

*Education & Democracy: Shortcomings of Traditional Education and a More Progressive Approach*

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I. Introduction

Many views have shaped the contemporary understanding of education and the role it should play in society.<sup>1</sup> Although views on education are diverse, there is philosophic consensus that the purpose of education, in large part, is to prepare students with the skills and knowledge necessary for productive citizenship in a democratic society.<sup>2</sup> However, in the United States, a vast majority of schools have adopted an educational model that is adverse to such a purpose.<sup>3</sup> Supported by most conservative policymakers, the model is often referred to as the “traditional” or “authoritarian” approach to education.<sup>4</sup>

To provide background, this paper will discuss the history of American educational philosophy in the United States.<sup>5</sup> This paper then will argue that the traditional model of education fails to prepare students with the skills and knowledge necessary to be productive members in a democratic society.<sup>6</sup> Finally, this paper will propose that a progressive approach to education is more compatible with the fundamental purpose of education in a democracy.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Kaufman and Sherelyn Kaufman, *Education Law, Policy, and Practice*, 2nd (New York, New York: Aspen Publishers, 2009) at 21-22.

<sup>2</sup> Alfie Kohn, *The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and "Tougher Standards"* (New York, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999) at Amy Gutman, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987). 118-119.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 2.

<sup>5</sup> See discussion *infra* part II.

<sup>6</sup> See discussion *infra* part III.

<sup>7</sup> See discussion *infra* part IV.

## II. Background

The history of American educational philosophy can be traced back to the founding of the United States.<sup>8</sup> In trying to rid themselves of colonial traditions, the Founding Fathers took a radically different approach in defining what the system of education in the United States should look like.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, they sought to create a system of public education that reflected democratic principles of the newly founded republic.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, because the people of the United States consisted of diverse religious traditions, they believed in a shared system of education to promote common values.<sup>11</sup>

The result was a belief that American education should foster active participation in democratic government, loyalty to country, individual liberty, and be available to all citizens.<sup>12</sup> However, since this time, there has been considerable debate regarding the approach that should be taken to achieve these goals.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout American history, this disagreement has been influenced by a diverse number of philosophers, scholars, and education professionals.<sup>14</sup> However, the educational philosophy of John Dewey, set forth in numerous writings from the 1900s, has arguably proved to be the most influential source between both sides of the debate.<sup>15</sup> In *The School*

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<sup>8</sup> See Kaufman, *supra* note 1, at 15 (discussing the foundation of American educational philosophy).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 17.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 17-20 (discussing the founder's educational philosophy and their conception of public education).

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 22.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 21

*and Society*, Dewey argues that any approach to education should be tailored to the societal environment students will be eventual members of.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Dewey believes that because society rests on the principle of a common spirit with common aims, education should facilitate a “social spirit.”<sup>17</sup> However, Dewey contends that the educational approach in America is adverse to the principle of “social spirit,” because in form, it promotes individualism by “the mere absorbing of facts and truths.”<sup>18</sup> This approach to education, Dewey reasons, has “no clear social gain.”<sup>19</sup>

Today, the model of American public schools can largely be classified as “authoritarian” or “traditional.”<sup>20</sup> Proponents of the traditional model contend, that although a democratic society demands deliberation among citizens on mutually binding matters, education should not narrowly focus on developing this civic virtue.<sup>21</sup> Rather, they argue, education should focus on basic skills such as math and literacy that are essential to the critical thinking needed for deliberative citizenship and will enable the student to live a fulfilling life.<sup>22</sup> The civic virtue of deliberation, they reason, will come as “an unintended by-product of educational efforts that aim at something else.”<sup>23</sup> As such, they defend schools that promote deliberative citizenship “within a social context where educational authority is shared among parents, citizens, and professional educators.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> John Dewey, *School and Society* (Chicago , IL: The University of Chicago Press , 1900), 3-4.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 14.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 12-13.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> See Kohn, *supra* note 2 at 3.

