

John Dewey and Peace Education

Charles F. Howlett, Ph.D.
Molloy College.

INTRODUCTION

Dewey remains one of America's most preeminent philosophers and educational theorists. After World War I he applied his instrumentalism and progressive education ideas to the advancement of world peace. Dewey's peace education was based on the view that teaching subjects like history and geography should be premised on the goal of promoting internationalism. His educational objective was to counter the philistine notion of patriotism and nationalism developed by individual nation-states which had been a basic cause of war.

BACKGROUND

Born in Vermont on October 20, 1859 and later educated at the University of Vermont (A.B.) and Johns Hopkins (Ph.D.), John Dewey established himself as one of the leading philosophers in the field of pragmatism while teaching at the University of Chicago in the 1890s. The increasing dominance of evolutionary biology and psychology in his thinking led to the abandonment of the Hegelian theory of ideas and the acceptance of an instrumental theory of knowledge that conceived of ideas as tools or instruments in the solution of problems encountered in the environment. Prior to an appointment at Columbia University in 1904, moreover, Dewey's writings on school and education gained him a widespread audience. In *The School and Society* (1899) and *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), he argued that the educational process must be built upon the interest of the child, that it must provide opportunity for the interplay of thinking and doing in the child's classroom experience, that schools should be organized as a miniature community, that the teacher should be a guide and co-worker with pupils rather than rigid taskmaster assigning a fixed set of lessons and recitations, and that the goal of education is the growth of the child. His crowning work, *Democracy and Education* (1916), solidified his reputation in the history of American education.

But nothing prepared John Dewey for the events taking place in the world from 1914-1918. Despite being hailed as America's foremost educational philosopher, the Great War tested Dewey's mettle. During the First World War he reasoned that the use of force might provide a useful and efficient means for bringing about the goal of a democratically organized world order. Writing for his *New Republic* readers in "Force and Coercion" and "Force, Violence and Law," he commented that armed force was morally correct and war legally justified.

What he did not count on was the stinging rebuke he received from his former Columbia student, Randolph Bourne. Bourne challenged Dewey's support for war by pointing out that the esteemed philosopher's instrumentalism had trapped him into miscalculating the relationship of the war to true national interests and democratic values. In a powerfully written article, "Twilight of Idols," Bourne argued that Dewey's excessive optimism caused him to overestimate the power of intelligence and underestimate the force of violence and irrationality.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO PEACE EDUCATION

It was Bourne's telling criticism that Dewey's support for war was technique conscious and morally blind that led to the Columbia philosopher's promotion of peace education after the war. In the postwar years, Dewey's interest in peace education was defined by a curious mixture of moralistic beliefs, democratic values, and nonreligious ethics. The basic thrust of his pragmatic

philosophy and peace education efforts after 1918 was formulating the method of intelligence in such discriminating fashion as to minimize the appeal to nationalistic propaganda. Eliminating the institution of war required an educational program that would reconstruct existing social and political habits. The tragedies of the war convinced Dewey that schools could serve as a basis for dynamic change. Given proper direction, schools could become dynamic instead of reflexive agencies; as instruments of reform schools could search out and reinforce concrete patterns to remake society in the name of peace while at the same time enabling each student to realize his or her potential for building a nonviolent world.

During the years between the two world wars, Dewey energetically examined ways in which peace education could become an effective instrument in promoting global understanding as opposed to the more traditional patriotic indoctrination currently doled out in schools and textbooks. Specifically, efforts for establishing world peace and universal citizenship were based upon a social science approach to education. Dewey insisted that there were two subjects that represented the foundation blocks necessary for building international understanding: geography and history. He believed that geography and history enable students to reconstruct the past in order to cope with the present. Both subjects were necessary for overcoming some of the more sinister aspects of chauvinism which were being taught as citizenship in the schools.

When it came to the study of geography, for instance, Dewey applied his child-centered concepts and school as community into a more detailed investigation of peoples and their societies. Tying the notion of peace to global awareness required ways of teaching geography that will "help students gain insight into both nature and society, and which will help them apply what they learn . . . to their study of social and political problems" (Dewey, 1927, pp. 174-75). The proper teaching of geography to young students must take into account the study of all peoples, cultures, habits, occupations, art, and societies' contributions to the development of culture in general. For teachers it is important that they stop "worrying about the height of mountains and the length of rivers. When we do give consideration to these things, it must be in the context of cultural development" (Dewey, 1939, pp. 725-28).

Teaching geography to impressionable young minds had to become dynamic in order to act as a catalyst necessary for shaping a global picture. "Geography is a topic that originally appeals to imagination – even to the romantic imagination," Dewey asserted. "The variety of peoples and environment, their contrast with familiar scenes, furnishes infinite stimulation" (Dewey, 1916, p. 212). As an important part of the curriculum, necessary for fostering global cooperation, ". . . instruction in geography . . . should be intellectually more honest, should bring students into gradual contact with the actual realities of contemporary life and not leave them to make acquaintance with these things in [a] surprised way. . . ." (Dewey, 1958, p. 4a).

The teaching of history should also promote the goal of peace by divorcing itself from the past emphasis on the study of dates, military heroes, and battles. What Dewey stressed in the curriculum was for teachers to focus more on the social meaning of history: "History is not the story of heroes, but an account of social development; it provides us with knowledge of the past which contributes to the solution of social problems of the present and the future" (quoted in Clopton & Tsuin-Chen, 1973, p. 277). Present-day problems, such as wars, should be examined in their historical setting in order "to determine the origin of the problem; examine past efforts to deal with the problem; find out what sort of situation caused it to become a problem" (quoted in Clopton & Tsuin-Chen, 1973, p. 277). Knowledge of the past, coupled with a forward-looking approach to problem solving and values clarification, characterized Dewey's conception of history as moral imperative. "Intellectual insight into present forms of associated life," Dewey insisted,

is necessary for a character whose morality is more than colorless innocence. Historical knowledge helps provide such insight. The assistance which may be given by history to a more intelligent sympathetic understanding of the social situations of the present in which individuals share is a permanent and constructive moral asset (Dewey, 1916, p. 217).

