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SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY HUBS: THE LASTING INFLUENCE OF JOHN DEWEY'S PHILOSOPHY

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This paper retains the authors' use of American English.

Abstract

This paper surveys both contemporary and historic interpretations of community schools with respect to philosopher John Dewey's web of life concept, where life and pedagogical practice were viewed in terms of their interrelations. As Founder of The Laboratory School, completed in 1903 on the University of Chicago campus, he proposed distinctive facilities in keeping with his educational vision. Chicago Public School's Community School Initiative, became the largest community schools' system in the United States. Nettelhorst School is presented to illustrate the district's mission. A circumscribed historical timeline provides context. The paper closes by assessing associations between curriculum, society, and the built environment, appraising a contemporary community school system in terms of Dewey's ideas proposed more than a century ago.

Keywords: John Dewey, community, web of life, schools, architecture

Schools as Community Hubs: The Lasting Influence of John Dewey's Philosophy

In March 2020, our local school district closed as a precaution to help mitigate the spread of the coronavirus. It took the school district about a week to establish food delivery for the nutrition program, plus another week to make it more effectual. Approximately two weeks after schools closed parents and students were informed that no curriculum was going to be provided, however enrichment materials would be made available. While all students in this district have a school provided laptop computer, not all students' families have access to internet services. Our local school district was not yet of the mindset that the quarantine would last long.

Little did we know the extent to which our lives would be affected by the pandemic. The initial short-term closure was soon extended to the end of the school year. It was at this point that I contacted my children's school principal to advocate for teachers to maintain contact with their students. In the principal's reply she informed me that student teacher relationships were very much on her mind. Further, she wanted me to know that the most vulnerable students, those with depression, suicidal ideation, compromised housing, and anxiety had been checked regularly.

The principal's communication was a reminder of the many social services provided by our public schools. Behind a curtain of privacy our schools have responsibility for so much more than traditional school subjects, like math and reading, with educational professionals addressing the immediate and pervasive needs of students. The pandemic facing us in 2020 has presented new challenges to keep students safe, healthy and ready to be engaged academically. Our local school district is not part of a community school system. However, community school structures influenced by the Progressive Era, and the philosophy of John Dewey in particular, offer wisdom and insights to inform our educational futures.

Background

John Dewey's contributions to philosophy and education are well known. Dewey, with University of Chicago president William R. Harper, founded the Laboratory School in 1894. They aspired to present an alternative to the formal schooling of the time (Wirth & Bewig, 1968; Knoll, 2014).

Architects of this era looked at natural daylighting, the practice of placing windows to maximize sunlight for internal lighting, from a different perspective. By aligning desks and chairs, architects could control the shadows cast from the light beaming through windows. The architects used this formula: width of room not to exceed two times the overall height of windows, windows cover 40-50% of exterior wall = to 25% of floor area. The ideal classroom of the time held forty-two desks, in rows of seven by six, with a room dimension of 23' x 29' (Weisser, 2006).

In contrast, the design of the Laboratory School sought to eliminate waste and isolation. Waste in school, as Dewey saw it, was the inability to utilize that which the student brought from home life. Likewise, if a student was unable to apply what s/he learned in school to life in society that too was regarded as

waste (Wirth & Bewig, 1968). Dewey offered:

The ideal home would naturally have a workshop where the child could work out his constructive instincts. ... The life of the child would extend out of doors to the garden, surrounding fields, and forests. He would have his excursions, his walks and talks, in which the larger world out of doors would open to him (1920, p 35).

