



## University of Dundee

### Schools of Tomorrow – Tomorrow's Schools

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## Chapter 14

### Schools of Tomorrow – Tomorrow’s Schools.

#### *A reading for a Maltese document from a Deweyan perspective.*

Daniela Mercieca and Duncan P. Mercieca

#### 1. A personal reflection

When thinking about the influence of John Dewey on the Maltese educational system, we find ourselves nostalgically recalling our teacher training at the University of Malta, recalling our first years of teaching in Maltese schools, and then our years as teacher educators at the same University. This chapter contributes to the existing documentation of the influence of John Dewey on understanding education in Malta, as we recall his ideas as strong influences on our approach and practice as student-teachers, teachers and teacher-educators.

Whereas some countries claim a direct link with John Dewey through records of his visits or exchange of letters, Malta has no direct historical link with Dewey. Our first awareness of Dewey came from attending lectures by Professor Kenneth Wain. Dewey was here presented to us within a timeline of educational thinkers, and connections were being made between Dewey and the Maltese educational system. In 1989-90 two ‘Minimum’ Curricula were published in Malta, one for primary education and another for secondary schools. Wain wrote a critical evaluation of the process and content (1991) in response to this. He questioned why the publication of these two curricula ‘neither produced more than a murmur from the public, or even from the teachers. Why?’ (Wain, 1991, back cover). The opening quote of the book from Dewey seems to capture the sentiment of Wain’s engagement in the book: ‘It would not be a sign of health if such an important social interest as education were not also an arena of struggles, practical and theoretical’ (Dewey, 1938, p.221 in Wain, 1991, p.1). A Consultative Committee on Education was established in 1994 by the Minister of Education and Human Resources chaired by Wain. The Committee produced a report entitled *Tomorrow’s Schools: Developing Effective Learning Cultures* (Wain et al. 1995). This report is considered a turning point in the development of Maltese education. While it is now more than 25 years old, its ideas are still influencing the formation of curricula and educational thought in Malta. We refer to this document as the Report hereafter.

This chapter takes this seminal Report and reads it from a Deweyan perspective in order to highlight the Deweyan legacy and its influence on Maltese education. At no point does this Report refer to Dewey’s work, or to the work of any other educational theorist, although it clearly has educational theory as its foundation. In our correspondence with a member of the Committee, Prof Ronald Sultana, it was highlighted that the main inspiration underlying his first writing of this Report was Paolo Freire and his critical and political ideas. Sultana continued to explain “... of course [Dewey] was there somewhere in the background of everybody’s mind – we are all Dewey’s children in one way or another, as the principles underpinning progressive education filter through him, as well as other authors of course, and informed our generation’s thinking about education.” (R. Sultana, personal communication, July 2021). Four regulative principles, proposed by Prof Mary Darmanin, constitute the backbone of the report. These are Entitlement, Effectiveness, Equity and Economy (Wain et al. 1995, p.8-9). The Report quotes Maltese research and writing to corroborate its claims. We are intrigued by the title *Tomorrow’s Schools* as we note its resemblance to the title of one of

Dewey's books *Schools of To-morrow* (Dewey and Dewey, 1915) written 80 years earlier than the Report. Dewey's work is daunting in its volume, depth and influence. The aim of the chapter is to link the Report and Dewey's work.

This Chapter is divided into three sections. The first section looks at the student as learner, focusing on the conditions of learning and experiences within environments surrounding the vulnerable learner. The second section focuses on schools as learning communities, showing the aim of the school as a social institution and the idea of caring schools. Section Three focuses on the democratisation of the curriculum.