<sup>21</sup> Amy Gutman, *Democratic Education* (Princeton , NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987) at xiii.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at xiv.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*

On the other hand, many scholars and intellectuals oppose the traditional model and advocate a “progressive” or “nontraditional” approach to education.<sup>25</sup> Proponents of the progressive approach recognize education as being critical in a democratic society and believe that it should not merely prepare students to enter an already pre-existing community, but should teach students how to create the social conditions they desire.<sup>26</sup> As such, they believe that the function of education is to “liberate the mind, strengthen its critical process, inform it with knowledge and the capacity for independent inquiry, engage its human sympathies, and illuminate its moral and practical choices.”<sup>27</sup> Additionally, proponents of this approach believe that education must be available to all citizens since they are all responsible for engaging in public debate, criticism, and co-operation aimed at strengthening the democratic society.<sup>28</sup>

### III. Shortcomings of the Traditional Model

A democratic society is both open and dynamic.<sup>29</sup> Open, in that no decision or status quo is immune from critical evaluation in the public forum; dynamic, in that its institutions are meant to channel change by allowing public scrutiny to be the guide among choices.<sup>30</sup> As such, a democratic social structure places strong demands on its members.<sup>31</sup> It relies on their informed consent when imposing policy arrangements and requires its members to be

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<sup>25</sup> See Kohn, *supra* note 2, at 2.

<sup>26</sup> Israel Scheffler, *Reason and Teaching* (Hackett Publishing Company, 1979), at 138.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 139.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 137.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*

deliberative and critical when taking part in public debate.<sup>32</sup> Under this backdrop of democratic ideals, it is clear that education should promote critical thinking, deliberation, and cooperation.<sup>33</sup>

However, the traditional model of education embodies an authoritarian structure and a standards approach to learning, both of which fail in promoting critical thinking, deliberation, and cooperation from students.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the traditional approach to education supports the believe that it is not important to prepare students to enter a democratic society.<sup>35</sup> Rather, the traditional approach has shifted the fundamental role of education into what it can do for the individual student.<sup>36</sup> In other words, the traditional approach to education emphasizes individual achievement and personal gain over cooperation and common societal goals.<sup>37</sup>

*(1) The Authoritarian Nature of the “Traditional” Model*

The traditional model of education typically structures the classroom environment in a top-down structure, where the teacher drills facts and knowledge into her students.<sup>38</sup> Students in this structure are reinforced with the principle that they must obey the teacher and accept the lessons being taught.<sup>39</sup> While proponents of the traditional model often gleam with satisfaction over such classroom discipline, this structure has serious implications in preparing students to enter a democratic society.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *Id.*

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> *See* Kohn, *supra* note 2, at 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 118.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.* at 119.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.*

<sup>38</sup> *See* Kohn, *supra* note 2, at 2.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.*

<sup>40</sup> *Id.*

Many scholars believe that effective citizenship in a democratic society requires its members to question authority and be critical to societal norms.<sup>41</sup> However, in an authoritarian structure, students are incapable of developing such skills because they are not given the opportunity to question educational principles.<sup>42</sup> Rather, teachers demand that students listen and learn the lesson being taught.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, this structure often disciplines students for being critical of the facts being advanced by the teacher.<sup>44</sup> As such, students in this regime are indoctrinated to believe that questioning authority and being critical are impermissible behaviors.<sup>45</sup>

*(2) The Standards Approach*

The traditional model has given way to a standards approach to learning.<sup>46</sup> This approach emphasizes that students should memorize facts and knowledge which will later be reinforced on an exam or quiz.<sup>47</sup> In this approach, educational quality is measured by the quantity of facts students have retained, and student development is assessed by objective standards that reflect their ability to recall the information they have learned.<sup>48</sup> Teachers under this approach are often pressured to cover as many topics as possible to maximize the number of facts students will know.<sup>49</sup> As such, complex theories are broken down into

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<sup>41</sup> See Kaufman, *supra* note 1, at 22.

<sup>42</sup> See Kohn, *supra* note 2, at 2.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*

<sup>45</sup> *Id.*

<sup>46</sup> *Id.* at 13-16.

<sup>47</sup> *Id.*

<sup>48</sup> See Kaufman, *supra* note 1, at 23.