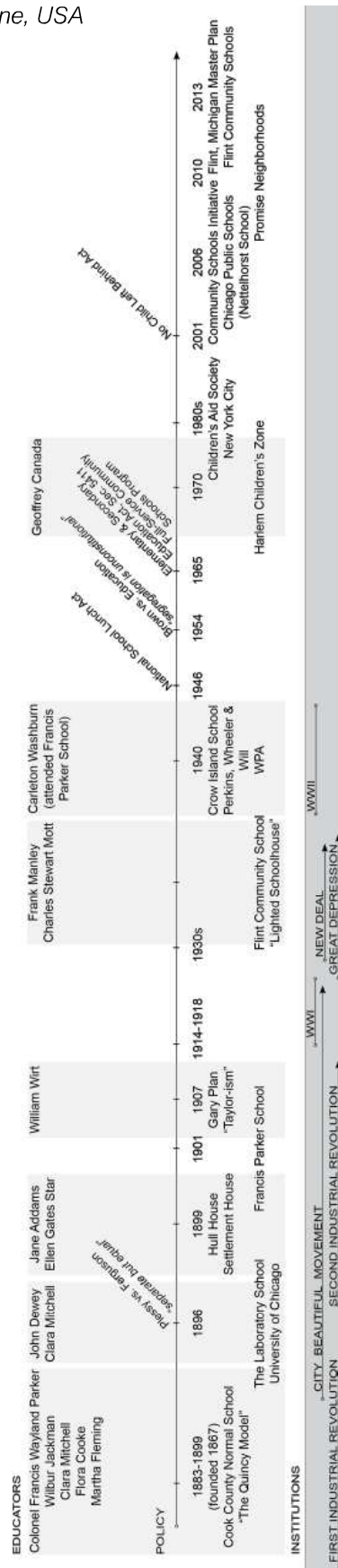
As chair of the departments of pedagogy and philosophy at the University of Chicago, Dewey advocated creating distinctive facilities reflective of his educational vision. He believed it was essential to correlate the physical form of the school building with the school grounds (Wirth & Bewig, 1968). Dewey felt that school had a fundamental responsibility to aid young people in understanding the larger world around them (Wirth, 1968). What happened at school needed to be relevant at home and what happened at home needed to be applicable at school. With this in mind, teachers were tasked with converting the curriculum into problems for students to analyze and develop strategies of action to address the problems identified. In this way students were actively engaged in *thinking and doing* and *reflecting* on their actions with teacher support (Knoll, 2014).

These progressive ideas took school design from bolted down desks and chairs to movable furniture, natural lighting, fresh air and expansion of classroom activities to the outdoors. The Laboratory School model included workshops, experimental gardens, kitchens, laboratories and accommodations for creative expression through the arts and drama (Wirth & Bewig, 1968). The common theme in the curriculum of the Laboratory School was the *web of life* and subjects were studied according to their interrelationships. Dewey's philosophy proposed that the school is society, stressing character building on the part of the student and responsibility on the part of the school community through a close connection with the natural environment. He advocated first-hand contact with what he called "a close and intimate acquaintance" with nature (Dewey, 1920, 11).

Dewey's work co-occurred with other influential social movements and activists. These included the City Beautiful Movement, an architecture and landscape architecture response to deteriorating living conditions in cities following Industrialization. Jane Addams' and Ellen Starr's Hull House, located on the west side of Chicago, was an early settlement house offering multiple social services based on the model of Toynbee Hall in London's East End. Another example was Cook County Normal School for teacher training directed by Colonel Francis Parker, who Dewey referred to as the *father of Progressive Education* (refer Figure 1). Parker's educational philosophy of teaching to the whole child was notable for its supportive environment, innovation, and experimentation for students and teachers alike (Gross, 2009; Goulah, 2010). Further, Parker believed the success of democracy was in large part dependent on the success of schools. To Parker and Dewey, school was the training ground for good citizenship. Moreover, Parker saw school as a form of community life (Cooke, 2005).

Figure 1

Limited Community School Timeline, USA



Source: Author

Similarly, Dewey believed that school was preparation for citizenship not solely related to the state, but a thoroughly socialized affair connected to all aspects of community life. Accordingly, community life shared in all intellectual and spiritual resources (Dewey, 1902). Dewey recognized the applied science of his time, indeed Industrialization rapidly changed community compositions. Schools as social centers brought people together, promoted empathy, and facilitated understanding of difference (Dewey, 1902). The continuity between home and school, to which Dewey referred, confirms the importance of the design of school experience structured through community to form a democratic society.