## **2. The student as learner**

The Report shifts the focus of the education enterprise from a 'Maltese state education system [that] functions as a bureaucracy' (Wain et al. 1995, p.7) to the 'student as learner' (p.7). The first focus centres around the 'hope' that a myriad of intricate systems produced outside of schools and classrooms (such as national minimum curricula, teachers' codes of ethics, syllabi) from a central bureaucratic system 'have an effect on real classroom life' (Wain et al. 1995, p.7). The Report eschews this focus by displacing this complex system from the heart of the Maltese educational project and replacing it with the learner. Yet the writing does not construct the learner as one who lacks and needs instruction to fill the empty vessel. On the contrary, although this learner occupies a central spot in this conceptualisation of the Maltese educational project, the Report is concerned about the conditions around that learner, which conditions somehow bring about education. These are 'conditions... [that] must prevail if all tomorrow's children are to have a quality education' (Wain et al. 1995, p.7).

We link the reference of 'conditions' in the Report to Dewey's writing on the learning environment, which he believes that adults bring about. We first outline Dewey's argument about adult involvement before moving on to the environment and conditions conducive to education as mentioned in the Report. Dewey emphasised the learner's initiative and involvement in learning 'since learning is something that the pupil has to do himself and for himself, [therefore] the initiative lies with the learner' (Dewey, 1960, p.36). Yet Dewey did not intend students to hold primary responsibility for their achievements or shortcomings. In fact, he writes that adults (teachers, parents, and professionals) play a significant part in education, and have a 'major responsibility' (Simpson, 2001, p.183) to create learning conditions which promote educative experiences for children. For Dewey there is no direct influence apart from use of the physical environment as an intermediary:

the only way in which adults consciously control the kind of education which the immature get is by controlling the environment in which they act, and hence think and feel. We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment. Whether we permit chance environments to do the work, or whether we design environments for the purpose makes a great difference. And any environment is chance environment so far as its educative influence is concerned unless it has been deliberately regulated with reference to its educative effect (Dewey, 1944, p.18-19).

Yet even here, Dewey issues a warning about the kind of environment which surrounds the learner. Relying on a chance environment could be risky as it 'renders human outcomes a toss-up between the better and the worse, the helpful and the harmful, the good and the bad'

(Simpson, 2001, p.270). A controlled environment, on the other hand, risks displacing the learner from the centre. The Report suggests that this reflects the educational system it was seeking to review and uses phrases like ‘bureaucracy’, ‘centralisation’, ‘stultifies personal initiative’ and ‘top-heavy’ (see Wain et al. 1995, p.7) in its attempts to highlight what it is that needs to be addressed to affect change.

Dewey’s writing focuses on experiences within environments and is interested in the influence of human beings on each other through relationships. This is the kind of influence on the environment which Dewey believes enables education as it provides stimuli to the diverse learners to engage in different learning experiences. Simpson (2001) writes that for Dewey, the environment ‘supports, or hinders, the cultivation of qualities of open-mindedness, responsibility, seriousness of purpose, and others that he [Dewey] associates with developing “the essential moral interest”’ (p. 270). This idea of teaching as ‘moral enterprise’ (Wain et al. 1995, p.7) is also reflected in the Report, as it argues that teaching involves an exercise in power relationships between different actors, particularly, different adults (parents, teachers, professionals) and students. The Report suggests that both adults and students in Malta are surrendering unconsciously their ‘individuality, aspirations and humanity’ (Simpson and Jackson, 2003, p.23) to the bureaucratic system of learning that prescribe precisely when students learn which specific skills and information. This effectively removes teachers’ (and educators’) professional roles and responsibilities, which include the freedom to think for themselves, to make professional judgments, and to teach in ways that they consider are in the best interest of students (see Wain et al. 1995, p.54-55). Such thinking affects relationships in classes and schools and influences experience which could be conducive to education.

