

Deweyan Democracy and the “Free” Schools: What Constitutes a Good Education and What Social Conditions are Conducive to it?

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Introduction: “Free” Schools are a Potential Threat to Democratic Education

The “free” schools policy, introduced to Britain by Michael Gove, is inspired by a similar policy that has been active in Sweden since 1992. Part of David Cameron’s “Big Society”, it is intended to give the public a more involved role in education. “Free” schools have been described by the government as being “set up in response to what local people say they want and need in order to improve education for children in their community.” (Department for Education, 2012) The Department for Education has attempted to improve students’ educations and give local people a more involved role in their children’s education by drawing three main differences between “free” schools and local authority maintained schools. Local authority maintained schools are under Local Authorities, must follow the National Curriculum and employ educators with qualified teacher status. Yet “free” schools are set up by groups, such as: teachers, parents, charities, businesses, universities, trusts, religious, or voluntary (Hough, 09/09/2011). They do not have to follow the National Curriculum, but must provide an education that is “broad and balanced” (BBC News, 18/06/2010). Neither do they have to employ educators with qualified teacher status, although the majority of educators in “free” schools are qualified. By allowing a group to run a school and not making the National Curriculum or the employment of qualified educators mandatory, the Department for Education claims that a “free” school can improve a student’s education and respond to the wants and needs of “local people”.

In this essay, I will argue that the “free” schools pose a threat to good education in Britain. In clarifying what I mean by “good education” I will build on John Dewey’s ideas on democratic education, which I broadly endorse. My focus will be on if “free” schools provide social conditions that are conducive to democratic education. I will examine: what the role of the school in the community should be; what social conditions are conducive to education; if the “free” schools do what they claim to; and if, in practice, they provide social conditions that are conducive to democratic education.

The threat the “free” schools pose to democratic education rests on their general failure to be set up by culturally diverse groups. In the first part of my essay, I will define a culturally diverse group (which will now be referred to as a CDG) as a group that incorporates a multitude of experiences; I will also consider the conditions under which such a group can be formed and supported. In practice, many of the groups that have set up “free” schools do not fit my definition of a CDG. There are three potential dangers if the group running a school is not a CDG. These are: the group will be ill-equipped to eliminate non-progressive features of its self or the community; there will be a breakdown of dialogue between the group and the community, leading to segregation between them; there may be a similar rise in segregation in the wider society. I will argue that in practice many of the groups setting up “free schools” do not provide social conditions that are conducive to democratic education. The potential consequences of this are: a hindering of the progression of the group and of the community; and

segregation on both the level of the community and of the wider society.

In the second part of my essay, I will consider the features a classroom environment must provide for democratic education. Experiences within the classroom must train a student to live in a plural society whilst cultivating their own individuality. “Free” schools are in danger of not providing these experiences if the group cannot provide a plural environment. Also, a non-CDG may maintain an undemocratic authority over their students, where they prioritise their values and needs over the students’. This will cause the student to struggle to cultivate their own individuality. A further problem is that, if the group prioritises itself over the student, the subject matter and the method in the classroom can become inappropriate to the student’s individuality and capabilities. Some “free” schools have formed their curriculums to reflect their own ideals and not the needs of their students; some have over-intellectualised their curriculum due to outside pressure. If the subject matter or method is inappropriate to a student, it will hinder their ability to have future educative experiences. Therefore, if a “free” school is to provide a democratic education it must provide a plural democratic classroom environment, catering to the needs of its students

In this essay I will look at “free” schools in general. Yet I shall sometimes use a particular “free” school as an example; this is a school that is considered a success of the policy by the government. Kings Science Academy in Bradford is described as coming “closest to David Cameron's vision of what a free school should be.” (Abrams, 02/09/2011) It is set up by Sajid Hussain in aid of helping children from the deprived area of Bradford. The school has a strong tie with professionalism; the governors are professionals, the school is supported by ARM and the University of Bradford and is in partnership with Apple and other businesses. I will use Kings Science Academy as my main example because it is fairest to the policy to critically analyse it by using as an example a school that is regarded as a success in the policy.