<sup>49</sup> See Kohn, *supra* note 2, at 75.

incremental segments and students often never develop the critical understanding needed to apply such theories.<sup>50</sup>

When assessing the standards approach it is clear that it fails to prepare students to enter a democratic society.<sup>51</sup> A democratic society puts pressure on its members to critically choose and deliberate among alternatives.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, a democratic society demands new ideas and approaches to complex problems.<sup>53</sup> However, the standards approach focus on memorizing facts and knowledge leaves students without a critical understanding of such knowledge.<sup>54</sup> In turn, students never develop the critical thinking skills necessary to effectively deliberate and choose among democratic alternatives.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, without critical thinking skills, students are never able to develop their own approach to problems.<sup>56</sup>

### *(3) Emphasis on Individual Achievement*

The traditional model emphasizes individual success over cooperation and students are placed under enormous pressure to perform up to the standards placed upon them.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, by rewarding individual performance, the traditional model encourages competition between students.<sup>58</sup> As Alfie Kohn said in *The Schools Our Children Deserve*, “here, the emphasis is on transmitting basic skills as well as good work habits – that is, training students to show up on time, do what they’re told, and get used to being measured

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<sup>50</sup> *Id.*

<sup>51</sup> *Id.* at 75-120.

<sup>52</sup> See Scheffler, *supra* note 26, at 137.

<sup>53</sup> *Id.*

<sup>54</sup> See Kohn, *supra* note 2, at 50.

<sup>55</sup> *Id.*

<sup>56</sup> *Id.*

<sup>57</sup> *Id.* at 153

<sup>58</sup> *Id.*

and goaded by rewards and punishments.”<sup>59</sup> Proponents justify this approach in economic terms by arguing that it promotes the skills necessary for students to become productive workers.<sup>60</sup>

However, by overemphasizing the skills necessary in the workplace, the traditional model fails to promote the skills needed to become a productive citizen in a democratic society.<sup>61</sup> As John Dewey reasoned, a successful society rests on the principle of a common spirit with common aims and education, therefore, should promote the principle of a “social spirit.”<sup>62</sup> John Dewey’s reasoning has particular importance in a democracy where the fate of society rests in the hands of the people themselves.<sup>63</sup> As such, it is critical for members of a democracy to cooperate and work together toward building a stronger democratic institution.<sup>64</sup> However, by emphasizing individual success and competition, the traditional model strips the student of humanistic ideals and focuses primarily on economic values.<sup>65</sup>

#### IV. A Progressive Model as The Solution

Justifying their principles with reasoning from the Founding Fathers and John Dewey, proponents of the progressive approach view teaching the skills necessary for productive citizenship in a democratic society fundamental to education.<sup>66</sup> They believe that education should foster an environment where students can question authority and develop the critical

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<sup>59</sup> *Id.* at 118.

<sup>60</sup> *Id.*

<sup>61</sup> *Id.*

<sup>62</sup> *See Dewey, supra* note 16, at 14.

<sup>63</sup> *See Scheffler, supra* note 26, at 137-139.

<sup>64</sup> *Id.*

<sup>65</sup> *See Kohn, supra* note 2, at 119.

<sup>66</sup> *See Kaufman, supra* note 1, at 23.

thinking skills necessary to be deliberative members of society.<sup>67</sup> Although there are many variations on what a progressive education would look like, its central tenants promote the skills necessary for democratic citizenship.<sup>68</sup> Its three central tenants being, (1) allowing students to take an active role in the classroom, (2) teaching around broad themes, and (3) allowing students to be a community of learners.<sup>69</sup>

*(1) Allowing Students to Take an Active Role in the Classroom*

Proponents of the progressive model believe that students should take an active role in the classroom.<sup>70</sup> Here, the teacher facilitates class discussion but students engage the teacher with questions that help develop their own ideas on the subject.<sup>71</sup> This classroom structure downplays the authoritative role of the teacher and allows for students to challenge the ideas being offered.<sup>72</sup>

As discussed, a democratic society demands that its members be able to question authority and challenge societal norms so as not to be indoctrinated with myth.<sup>73</sup> Under the progressive approach, students are encouraged to question their teacher and the ideas being offered.<sup>74</sup> As such, the progressive model teaches students at an early age that authority and ideas should be challenged.<sup>75</sup> For these reasons, a progressive approach to education better prepares students to become productive citizens of a democratic society.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> See Scheffler, *supra* note 26, at 137.