One of Dewey's major contributions to the importance of peace education was his argument that in order to achieve international harmony, important changes in domestic institutional thinking would have to occur first. In *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), Dewey observed that "History does not prove the inevitability of war but it does prove that customs and institutions which organize native powers into certain patterns in politics and economics will also generate the war-pattern" (p. 115). The key to conflict control is to deflate the emotions and values attached to nationalism and substitute in its place a world order based on international law and organization. "Questions of prestige and honor are now of inflammatory importance," he wrote in the aftermath of the Great War, "because of the legalizing of war and the absence of a court; they will remain the main reliance in the technique of enlisting support of a war waged for unavowed reasons until war is outlawed" (Dewey, *Outlawry of War: What It Is and Is Not*, 15).

In an effort to promote international understanding, Dewey called for a school program in the 1920s that would foster an appreciation for internationalism and challenge the glorification of militarism. Applying the social science approach of Professor James Harvey Robinson's "New History" to the curriculum, Dewey charged that current social studies texts used in American classrooms were not only diminishing possibilities for creating an atmosphere of international cordiality but also increasing the chances for domestic intolerance. Issues such as the importance of the Outlawry of War Movement, a World Court, and American military interference in the Caribbean, for instance, were not being addressed. To counter this trend, Dewey's peace education program encouraged the development of a curriculum exploring the theme of nationalism within an international context.

His peace curriculum was designed around promoting an attitude of world patriotism. "We need a curriculum in history, geography, and literature," he informed readers in one of his most important articles on the subject entitled, "The Schools as a Means of Developing a Social Consciousness and Social Ideals in Children,"

...which will make it more difficult for the flames of hatred and suspicion to sweep over this country in the future, which indeed will make this impossible, because when children's minds are in the formative period we shall have fixed in them through the medium of the schools, feelings of respect and friendliness for the other nations and peoples of the world (Dewey, 1923, p. 516).

War as an institution thrives because no one is taught to question contemporary values and beliefs. The true value of his peace education program was in fostering new moral values in schoolchildren which would offset institutional habits. Challenging conservative critics who argued that war is part of human nature, Dewey responded by saying that "War and the existing economic regime have not been discussed primarily on their own account. They are crucial cases of the relation existing between original impulse and acquired habit. . . . A truer psychology locates the difficulty elsewhere. It shows that the trouble lies in the inertness of established habit" (Dewey, 1922, p. 125).

The real key to Dewey's peace education program, however, and one that is relevant today, is transforming the notion of nationalism into a more transnational perspective. He was well aware of how successful nationalism was in the unification of Germany and he attempted to use that historical experience in schools in order to develop "a new movement in education to

preserve what was socially most useful in the national heritage and to meet the issue of the emerging international society" (quoted in Curti, 1967, p. 1109). The age-old identification of patriotism with "national interests," one fostered by habit and training, which inevitably led to exclusivity, suspicion, jealousy, and dislike for other national cultures had to be subordinated to broader conceptions of human welfare. The peace education program Dewey encouraged between the World Wars was one that

. . . binds people together in co-operative human pursuits and results, apart from geographical limitation. The secondary and provisional character of national sovereignty in respect to the fuller, freer, and more fruitful association and intercourse of all human beings with one another must be instilled as a working disposition of the mind (quoted in Curti, 1967, p. 1109).

CONCLUSION

John Dewey's interest in peace education was inspired, in part, by the stinging condemnation he received for supporting President Woodrow Wilson's war aims in 1917. To his credit, he took those criticisms to heart and examined ways in which his social and political philosophy could further the interests of peace education in American schooling. "The lesson to be learned," he proclaimed "is that human attitudes and efforts are the strategic center for promotion of the generous aims of peace among nations; promotion of economic security; the use of political means in order to advance freedom and equality; and the world-wide cause of democratic institutions." Following this line of thought, he continued, "is bound to see that it carries with it the basic importance of education in creating the habits and the outlook that are able and eager to secure the ends of peace, democracy, and economic stability" (Dewey, 1946, p. 30). Even the horrors of World War II and the advent of the atomic bomb did not deter him from his goal of using schools to foster international understanding. He held onto that belief until his death in 1952.

Indeed, since the Vietnam War there have been a number of peace education and peace studies programs created at colleges and universities throughout the United States. Many of these programs and peace courses have integrated Dewey's relativistic thought as an instrument for encouraging international understanding and domestic social justice. The real problem remains, however, at the elementary and secondary levels in American education. There, patriotic citizenship continues to be a powerful force in shaping young minds. It was in this area of learning that Dewey directed most of his efforts during the interwar period. In calling for a peace education program in schooling, Dewey encouraged the creation of a curriculum emphasizing the development of an attitude which would accomplish the following: promoting the idea of world patriotism; using the social sciences, especially geography and history, as a bridge for understanding other cultures; and rectifying the more sinister aspects of patriotism and nationalism that have been a basic cause of war between nations. His peace education ideas also challenged the role of teachers and urged them to incorporate the values of peace and global cooperation among nations in their curriculums. To promote the human community in education, Dewey maintained, ". . . is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it" (Dewey, 1971, p. 87). That article of faith was his educational blueprint and instrument for establishing a lasting peace.

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