The School, the Group and the Community

For a group to provide conditions that are conducive to democratic education it must be a CDG. The criteria for evaluating a CDG are: How numerous and varied are the interests that are consciously shared? How free are the interactions in different forms of associations? (Garrison and Neiman, 2003, 27) These are the criteria, described by Dewey, for a group being conducive to plural democracy. To apply this to a group in charge of running a school, the group must be a plural group and also in free and constant interaction with other groups. To be able to fulfil these criteria, the group must embody a multitude of experiences and contain individuals with different experiences from one another. Due to Britain becoming increasingly multi-cultural and multi-faith, it is important the group represents different ethnicities and faiths. Yet this must be done with a consideration of the community the group exists in. By community, I refer to the geographical community¹, which is the way in which schools and the Press normally use the term. The pluralism within the group should represent the pluralism within the community. If a community is half Muslim and half Christian and a group is wholly Christian it is not representative of the multitude of experiences within that community. Yet pluralism alone it not enough; the group must share their ideas freely and constantly among each other to be able to gain from their different experiences. They must also be

¹ For the purposes of this essay, “community” will always refer to the geographical community a school is situated in.

in dialogue with other groups so as to not close themselves, and the community they represent, off from the wider society². Without the group interacting with other groups, the student cannot learn to live a society that is wider and more diverse than their community. Thus, in this essay, the term CDG means a group that embodies a multitude of experiences so as to properly represent the community it exists in. It also means a group that interacts well within itself and with other groups.

The School's Role in the Community

To consider the impact of a non-CDG running a school, I must specify what the role of the school in the community should be. Education, in the broad sense, is described by Dewey as creating in a person a “transformation of the quality of experience till it partakes in the interest, purposes, and ideas current in the social group” (Dewey, 1916, 9). Here, Dewey is describing the natural education of person in their interaction with their social environment, which helps a person to function in the group they were born into. Yet education, within the school, has a more specialised role. As well as fulfilling the role of general education, it must also train the student to be able to function in the wider society. By being able to function in a more diverse environment, the individual student will not be restricted by the limitations of the social group they are born into (Dewey, 1916, 14). In its specialised role, the school must also provide conditions that will aid the progression of the group; progression meaning a group improving itself due to its diversity and its recognition of the diverse opportunities available to it. As education is a social process that should aid a group's progression, it must be able to eliminate “the unworthy features of the existing environment from influence upon mental habitudes” (Dewey, 1916, 14). This means the school must be able to provide conditions that are conducive to the critical analysis of the community. Meaning that features that are undesirable, maladaptive or hindering the community's progression can be identified and eliminated. In conclusion, the school must: give a fair and balanced representation of the community to prepare students to function in it; prepare students to function in the wider society; be able to critically analyse the community so as to eliminate features that are non-progressive.

The threat “free” schools pose to democratic education is that, in practice, they can be run by non-CDGs. Some of the groups already running “free” schools are not CDGs due to their lack of plurality. This derives from many of them having distinctive ways of thinking about education. For example, over half the “free” schools set up in 2011 were faith schools. This in itself is not problematic. Yet many of the groups running faith “free” schools only embody experiences that are within this faith, and fail to embody experiences without it. On the whole, the governors of these schools are of the same faith. The problem is not just with groups only being representative of one faith or ethnicity. Some groups only embody one class-ideal, one segment of the employment sector and one view on what it is to be successful. Kings Science Academy is set up by people who define success as having a career in business, marketing or entrepreneurship. Alan Lewis CBE, Chairman of the Hartley Group and governor of Kings Science Academy, describes the school as “an opportunity to perfect [students'] character and entrepreneurial skills, thus enabling them to become competitive individuals in a global market.” (Kings Science Academy, 2010) Although this is not a bad aim within itself, it shows the lack of plurality within the group running the school.

² The term “wider society” in this essay will refer to Britain; this is due to the essay's focus being on the British education system

The school's governors are businessmen; its partners are marketing, and entrepreneurial, businesses. There is little or no input from people with different careers, such as craftsmen or those involved in agriculture. A lack of pluralism is apparent in many of the "free" schools already running. In practice, this could lead to the groups failing to interact well with those who are different from them. The "free" schools policy allows non-CDGs to run schools; these groups are in danger of not providing social conditions that are conducive to democratic education.

If the "free" schools are not run by CDGs, what are the possible consequences of this? I ask this in the pragmatism spirit, with the pragmatist maxim in mind: "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object." (Peirce, 1878, 57) In this instance I am interpreting the pragmatist maxim as: when considering a concept, the possible consequences must be considered to evaluate its worth. Therefore to evaluate if non-CDGs being in charge of schools is conducive to democratic education I must consider the possible consequences of this.