<sup>68</sup> See Kohn, *supra* note 2, at 118-119.

<sup>69</sup> *Id.* at 131-185.

<sup>70</sup> *Id.* at 185.

<sup>71</sup> *Id.*

<sup>72</sup> *Id.* at 135.

<sup>73</sup> See Scheffler, *supra* note 26, at 137.

<sup>74</sup> See Kohn, *supra* note 2, at 185.

<sup>75</sup> *Id.*

<sup>76</sup> *Id.* at 118-119.

(2) *Moving Away from Memorizing Facts*

Progressives believe that subjects should be taught around broad themes rather than segmented facts.<sup>77</sup> The central principle behind this approach is that there is no educational value in having students memorize large pieces of segmented information.<sup>78</sup> Rather, progressives believe that the value of education comes from the free exercise of personal reasoning power.<sup>79</sup> By teaching around broad themes, the student is able to connect the facts to the big picture and develop a critical understanding of the theory being offered.<sup>80</sup> As Jean Piaget, a philosopher and proponent of progressive education, said, “the goal of education is not to know how to repeat or retain ready-made truths’; rather, one becomes educated by “learning to master the truth by oneself.”<sup>81</sup> As such, by developing a complete understanding of the subject, students are equipped with the skills necessary to formulate their own solutions and techniques to problems.<sup>82</sup>

Democratic citizenship demands critical thinking skills that enable a citizen to deliberate and choose among alternatives.<sup>83</sup> By teaching in broad themes, the progressive approach allows the student to use his own reasoning power to develop a critical understanding of complex topics, which in turn lead to the formulation of new solutions and techniques to complex problems.<sup>84</sup> As such, it is clear that the progressive approach better

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<sup>77</sup> *Id.* at 177.

<sup>78</sup> *Id.*

<sup>79</sup> *Id.*

<sup>80</sup> *Id.*

<sup>81</sup> *Id.*

<sup>82</sup> *Id.*

<sup>83</sup> See Scheffler, *supra* note 26, at 137.

<sup>84</sup> See Kohn, *supra* note 2, at 177.

prepares the student with the skills necessary for productive citizenship in a democratic society.<sup>85</sup>

*(3) Allowing Students to be A Community of Learners*

Proponents of the progressive approach believe that learning is a social event rather than an individual exercise.<sup>86</sup> As such, progressives believe that students should learn in a community that fosters cooperation and the sharing of ideas.<sup>87</sup> Under this approach, students learn from each other and are able to engage in intellectual disagreement.<sup>88</sup> In turn, students learn that cooperation in solving a problem is more effective than non-cooperation and that two heads are better than one.<sup>89</sup>

By creating an environment of cooperation and shared ideas, the progressive approach incorporates Dewey's principle that education should foster a common social spirit.<sup>90</sup> Under this approach, students learn through cooperation and the sharing of ideas and work together in solving common problems.<sup>91</sup> As a result, students under this approach will be better prepared to enter a democratic society and work together to build a stronger democratic institution.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> *Id.* at 118-119.

<sup>86</sup> *Id.* at 153.

<sup>87</sup> *Id.* at 154.

<sup>88</sup> *Id.* at 155.

<sup>89</sup> *Id.* at 153-156.

<sup>90</sup> *See Dewey, supra* note 16, at 14.

<sup>91</sup> *See Kohn, supra* note 2 at 155.

<sup>92</sup> *Id.* at 118-119.

## V. Conclusion

The traditional model of education is inherently deficient in promoting the skills and knowledge necessary for productive citizenship in a democratic society. Under this approach, students are indoctrinated to believe that questioning authority is impermissible behavior. Also, the traditional model embodies a standards approach to education where students never develop the critical thinking skills necessary for deliberation among democratic alternatives. Moreover, the traditional model emphasizes individual success over cooperation, stripping students of humanistic ideals. At a basic level, schools must move away from this approach and adopt a more progressive approach to education that promotes critical thinking, cooperation and deliberation.