We earlier referred to ‘conditions’ which bring about education as named by the Report. These conditions are entitlement, effectiveness, equity and economy, which were elaborated in this Report and were named to regulate efforts in responding “to the challenge of developing effective learning cultures for tomorrow’s schools” (Wain et al. 1995, p.55). The Report emphasises that all students are entitled to a quality education (see p.8). The focus on ‘all’ (see Wain et al. 1995, p.5 and p.8) refers to all learners/students having ‘outcomes’ (p.8) rather than stopping at mentioning opportunities for all. It is not about what ‘the system claims to be providing, ... [but] rather more with considering what the effect of the system is on the learner’ (Wain et al. 1995, p.8). The Report recommends a ‘collective responsibility’ (p.8) for providing what students are entitled to, that is a meaningful quality education. This calls for a shift from a blaming culture to one where everyone is seen as contributing and responsible for students’ learning. The blame culture that the report highlights is one where the Education Department blames teachers; teachers blame the Department, as well as parents and the students for ‘being unmotivated and unintelligent’ (Wain et al. 1995, p.8). We are aware that when a system argues for entitlement it risks being caught in a (political) discourse of sameness and difference. The Report emphasises equity, but it is very quick to explain that this is not referring to “sameness”, or even “equal resourcing for all” (Wain et al. 1995, p.9). While recognising and acknowledging difference among children and their families (p.9), all students are entitled to ‘similar outcomes in terms of a quality education, but the process by which they achieve that entitlement can be differentiated’ (Wain et al. 1995, p.9).

When reflecting about this, Dewey’s idea of growth comes to mind, as he writes about growth which does not look towards an end, a *telos*, but is instead growth which is an end in itself - growth for growth’s sake. Dewey states that ‘this cumulative movement of action toward a

later result is what is meant by growth' where this later result is not fixed, final, or once-and-for-all (Dewey 1944, p.46). The result and related aims shift and change as a part of the process of growth, while keeping in mind that the very process of growth itself is worthwhile, as it carries us from one satisfactory activity to the next.

Dewey writes that our focus should be on educative experiences that lead us to continued learning and more growth. This is what Dewey means in his famous quote, "The educational process has no end beyond itself; it is its own end" (Dewey 1944, p.54). Teachers and educators' roles are tasked with supplying the conditions that best facilitate growth, without concern for an end beyond educational growth itself (see Stitzlein, 2017).

Facilitating children's growth implies adequate resources for the 'condition' of learning to occur. The principle of equity is intricately linked to that of economy, as the Report emphasises that 'those learners who are more "at risk" receive the larger and best share of what the state can offer, in terms of both human and material resources' (p.9).

Two further points from the Report address the learning individual (Wain et al. 1995, p.15). First, that all children 'bring with them a capacity to learn' (Wain et al. 1995, p.15) and, second, that they are 'the most precious - and at the same time, most vulnerable' (Wain et al. 1995, p.15), an aspect of childhood that Dewey valued. Sarah Stitzlein (2017) reminds us the context in which Dewey was developing his educational ideas, where at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was

a fresh interest in understanding the mind of the learner, including measuring its capacities through newly developed tests. More insidiously, there was accelerating interest in comparing cognitive abilities across racial groups, as part of the eugenics movement that sought to understand supposed natural superiority of the behavior and intelligence of some people (p.38).

Dewey, however, differs from his contemporary psychologists, as rather than studying the individual distinct learner, he took a perspective of the learner as a social being, focusing on the naturalistic and comprehensive understanding of the learner. In Chapter Four of *Democracy and Education* (1944), Dewey traces the life of organisms and shows how children (humans) are unique organisms in that they have a prolonged dependency. Dewey believed that children and society actually benefit from this prolonged dependency. This dependency, while highlighting vulnerability (different from many animals), yet offers children opportunities for engaging their plasticity, that is, the ability to adapt and transform with the support of other people. Prolonged dependency enables children to learn how to learn, especially in interdependent ways that foster social skills (Dewey, 1944. p.48–9). 'This celebration of the potential within children and their process of development is a shift from seeing children as lazy, overly dependent, or indulging in meaningless play. It helps us to see that children are engaged in the real and useful process of growth and habit formation' (Stitzlein, 2017, p.39).

The role of the learning community is then deemed fundamental and essential, as will be explored in the next section.