Community School Visions

The Coalition for Community Schools and the Institute for Educational Leadership advocacy groups have outlined a hopeful vision for community schools from a Deweyan perspective (Melville & Blank, 2011). For a little over a century, the community school movement in the United States has looked to Dewey's example of *school as social center* (Blank, Melville & Shah, 2003). During the Depression of the 1930s, The Mott Foundation in Flint, Michigan supported lifelong learning for adults and children with after school recreation programs. During the 1970s the Community Schools Act and the Community Schools and Comprehensive Community Education Act provided federally sanctioned funding for community-centered programming. The following decades saw a variety of community school organizations take shape, including the Children's Aid Society, Communities in Schools, Beacons Schools, Healthy Start, Caring Communities, among others. Their missions encompassed family support centers, health and mental health services, early childhood and after school programs, adult learning, partnerships with businesses and civic groups, and shared use of facilities after school hours (Melville & Blank, 2011). A new federal program in 1998 increased funding from the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program, further increasing the visibility of community schools as a whole.

Through increased collaboration with businesses and non-profit service organizations, more community schools have grown from their historic role as social centers to multi-use educational facilities. Coalition for Community Schools identifies three important factors contributing to expansion in community school development, moving from individual schools to entire districts:

- educators and policy makers are less focused on test scores
- community partnerships underscore specific community needs
- support from public and private, local, state and federal agencies (Blank, 2018)

Other factors commonly associated with community schools is the four pillars model:

- integrated student supports on site
- expanded learning time and opportunities
- family and community engagement
- collaborative leadership (Oakes, Maier and Daniel, 2017).

These pillars are described as self-reinforcing.

Another popular model is the developmental triangle, with each side of the triangle connected to and integrating three key concepts:

- core instructional program
- expanded learning opportunities
- comprehensive support services on site.

The three sides of the triangle form a framework around the community, the family, and the child (Lubell, 2011).

Chicago Public Schools and the Sustainable Community Schools Initiative

The campaign to increase community school models in Chicago began in the mid-1990s when Arne Duncan became CEO of the Chicago Public Schools. Funding partnerships led by the Polk Brothers Foundation in a public/private venture supported a pilot program to organize 100 community schools in the city (Melville, Jacobson & Blank, 2011; Nicely, 2016). By 2007 Chicago Public Schools represented the largest community school network in the United States providing a range of services to individual school communities in partnership with over 400 community non-profit organizations (Bingler, 2010). The Sustainable Community School Initiative has endured. In 2018, Chicago Public Schools announced an additional investment of 10 million dollars (US) to aid community school programming in 20 schools, to increase access to programs for students, teachers, and parents (CPS, 8/7/18).

Chicago Public Schools participating in the Sustainable Community School Initiative encourage a *place-based approach* in which schools' partner with local agencies to support academic achievement, health and social services, as well as encourage community and parental engagement. In a place-based approach the local context defines the specific community program (Oakes, Maier & Daniel, 2017). Dewey's ideology can be identified in this model, where relevance of what happens at home is advanced by what happens at school. Further, place-based education is described as immersion in local ecologies, cultures, and heritage as a foundation for studying math, language arts, and sciences (PEEC, 2004). This could further be described as *topophilia*, love of place, attachment to place, or homeland, understood at different scales (Tuan, 1990). Constructivist, project-based and place-based education draws on progressive ideas that encourage community building through multi-disciplinary activities with relevance beyond the school walls (Williams, 2017). Schools as community hubs support democracy in education, through community participation and partnerships in design and planning on the front end and ongoing adjustment to program delivery throughout the life of the community school. This reflects Dewey's philosophy of *thinking and doing*, and *reflecting* (Bingler, Quinn & Sullivan, 2003). As community schools advance through *thinking and doing*, adjustments that best address the ongoing evolution of the community are made (*reflecting*).

