

How Educational Foundations Can Empower Tomorrow's Teachers: Dewey Revisited

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Why should future teachers study educational foundations? To a large extent, the answer to this question hinges on how we view teaching itself. As John Dewey noted in a speech he delivered to the Teachers' League of New York in 1913, "either teaching is an intellectual enterprise or it is a routine mechanical exercise" (1913/1979, p.112). Now if teaching is an intellectual enterprise, if teaching demands that its practitioners are caring and reflective individuals who are capable of making independent judgments and engaging in moral actions, then educational foundations has an important role to play in schools of education. On the other hand, if teaching is a routine and mechanical exercise, if teachers are nothing more than subject matter specialists or, even worse, skilled workers on an educational assembly line, then educational foundations is an unnecessary frill.

In what follows, I draw heavily on Dewey's writings to establish a rationale for including educational foundations in teacher preparation programs. I believe the arguments that can be used today to justify educational foundations are essentially the same ones that Dewey formulated several decades ago when the profession of education was still in its early stages of development.

Teachers as Decision Makers:

The Role of Psychological Foundations

Although prospective teachers need to master the subject matter they will teach, although they need to develop skills in using a variety of instructional methods, they also need a thorough grounding in psychological foundations to become effective teachers. As Dewey points out, there is a difference between a logical and a psychological organization of subject matter (1902/1990, pp. 199-202). A logical organization of subject matter is characteristic of adult patterns of thinking; though important, it is not the starting point of instruction. Rather, the first question regarding any subject of study is a psychological one: "We have first to fix attention on the child to find out what kind of experience is appropriate to him at the particular period selected; to discover, if possible, what it is that constitutes the special feature of the child's experience at this time; and why it is that his experience takes this form rather than another" (Dewey, 1897/1972, pp. 171-72).

Without an understanding of different learning theories and without an appreciation for the dynamics of childhood and adolescent development, teachers are apt to become too dependent on textbooks. These materials, after all, are developed by experts in the subjects they teach. Similarly, without the same psychological understandings, educators are apt to impose inflexible standards of achievement for each grade level. But neither a textbook-driven curriculum nor a test-driven curriculum can take into account all the developmental stages, learning styles, past experiences, and current interests of students in any given classroom. Teachers need to know when to modify the existing curriculum and when to discard it and create their own. Equally important, they need to know how to devise a curriculum that does not overemphasize abstract reasoning, which, after all, is a narrow form of rationality. Instead, teachers must value the full range of human intelligence, which includes concrete thinking, practical activity, feeling, spirituality, and moral action as well as reasoning (Noddings, 1992, pp. 30-31, 43).

If the preparation educators receive and the conditions under which they work do not enable them to make reasoned judgments about the design and implementation of the curriculum, teaching becomes a lifeless affair, a routine and mechanical exercise. As Dewey aptly observed almost a century ago, intellectual subservience is a detriment to good teaching: it results in teachers accepting "without inquiry or criticism any method or device which seems to promise good results" (1904/1977, p. 257). But perhaps the greatest obstacle to the development of a professional

spirit among educators is a lack of adequate incentives. Teachers are not likely to devote themselves to "the continuous study of the questions of teaching" when they have limited intellectual responsibility for the conduct of the schools in which they work (Dewey, 1913/1979, pp. 100-11).

Teachers as Moral Agents:

The Value of Social Foundations

Educators need a thorough grounding in social foundations as well as psychological foundations if they are to work effectively in their classrooms, schools, and communities. Unlike most education students today, Dewey's students at the turn of the century had a substantial amount of coursework in this area. While at the University of Chicago (1894-1904), he insisted that prospective teachers and administrators take coursework in Educational Sociology, Educational Ethics, and Philosophy of Education. Dewey expected students to be knowledgeable about schools as social and political institutions and to be familiar with the historical development of ideas concerning education (1896/1972, pp. 285-87).

Also while at the University of Chicago, Dewey created a Laboratory School where students and professors alike could test theories in an idealized, concrete setting. Dewey wanted students to link theory to practice but only after they had acquired a thorough understanding of the theories undergirding sound educational practice. The theories Dewey had in mind were drawn not only from the field of instruction but also from psychology, philosophy, and the social sciences. This last point is worth emphasizing since Lee S. Shulman (1990) recently has proposed a model of teacher education that he claims is based on the Laboratory School. Shulman recommends a method of teaching that calls for a diminishing or "withering away" of the field of educational foundations (p. 304), a move that Dewey surely would oppose, were he alive today (Pietig, 1997).

Why should today's graduate and undergraduate students study social foundations? Like Dewey's students, they need to understand the ethical dimensions of educational practice. They need to be sensitive to the dynamics of school culture and the power relationships at play in their classrooms, schools, and communities. Similarly, teachers need to appreciate cultures different from their own and reflect on the full ramifications of their teaching practice so they will be less likely to perpetuate stereotypes of race, gender, sexual orientation, and social class. By drawing on several disciplines, social foundations provides a basis for lifelong reflection on education: it gives students interpretive frameworks for evaluating educational policy and practice (Council of Learned Societies in Education, 1996).

Finally, social foundations helps prepare and motivate students to become moral agents in their classrooms, schools, and communities. It is not enough for educators to be caring and reflective practitioners, laudable as these goals might be. Teachers also must be well informed, politically astute citizens who know how to

articulate their values persuasively to others in order to affect social change. All educators bear a responsibility to the general public. They need to be leaders and "directors in the formation of public opinion" (Dewey, 1913/1979, p. 110). More than any other group, they should be advocates for the welfare of children and young adults in our society.

Some Final Thoughts

As might be expected, Dewey set high expectations for educators in our public schools. Teachers need to be "saturated" in the subject matter they teach yet recognize that they are much more than subject matter specialists. They need to be lifelong students of "mind activity" (Dewey, 1904/1977, p. 256). In other words, they need a working knowledge of psychological foundations to explore the educational significance and instructional potency of the subjects they teach. Educators also need a working knowledge of social foundations to fully appreciate the cultural, political, and moral dimensions of school life. If they are ignorant of these contextual realities, such as the need for multicultural education, the impact of poverty on learning, and the unequal distribution of goods and services within education, they will be less sensitive to issues of social justice.

Dewey set equally high expectations for professors in schools and colleges of education. Like public school teachers, education professors should be advocates of children and young adults in our society. More than that, they should be advocates of teachers and sympathetic to their situations. Education professors must speak out against policies that disempower teachers, inhibit the development of a professional spirit, and reduce the quality of teaching. To the extent that teacher educators fail to meet this goal, they need to examine their own working conditions and critically evaluate the incentives at play in schools of education (Goodlad, 1990; Clifford & Guthrie, 1988). Does the reward structure encourage or discourage professional involvement in K-12 schools? Dewey expected public school teachers to recognize their responsibility to the public and become leaders and shapers of public opinion. Can we expect any less of teacher educators?

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