### **3. Schools as Learning Communities**

I believe that the school is primarily a social institution. Education being a social process, the school is simply that form of community life in which all those agencies

are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of the race, and to use his own powers for social ends. (Dewey, 1897, 2–3)

We think that it is appropriate to introduce this section with the above famous quote from Dewey's *My Pedagogical Creed*, (1897) as the Report dedicates its longest section focusing on schools as learning communities. Schools are understood as key learning communities 'entrusted by society to transmit and problematise the legacy of knowledge generated in the past and at the same time to equip students to critically understand, face and manage the present and future' (Wain et al. 1995, p.15). Schools need to be safe and welcoming sites. This will ensure that students 'identify positively with their schools' (Wain et al. 1995, p.16) thus ensuring their physical well-being.

The Report takes a strong stance to the 'culture of competitive achievement' (Wain et al. 1995, p.17), and it deems this unacceptable to the emotional well-being of the student. This culture 'distorts' learning as communion initiative, as schools place 'inordinate emphasis on examination, on selection, on inter- and intra-school streaming, so that schools resemble rather more sorting and channelling mechanisms than communities where meaningful learning takes place' (Wain et al. 1995, p.17). Dewey argues that the purpose of schools and teaching is

not to devise a method by which the teacher can teach more to the child in the same length of time, or even prepare him more pleasantly for his college course. It is rather to give the child an education which will make him a better, happier, more efficient human being, but showing him what his capacities are and how he can exercise them, both materially and socially, in the world he finds about him (Dewey and Dewey, 1915, p.58)

Often teachers are focusing on exams and make use of pedagogies that are instructional, teacher-centred and based on rote-learning (see Wain et al. 1995, p.17). Students who cannot cope and are not achieving are often 'labelled' as underachieving and failing students. The emphasis is on deficits within students and not within schooling systems and structures. In *The Child and the Curriculum*, Dewey (1956) argued that education and educators must "get rid of the prejudicial notion that there is some gap in kind... between the child's experience and the various forms of subject-matter that make up the course of study" (p.11). This, for Dewey, was the "problem" with traditional and dominant viewpoints. The Report emphasis that 'project-work, interactive and co-operative learning, discovery modes of pedagogy, learning-by-doing, interaction with the community have, generally speaking, little if any place at all in the lives of students' (Wain et al. 1995, p.18). These not only support the recognition of differences in learning styles and rates of development (Wain et al. 1995, p.19), leading to students' intellectual well-being, but they provide spaces for students to recognise, acknowledge, develop empathy and solidarity between different groups of learners (see Wain et al. 1995, p.22). Dewey emphasis that a school has a 'chance to be a miniature community, an embryonic society' (Dewey, 1899, p.15). Through education, students are involved in the development of a 'spirit of social cooperation and community life' (Dewey, 1899, p.14) and are regarded as 'a social individual' (Dewey, 1897, p.2). A child is always to be considered 'a member of a unity' (Dewey, 1897, p.1). The child learns what it means to be such a member in community from 'the responses which others make to his own activities' (Dewey, 1897, p.1).

Two other points are emphasised by the Report: first, the community needs to be recognised as offering opportunity for students to ‘critically explore their wider environment, and to help strengthen their understanding of what it means to live in a participative and democratic environment’ (Wain et al. 1995, p.22); secondly, the role of parents is also emphasised in the Report, suggesting that a move is needed from understanding classrooms as ‘teacher’s territory’ (Wain et al. 1995, p.21) to teachers and schools developing partnerships with parents, ‘sharing with them [parents] their understanding of what they mean by a good education, listening to them to appreciate their aspirations as well as concerns and anxieties’ (Wain et al. 1995, p.21). These two changes would further serve for students to develop the ‘spirit of social cooperation and community life’ (Dewey, 1899, p.14).

One of the main suggestions that the Report offers is a shift from this ‘culture of competitive achievement’ to ‘a caring school’ (Wain et al. 1995, p.18). A caring school ‘responds to the learning needs of its student population, is also an inclusive school, that is a community that works with and for, rather than against individuals and groups’ (Wain et al. 1995, p.18). In return, caring schools are ‘more likely to engage the attention and co-operation of learners’ (Wain et al. 1995, p.24). We turn to Nel Noddings’ article on *Dewey, Care Ethics, and Education* (2017), as we think it sheds a light on the idea of care as argued in the Report. Quoting Dewey, Noddings reminds us that democracy is not simply a form of government:

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full impact of their activity. (Dewey, 1944, p.93).