The Dangers of Letting a Non-CDG Group Run a School

Failure to Evaluate and Eliminate Unworthy Features

The first threat a non-CDG running a "free" school poses is that it will not be able to eliminate the unworthy features of the community it exists in. Although the Department for Education has implicitly identified groups setting up "free" schools with the local community, they are two very different things³. As I quoted earlier, the department claims that "free" schools will be "set up in response to what local people say they want and need" (Department for Education, 2012); this assumes that the groups running the "free" schools can know what their communities want and need. Yet, in practice many of the groups do not embody the pluralism and multitude of experiences that the community does; they are not CDGs. If the group in charge of a school lacks this pluralism of ideas it will fail to evaluate characteristics of the community that are non-progressive. A group that lacks diverse interests is maladaptive. It reduces its capacities to imagine alternative possibilities that will lead to reorganisation and progress (Garrison and Neiman, 2003, 27). Therefore the role of the school to aid the progression of its community is in danger. A group that only embodies one faith, one class, or only the business-minded is not equipped to evaluate a community that embodies many faiths, classes and professions⁴. I am not claiming that non-CDGs are completely like-minded; there is always a variety of different views. I am claiming that a non-CDG's variety of views will not be as numerous or diverse as the community's. A non-CDG lacks the same range of alternative possibilities as that of the community; this pluralism is required for the reorganisation and progression of the group and the community. Therefore, one negative consequence of a non-CDG group running a school is that it will make the school unable to critically analyse the community, thus hindering its progression.

³ In fact NASUWT argues that "free" schools are not a response to what local people want, claiming that research by Ipsos MORI shows that 95% of the public are against schools being run by groups such as businesses. They claims that the "public support is for local, democratically accountable schools." (NASUWT, 2012, 5)

⁴ Dewey may have been firmly against a group such as a faith group being in charge of a school, I do not have the same disagreement.

Segregation on Two Levels: The Community and the Wider Society

Another negative consequence of a non-CDG running a school is that there may be a breakdown in the dialogue between that group and the community, which will lead to segregation. The group's lesser degree of plurality, alongside its lack of need to interact with other groups to educate its immature members, may lead to it not keeping in constant dialogue with other groups. For example, Kings Science College could decide that it has all the interactions it needs with the businesses it is partnered with; it could stop interchanging ideas with groups that embody other forms of employment. This lack of interaction would lead to segregation between different segments of the employment sector. There have already been accusations that the "free" schools in Sweden created segregation (Hough, 09/09/2011), and that the same will occur in Britain. The BBC reported Patrick Roach, deputy general secretary of the NASUWT, as claiming that letting some groups run a school would create "a climate in which fascism and racism could grow." (Wheeler, 04/10/12) In cases where extremist groups were involved this is a strong possibility. Yet even with non-extremist groups, segregation is a possibility. This is partly because any non-CDG will not have the same diversity as the community. Yet it is mostly because the threat of a breakdown in the dialogue between school and community is a strong possibility⁵. Non-CDGs are likely to pick out the features of the community that fit with their own values, and not interact with features they disagree with. In not being required by legislation to alter its view on education, a non-CDG will not be forced to interact with those who think differently from it. If a group is not required to interact with those that disagree with it, the chance of it failing to do so is high. If this occurs, the school will become separated from certain parts of the community, thus leading to segregation on the community level.

Segregation within the community is not the only possibility. A non-CDG running a school could also create segregation in the wider society of Britain. The deregulation of schools may lead to individual schools not interacting with other schools. This could occur if they believe their views to be too diverse from one another, or fail to recognise a need to converse with other schools. Therefore, a non-CDG running a school may not just hinder the progression of the community but also the school, education, and the wider society. The main problem is that, if the group becomes segregated from the wider society and the different groups within it, it cannot educate students to function within this wider society. Students may only be educated to function in the roles given to them by the group, without knowing or being able to interact with other ways of living. The problem here is twofold: the group may stop interacting with other groups; and it may fail to train students to interact with other groups in the wider society. Interaction between different groups is vital because it leads to changes in social habit and "its continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse." (Dewey, 1916, 49) These changes in social habit may mean a group is better adapted to function in its current, and future, context. Groups cannot function in, contribute to, or learn from the wider society unless they are in a free and regular interaction with other social groups in that wider society. Therefore, segregation amongst groups will hinder their progression. It will also hinder the progression of the wider society because

⁵ An example of a good working dialogue between a school and a community is the John Dewey Project on Progressive Education running in America (Koliba, 2000). The project involves rooting the school's culture in the local community by opening up the school's resources to the local community and creating direct ties between the local community and the curriculum. This interchanging of resources and views is an example of how a dialogue between the community and a school can be beneficial to both participants.

students will not be trained to live in, and contribute to, this society.