Louis B. Nettelhorst School, Chicago, Illinois

Louis B. Nettelhorst School is a Chicago Public School serving children in kindergarten to 8th Grade. Nettelhorst School is part of the Sustainable Community School Initiative. The school is named after a popular German immigrant known for his advocacy of physical education and teaching of the German language. Louis B. Nettelhorst served on the Chicago Board of Education for seven years during the late 19th century (Bachrach, 2012). Nettelhorst School, established in 1892, is housed in an historical building designed by J. J. Flanders. In 1911, Arthur F. Hussander designed an addition to the school and a three-story wing was added to accommodate 2,200 students in 1937. Over the years, Nettelhorst School has struggled with deteriorating facilities, declining enrolments, and poorer academic achievement (Bachrach, 2012). The recent turnaround of the school is credited to an initiative that gathered parents, teachers and community leaders to get behind the project to renew Nettelhorst School and revitalize the neighborhood. A coalition of dedicated parents was able to procure project funding, in-kind donations, and volunteer labour to renovate their school (Wilson, 2011). Today the school serves over 700 students.

The outward appearance of Nettelhorst School is visually rich with exterior artwork, murals, linear gardens, a chicken coop, and outdoor classroom along the perimeter of the building in the Lake View neighborhood of Chicago. Bright colors and foliage stand out against the historical masonry building. Two murals in the school's art collection have been restored by Works Progress Administration and a number of other artworks, inside and out, have been revitalized by local Chicago artists. Some of these projects were created in collaboration with Nettelhorst students. The outdoor classroom at Nettelhorst uses the Nature Explore model which uses data informed design, curriculum resources, and educator workshops among other related programming. Nettelhorst School strives to be the center of its community through contact with nature that facilitates topophilic and biophilic predispositions. This is occurring through community engaged programming inclusive of arts expression and urban centered gardening practices open to all residents every day, evenings and weekends, while at the same time focusing on the students with resources for health, social services and academic attainment. After school programming and adult education are offered. Residents are invited to participate in garden events as well as school governance activities. Expectations for students and families are listed on the school website and instruct the school community to *take care of yourself, take care of others, and take care of our environment*.

Nettelhorst School engages with non-profit partners unique to the school community to address the needs of the whole child. Further, as one of over 200 community schools in the Chicago Public School District, Nettelhorst School has become the center of the community it serves, offering an array of onsite programs. These programs have been defined by educators, parents, residents, businesses, and community agencies that are available on site throughout the school day, evenings and weekends.

Every community school is different, varied to meet the unique needs of its community with programs and partnerships tailored to meet those requirements. In this way Sustainable Community Initiative schools become, or are enhanced to be, hubs of their communities. As one collaborator of Nettelhorst's program commented:

Architecture for Humanity Chicago was thrilled to collaborate with The Nettelhorst School to design the concepts that would ultimately lead to the Outdoor Classroom. The space created allows for imagination and learning beyond the narrow borders of the lot, entices the community to participate, and provides a unique educational opportunity that should be modeled across Chicago Public Schools (Katherine Darnstadt, Architecture for Humanity Chicago, Nettelhorst School website).

Conclusion

The antecedents to Community schools in the United States can most often be traced to the Progressive Era and the work of John Dewey. His work represents a shift in educational practice of the time which had a lasting influence on pedagogy, school architectural form, and relationship of the school to the larger community. The social activism of the era influenced Dewey's work. Since that time, public and private partnerships along with federal policy have fuelled community school development and led to a range of community school structures. Dominant themes including expanded learning opportunities, comprehensive support services on site, community-based partnerships, and family and community engagement, remain pillars of successful programs while honoring individuality of each community. As Dewey might advocate, thinking and doing, and reflecting are evident in the processes used by Chicago Public School's Sustainable Community Schools Initiative. Nettelhorst School is an example of a Chicago Public School that embraces the Sustainable Community Schools Initiative and has become a community hub that nurtures the whole child through the lens of the value of community experience. This would be in keeping with Dewey's web of life concepts, that life and pedagogical practice should be practiced in terms of their interrelations.

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