She emphasises the Deweyan idea of common and community in the word communication and contends that some communality needs to be established between the different members of a democracy for care to transpire. She points out that there is often already some level of common ‘language and knowledge’ (Noddings, 2017, p.315) between different members within a democratic community, but she is quick to argue that it is never a question of teaching ‘the other’ the language and culture of the dominant group within society. The issue is not to identify deficits within the other and it is not for us to think that ‘we must do something about their deficiency’ (Noddings, 2017, p.315). On the contrary we should find ways to invite conversation, communicate with those who do not have command of the standard language, and listen. The idea of democracy as argued by Dewey is important for Noddings as, her ethics of care, developed from Carol Gilligan (see Gilligan, 1982), is fundamentally relational<sup>1</sup>:

an interaction, between a carer and a cared-for. The carer must be attentive, must listen to the expressed needs of the cared-for, feel something as a result, and respond (Noddings, 2013); the cared-for, in turn, must somehow acknowledge the efforts of the carer as caring. (Noddings, 2017, p.315)

Noddings argues that her ethics of care is in synch with Dewey’s emphasis on democracy as a mode of associated living and its dependence on adequate communication for survival and improvement. Dewey argues that

Except in dealing with commonplaces and catch phrases one has to assimilate, imaginatively, something of another's experience in order to tell him intelligently of one's own experience. All communication is like art. It may fairly be said, therefore, that any social arrangement that remains vitally social, or vitally shared, is educative to those who participate in it. Only when it becomes cast in a mold and runs in a routine way does it lose its educative power. (Dewey, 1944, p.9)

Reflecting on the above quote from Dewey, Noddings gives an example from teaching mathematics (Noddings was a teacher of mathematics). As we read through her example, we are struck that many of her concerns are those captured by the Report, although her paper is written 20 years later and reflects an American context. Noddings argues that the content and processes of our schools and classrooms is often 'miseducation' (Noddings, 2017, p.317). This is because teaching mathematics (as well as other subjects) lacks communicative power. When guided by content and process, teaching and learning risks becoming a 'one-way communication characteristic in many classes today, ... "cast in a mold and runs in a routine way," ... guided by a pre-set lesson plan, and ... evaluated by a test of some sort, a test often constructed before instruction even begins... Communication, the very foundation of education, is too often translated to mean that teachers talk and students listen' (Noddings, 2017, p.317). The idea of 'caring schools' as is featured in the Report could be understood within the Deweyan idea of democratic community as Noddings points out. 'Stimulating communication is educative for both speaker and listener' (Noddings, 2017, p.318), when we encourage and support each other in learning communities to imagine otherwise, tell and listen to stories, encourage discussion, think critically, question and be there for each other. In their description of Dewey's views, Sutinen, Kallioniemi and Pihlström (2015) relate education to democratic competencies of "empathy, acceptance and respect" (p.346). By learning from each other and encountering different perspectives in the social context of a safe classroom and schools, students practice democratic values (Sutinen, Kallioniemi, and Pihlström 2015; Knight 1998).

#### **4. The Curriculum**

Section Four of the Report is devoted to the Curriculum as the Report turns its attention to what teachers teach and what students learn (Wain et al. 1995, p.42). The Report reminds readers that the curriculum 'is the instrument through which education takes place' (Wain et al. 1995, p.42). As Wain argues, questions about the aims and ideals of education 'are the ultimate questions about the curriculum' (1991, p.25). The Report asks several (political) questions about the nature of learning and teaching:

- What is worth teaching?
- Who should be involved in selecting a worthwhile content and methods?
- What policy instruments and texts are needed?
- What methods ensure entitlement to what is worth teaching?
- How should the more general personal, social, and national aims of the curriculum be?
- How are the considerations of teaching/learning effectiveness limited by the ethical and political constraints on it? (Report, 1995, p.42)