The Implications: The Student in the Classroom and Society

The Role of Experience: To Cultivate Individuality and Train Students to Live in the Wider Society

As well as having possible negative consequences for the school in the community and the wider society, a non-CDG running a school poses a threat to education in the classroom. A non-CDG may fail to provide an education that fulfils the aims of education. These aims are: to train students to live in the wider society; to aid students in the development of their individual potential. The former aim means that students must be trained to engage in fruitful discourse with those that are different from them; this requires pluralism within the classroom. The latter aim is due to a democratic belief in human equality. This understanding of human equality does not mean that everyone is equal in their capabilities but that every person has “the right to equal opportunity with every other person for development of whatever gifts he has.” (Dewey, 1939, 152) Every person is equal insofar as they have the right to an opportunity, equal to the opportunity given to others, to develop their individual potential. The aims of education in the classroom require it to do two very difficult things: train a student towards their individuality whilst training them to function in the wider society. Some have criticised these two aims, claiming they are incompatible⁶. Yet if a society is a plural democracy, these two aims should not be contradictory. This is not a claim that the aims are not challenging to achieve together, but that it is possible.

To achieve these two aims the right educative experience must be possible within the classroom. I agree with Dewey that a good education is not just built on principles but on a philosophy of experience (Dewey, 1938, Ch.2). A person’s ideas and beliefs are formed through the type of experiences they have; these experiences can either be educative or not depending on their quality. The criteria for assessing the quality of an experience are continuity and interaction. The principle of continuity is the idea that every experience will influence the conditions and possibilities of future experiences; an experience can either retard or aid the progression of future experiences. For example, a “spoilt” child due to their experiences of being constantly over-indulged may develop a disposition to avoid experiences that involve hard work, thus hindering their development. Yet an experience that “arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense to carry a person over the dead places in the future” (Dewey, 1938, 31) will enable a student in the progression of their future experiences, whilst developing the right attitudes, sensitivities and responses within them. The principle of interaction is based on the idea that an experience is dependent on a person’s interaction with the objective environment. This means that the person in control of the experience, the educator, must assign equal importance to both the internal conditions of the student and the objective environment. As experiences are dependent on their objective environment, the ordering of that environment will affect the experience’s educative success. The educator must consider both the internal condition of the student- their needs and capabilities- and the ordering of the objective environment to create an

⁶ These aims are based on Dewey’s commitments to pluralism and democracy as a way of life, which have been criticised as being incompatible. Turner shows that these criticisms, posited by Dewey’s opponents, stem from misinterpretations of his democracy as a rigid set of rules instead of the ever-changing and open democracy that fits with his pragmatism perspective (Turner, forthcoming).

experience that will be educative. The extent of the educative quality of an experience is measurable in its continuity and interaction. A good educative experience should help a student function in the wider society, whilst developing their own individual potential.

One potential threat to education in the classroom posed by a non-CDG running a “free” school is their inability to provide the right educative environment. A school run by a non-CDG will not represent a plural democracy for two reasons. First, as the non-CDGs do not represent the plurality within the community, the school environment will also fail to represent this plurality. Second, due to the non-CDGs having predetermined particular views on education and success, their form of social control within the school will be undemocratic. In this instance, a democratic form of social control is one where order is not established by any one person but by “the moving spirit of the whole group.” (Dewey, 1938, 58) This means that order within the school must be established by the group, including the students. It does not mean that anything goes, or the students should be in control of their education; the mature educators should use their experience to help guide the students. Therefore if a group running a school imposes its own wills and desires on the students without allowing the students to contribute their own wills and desires, they become an undemocratic authority. This type of authority must not be imposed in the school environment. If a group commits both these failures- being an undemocratic authority and not providing a plural environment- the experiences the students have will be inappropriate for democratic education. Lack of plurality may cause them to be closed off from having experiences that are other to the group, or make them unable to understand other people’s views. Being under an undemocratic authority may hinder them from having experiences that would cultivate their own individuality; instead they will have experiences that are in keeping with the group’s values. The “free” schools run by non-CDGs are at risk of providing an undemocratic environment. This environment will damage the students’ abilities to live in a wider society and to cultivate their own individuality.

