressly challenges academics to transform the modern university into an agent of positive social change (p. ix).

In part 1, the authors recount Dewey's tenure at the University of Chicago from 1894 to 1904, arguing that he developed his most important ideas about schooling during this time. They make the case that Dewey was deeply influenced by the educational vision of University of Chicago president William Rainey Harper. Harper believed that the central mission of the American university was to help build a truly democratic society by taking responsibility for the performance of the entire school system within its community. He argued that "'through the school system every family in this entire broad land of ours is brought into touch with the university; for from it proceed the teachers"' (p. 16). If the entire school system was not accelerating "'democratic progress,"' then the university must be performing poorly, in Harper's view. The authors of *Dewey's Dream* suggest that Harper's ideas about the proper role of the university helped shape Dewey's belief that schools were central to the development of a participatory democratic society.

The rest of part 1 traces the evolution of Dewey's thinking about schooling and society from his time at Chicago to his move to Columbia University, and

it includes a sharp critique of Dewey's work at the Chicago Laboratory School. The romanticized image we often have today of "Dewey's School," as it was then known, was that it put into practice Dewey's key ideas about student-centered learning and cooperative problem-solving. Not necessarily so, say Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett. Despite its best intentions, the Laboratory School in fact failed to adequately engage students in the work of real-world, community problem solving. Both its highly trained teaching staff and its student body, which consisted largely of children from professional families, made the school unrepresentative of U.S. public schools in general, thus raising doubts about the transferability of its model to other settings. (Robert Westbrook offers a similar critique of the Laboratory School in his excellent biography, *John Dewey and American Democracy* [1991], a book that the authors cite often.) Moreover, at the Laboratory School, students learned by tackling simulated, well-structured problems rather than real world, consequential problems that directly impacted the city of Chicago and the broader society. In other words, Dewey's school, and by extension the university, was too disconnected from the community to truly act as an agent of democratic change. The lesson here, we are told, is not that Dewey's ideas are impractical, but that they have not yet been adequately realized.

Part 2 proposes one solution to the "Dewey Problem" in the form of university-assisted community schools. Echoing Harper, the authors propose that "all higher eds should explicitly make solving the problem of the American schooling system a very high institutional priority" (p. 79). By way of example, they discuss the work of the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Community Partnerships, which was established in 1992 in an attempt to deepen Penn's relationship with Philadelphia. The center was designed to help Penn function as a "truly engaged, democratic, cosmopolitan, civic university" by focusing its resources on "universal problems" as they manifest themselves in Philadelphia (p. 93). Among the universal problems addressed by the center are schooling, healthcare, and economic development. The authors point out that addressing such problems requires both interschool and interdisciplinary collaboration, and, to demonstrate this, they describe one of the center's particularly innovative projects, the Community Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Program. The project originated in 2002 with a group of Penn undergraduates who were enrolled in a community service seminar. The students had researched the reasons why community-oriented health promotion efforts often fail (usually, due to lack of sustained external funding), and they proposed a school-based solution that would address the problem of urban healthcare by building health promotion into both the university and public school curriculum. Intended to "advance student learning and democratic development, as well as to help strengthen families and institutions within the community," the program was formally launched in partnership with Sayre Middle School in 2003 (p. 101). Some twenty faculty and hundreds of Penn students in medicine, nursing, dentistry, social work, arts and sciences, and fine arts have worked on the project by offering related courses, internships, and research projects. At Sayre, health promotion activities are being integrated into all core subjects, and related community service opportunities are available for students. Ultimately, this curriculum aims to empower Sayre students to become active promoters and disseminators of healthcare knowledge in their own community. Though the project began as a university/school curriculum initiative, it has since evolved into an even more community-oriented program. In 2006, thanks to a successful application to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for federal funding, the Sayre health clinic was established; the clinic now operates out of Sayre Middle School and serves students, families, and other members of the community.

Dewey's Dream describes several other programs and projects initiated by the University of Pennsylvania in its attempt to partner students, faculty, and diverse members of the Philadelphia community together in the work of solving real world problems. For any university educator or administrator interested in facilitating collaborative community problem-solving projects, part 2 should be required reading for its presentation of concrete strategies. However, historians of education, and Dewey scholars in particular, may bristle at some of the more hyperbolic statements in part 1 regarding Dewey's work and his alleged shortcomings. For example, the authors state that Dewey's departure from Chicago for Columbia was a "tragic mistake, which had devastating consequences for the American schooling system–and American society–in the twentieth century," because from then on Dewey "made little effort to practically connect universities with elementary and secondary schools" (pp. 45-46). In their defense, the authors openly concede that their book is not a "traditional scholarly work," and that their main agenda is "movement initiating, not thesis proving" (pp. ix-x).

For historians of childhood and those who teach the history of childhood, *Dewey's Dream* offers several possibilities for study. On one level, the book can be read

as a model for the kind of public advocacy that some childhood studies scholars believe must be a component of our work. Certainly this book challenges the conceit that the acquisition of historical knowledge should necessarily stand apart from the making of public policy or the pursuit of social justice. On another level, *Dewey's Dream* could be read and taught as a kind of twenty-first-century childrearing guide, a contemporary prescription for how to improve the lives of children through the work of the urban university. It could be paired, for example, with Chris Whittle's *Crash Course: Imagining a Better Future for Public Education* (2005), a book that promotes privatization as the key to school reform. Whittle is the founder and chief executive officer of the for-profit company Edison Schools, and his vision of a market solution to the problem of failing public schools could provide childhood studies students with a sharp contrast to the model of participatory democracy favored by Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett. Finally, for those historians of childhood who teach Dewey at some point in their courses, this book could serve as a short, focused (albeit biased) introduction to his philosophy of education, and it would certainly provoke in-class debates about the extent to which Dewey's influence can still be found in public school classrooms today.

Note

[1]. Benjamin Fine, "John Dewey's Great Influence on the Schools of America Weighed by Leading Educators," *New York Times*, June 8, 1952.

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