Wains (1991) argues that a national curriculum should not reflect an individual's aim and ideals, but it should capture the aims and ideals of a society, of the national community. 'The



sort of aims and ideals that educational aims and ideals are, are ultimately about the sort of society that people consider desirable and the sort of persons they want for it' (p.25). This begs the question: who controls the curriculum? Dewey found the notion of state-controlled education problematic as it places emphasis upon the needs of the nation rather than the needs of individual children. Dewey asks 'is it possible for an educational system to be conducted by a national state and yet the full social ends of the educative process not to be restricted, constrained or corrupted?' (Dewey, 1944, p.75). Neil Hopkins (2018) argues that state-controlled education, and therefore the curriculum, can be of concern in times of national strife and conflict where education is often viewed as a vehicle for social cohesion or improving national pride and performance. So how to balance between not having a state-controlled education but at the same time advocate for education as social participation? How do we not get caught in this contradiction? Hopkins (2018) asks,

where do we draw the line between the classroom as a community and the 'national community' controlling the classroom? Is the classroom a 'sealed unit' where participation and discussion occur without inference from outside or is the classroom an essential part of the wider community? (p.435).

Dewey (1944) suggests the latter:

An undesirable society...is one which internally and externally sets up barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience. A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder. (p.76)

The Report states that it is essential that teachers are well-versed in the content of the Maltese curriculum. In this light, the Report encourages Educational Authorities to draft another curriculum with a greater involvement of teachers, as this would lead to teachers owning the curriculum (Wain et al. 1995, p.47) and enabling them to become reflective practitioners, a concept developed further by Donald Schön (1984). This would be a democratic curriculum, that is 'a commitment to democratic values and to the values that characterise a pluralistic welfare society' (Wain et al. 1995, p.47) needs to be developed in a democratic process. It also emphasises that a context for general aims of the curriculum and a general policy should inform the curriculum. In this regard we need to emphasise the style in which the Report is written, which may be taken as an example of this. Every section of the Report is principally based, followed by the educational situations current at the time of the writing of the Report, together with the recommendations and suggested way forward. The Report has mirrored a possibility of the formulation of a curriculum that would 'guarantee for all pupils in Malta a common minimum entitlement as a right' (Wain et al. 1995, p.47).

## **5. Conclusion**

The Derridean claim that there is not life outside the text has captured our imagination in this Chapter. There could have been other ways how to write this Chapter. We could have systematically interviewed the authors of this Report and asked them about Dewey's influence in the process of writing the Report. How was the process of writing the report, did it reflect

the democratic process? Yet we chose to limit our analysis on the two historical texts, the first more than a hundred years old, and the second no less historical, being over twenty-five years old, and we have identified how the writing of one was based on the text of the other. We recognise that our interpretation is itself a creative activity, and that therefore we have possibly strayed from the text in a Derridean manner.

Considering the dearth of theorists and theories mentioned in the Report Tomorrow's Schools, we are fascinated by the mention of 'phronesis' in the last chapter, indeed, the last page of the Report. It is as though the authors felt that this was worth including, as a reminder that 'understanding carries with it a responsibility to be and the challenge to act in accordance to what we now see to be the best – in terms of the most virtuous – course of action' (Wain et al. 1995, p.55).

The Report was aimed to problematise assumptions which seemed to be taken for granted at the time, and to create a space where the aim of education could be claimed and ratified. We have recognised that conversations which contributed to this Report were inspired by Dewey's writing, and are struck at how relevant both texts are in today's time. When thinking about current curriculum, about the training of teachers and about children's voices (UNCRC), we appreciate once again the inspirational nature of Dewey's philosophy and psychology, and the application of these in the Report Tomorrow's Schools. We continue to face the challenge of meeting these ideas and strive to have 'the Will to Be...[and] the Courage to Do' (Wain et al. 1995, p.54).

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<sup>i</sup> Relational ethics as developed by Noddings stands in sharp contrast to virtue ethics, in which caring is described as the virtue of an individual or group, and the motives of the carer determine whether that virtue has been activated.