Suitable Subject Matter and Method

A philosophy of experience underpinning education also impacts the subject matter and method in the classroom. Within Dewey’s philosophy of experience is a commitment to create experiences that are shaped around individual students. It must be recognised that the subject of the immature and the way it is arranged- the method- will not be the same as that of the mature educator (Dewey, 1938, Ch.7). For a student to have educative experiences, what and how they are taught must be appropriate to their cognitive and personal development. To create experiences that will help a student develop their own individual potential, the educator must have an understanding of them individually; this involves knowing their needs, interests, desires and capabilities. In some instances, “free” schools have started to move towards a curriculum that is based around the individual. Kings Science Academy has introduced a “character curriculum” (Kings Science Academy, 2010), where character and citizenship developments are aspects running throughout the curriculum. This shows a potential for “free” schools to allow students to develop their own individuality. Yet in practice many of the schools have failed to take the student’s needs and capabilities into account.

There are two ways in which “free” schools have begun to fail to provide an appropriate subject matter and method to their students. The first way is due to the group prioritising its own values and needs over the individual students. This involves the group imposing its presupposed assumption of what a good education is on the student, thus becoming an undemocratic authority over the student. In a faith school, a child of another -or no-

faith may not receive subject matter that is appropriate to their values. In another case, Kings Science Academy has prioritised subjects that fit its business ethos. In Key Stage 4, students receive nine science lessons a week in comparison to the one history lesson and one geography lesson they receive (Kings Science Academy, 2010). Students whose capabilities are not strong in science will struggle within this curriculum and, due to un-enjoyable experiences within the classroom, lose the desire to go on learning. The second problem is due to the pressure the “free” schools are receiving from the Press and Teaching Unions. Due to the public criticism they are receiving, some “free” schools are trying to present themselves as superior to the local authority maintained state schools by over-intellectualising their curriculum. Kings Science Academy has introduced university style lecturing. This is inappropriate to younger students or those that are less developed. University style lecturing will fail to be engaging, interactive or interesting to students who are not yet at university level. If it fails to be engaging, it will not be conducive to their learning. Therefore, due to groups sometimes prioritising their own needs over their individual students or over-intellectualising the curriculum, “free” schools in practice have started to provide subject matter and method that is inappropriate to their students. This is not conducive to democratic education as it will hinder the students in the development of their individual potential

Conclusion

In this essay, I have broadly endorsed Dewey’s views on democratic education and considered whether the “free” schools can be conducive to this type of education. I have argued that the “free” schools are a danger to British democratic education if the groups that run them do not embody a multitude of experiences, meaning that they are not CDGs. As well as embodying these experiences, the group must be mindful of the role of the school in the community, the wider society, and for the individual student. If the group fails to do this, as many groups running “free” schools have done in practice, there are serious consequences. First, if a group is less plural than the community it exists in it will have less understanding of the multitude of opportunities available. This will lead to it being ill equipped to evaluate itself or the community so as to eliminate non-progressive features from either. Second, a non-CDG running a school may lead to a breakdown of dialogue between the group and the community, which will lead to segregation. Third, there may also be a breakdown in dialogue amongst schools run by different groups leading to segregation in the wider society. Segregation, in both the community and wider society levels, will hinder the progression of the group, community and the wider society as the variety of opportunities open to all will not be known due to failure to relay them in dialogue.

The “free” schools also pose a threat to the classroom environment; they may, and some already have, fail to provide an environment for their students to have democratic educative experiences. The possible lack of plurality, and the threat of an undemocratic authority the group may impinge on the students, may either stifle or retard the future experiences of the students. Both the students’ individuality and their ability to live in a plural environment may be damaged. Thus if the “free” schools are to be conducive to education, the group itself must be appropriate to plural democracy and avoid of all these pitfalls; non-CDGs will struggle to do this due to their lack of plurality.

I have only discussed how the “free” schools could, or may fail to, embody democratic education. I endorse Dewey’s view on democratic education, yet a discussion on the practice of how to educate a student to live in society, whilst cultivating their individuality, would be a good next step. To fulfil both these roles is a difficult task, even in theory, and

should be properly considered in terms of how it can be done in practice. I have also described my specific meaning of a CDG and the many things it must avoid in order to provide a democratic education. Yet, can a group embody the multitude of experiences a community does? Can it have a deep enough understanding of a community to evaluate it? These are difficult considerations that I hope will be put to further scrutiny. My essay has been focused mostly on what not to do in regards to education. This will hopefully inform future discussions of what should be done and how this will be possible.

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