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Volume 30, numéro 3, 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111140ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1111140ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Stengel, B. S. (2023). Compte rendu de [*Beyond Rhetoric: New Perspectives on John Dewey's Pedagogy* by Michael Knoll, Bern: Peter Lang, 2022]. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 30(3), 249–254. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1111140ar>

Review of

## *Beyond Rhetoric: New Perspectives on John Dewey's Pedagogy*

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### **John Dewey: Flawed Pedagogue, Preeminent Educator**

If you were to ask me whether John Dewey was an educator, I would answer yes without hesitation. My affirmative answer would be based largely in Dewey's own arguments about the intertwining of education, philosophy, and democracy. As he sought to analyze, share, and negotiate educational ideas and democratic ideas (not, by the way, ideas *about* education, nor ideas *about* democracy<sup>1</sup>), Dewey was both doing philosophy and doing education in a hoped-for democratic world. But were you to ask me whether Dewey was a pedagogue, a shaper and a student of educational practice, I would say no just as quickly. This failed high school teacher never claimed pedagogical props for himself, though he was generous in acknowledging and learning from the many (mostly women) pedagogues who took his ideas seriously and attempted to make practical sense of them while also always revising them. This distinction, between educator and pedagogue, is on my mind as I review Michael Knoll's *Beyond Rhetoric: New Perspectives on John Dewey's Pedagogy*.

Knoll, a German educator, has written a deeply and broadly researched collection of essays on Dewey's pedagogy that offers, as the subtitle promises, "new perspectives." In *Beyond Rhetoric*, Knoll wants to complicate the record with respect to the value of Dewey's pedagogical achievements. That strikes me as worthwhile, though not as important in the long run as considering if and how Dewey's body of work (largely philosophical) is, in the end, educative – including educative with respect to the project of formal education or schooling. Knoll's collection has relatively little to say about Dewey as educator in the broad sense I introduce above.

I am of two minds about the value of Knoll's critique of Dewey as pedagogue, recognizing the importance of his new perspectives, while being skeptical about just what these new perspectives amount to. He maintains that the University of Chicago Lab School, the site where handpicked educators worked out Dewey's ideas, did not fully reflect Dewey's theorizing about education or about democracy. I think that is accurate, but perhaps not particularly surprising in light of Dewey's pragmatist and inquiry-oriented approach to theory and practice. He maintains that Alice and John Dewey mismanaged the Lab School leading to its demise and the Deweys' departure from Chicago for New York City and Columbia University in 1904. I suspect that managerial ineptitude (and/or neglect) *is* part of the picture, but think

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<sup>1</sup> I allude here to the distinction Dewey makes in *Moral Principles in Education* (Houghton Mifflin, 1909) between moral ideas, that is, ideas that move action, and ideas about morality. I find this to be an important and generative pragmatist perspective on how and why ideas matter.

that Knoll's position represents an oversimplified view of university politics. He maintains that the Deweys intended to whitewash the record of the Lab School in order to maintain their place in educational history. As an educator who has worked in the difficult domain of school transformation, I can think of other reasons for offering a first-hand perspective on their experience of the Lab School, ones that are more constructive and less self-serving. In any case, Knoll's main intention is to "lay the groundwork for clarifying a question that has been largely neglected or insufficiently addressed, namely, why did Dewey's educational theory fail to gain general acceptance either in his Laboratory School or in the public-school system, past and present" (p. 26).

I am less inclined than Knoll is to focus on Dewey's limitations as a pedagogue, largely because Dewey's educational ideas about teaching, learning, and schooling so often capture the imagination – though not the institutional practice – of American educators who *are* pedagogues. There is something both tantalizing and promising in the various pedagogical efforts he promoted and called attention to (not just the Lab School), not because those efforts instantiate a prescribed formula for success, but because they percolate a reconstruction of local pedagogical practice.

Knoll's book is well worth reading, especially for the archival sources to which he refers, and the interesting and generative illustrations scattered throughout. His research is thorough, his conclusions provocative. There are tidbits that border on the gossipy (e.g., when he discusses Alice Dewey's relationships with teachers, "the wife as principal" [p. 281], as Knoll frames her), as well as patterns that give pause to assumptions about Dewey as a person and a pedagogue (e.g., that Dewey practised avoidance when it came to hard/administrative decisions). But it is not an easy book to read, in part because of its structure as a series of loosely related topical studies (see my description below), and in part because each chapter dives deep into the details of the topic at hand. Most of the chapters were previously published in some independent form and they are compiled here without connective tissue. Knoll intends the chapters to tell the "truth" of Dewey's pedagogical efforts, his pedagogical thinking, and the way each falls short of instantiating the other. The book ends abruptly, after documenting the Dewey-controlled compilation of *The Dewey School* (1936), without a rehearsal of any broad argument.

The first four chapters take up Dewey's theory of curriculum and instruction, his theory of education as democratic, the mismatch of that theory and its practice in the Lab School, and Dewey's association with the "learning by doing" movement. Knoll considers a host of "previously neglected documents": Clara Mitchell's correspondence with Dewey and the original *Plan of Organization of the University Primary School*, the Laboratory School Work Reports, as well as a variety of well-known texts: "The Ethics of Democracy" (1888), *Democracy and Education* (1916), *The Public and its Problems* (1927), "My Pedagogic Creed" (1897), and "Ethical Principles Underlying Education" (1897).

In Chapters 8 and 9, Knoll returns directly to Dewey, the putative pedagogue, to criticize his inept management of the Lab School, his unprofessional support of his wife, Alice, as the head of school, and his and Alice's attempts to whitewash the Lab School's less than impressive academic outcomes and seemingly undemocratic patterns of student enrollment. He invokes the Anita Blaine papers and unprinted weekly reports from the teachers, and pits Joan K. Smith's (1976) view that John and Alice Dewey caused the split from Chicago against Charlene Haddock Seigfried's (1996) view that William Rainey Harper was to blame.<sup>2</sup> (As a veteran of university politics in the US, I suspect the reality is a complex blend of the two.)

Knoll is clear about his position on the issue:

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<sup>2</sup> I was struck by a certain snarky tone in Knoll's appraisal of the Seigfried versus Smith interpretation: "On the other hand, the absence of Smith's critical appraisal of Dewey's conduct as school administrator is not surprising. Educators love their heroes, especially when they promise freedom, democracy, and progress" (p. 267). I am well acquainted with Smith's assessment and never disputed the Deweys' managerial failures, but Seigfried is a philosopher who makes a careful case worth considering (especially from a feminist perspective), not an educator who loves her heroes.

To sum up, Alice Dewey was not the victim of deep-rooted prejudices but the victim of her own shortcomings, and John Dewey was not an expellee unjustly defrauded of the fruits of his labors but a fugitive who could with his sudden, yet calculated flight solve two agonizing problems all at once. He could save face by escaping a self-inflicted predicament and at the same time free himself from the unloved burden of administrative duties. (p. 310)

In any case, the first four chapters and the final two chapters work reasonably well together to express Knoll's case that Dewey's pedagogical problems (creating and maintaining the Lab School) were of his own making. In general, Knoll finds Dewey's pedagogical record lacking. He seems to assume that Dewey and his wife knew that and wanted to rehabilitate his name and their mutual efforts on their way from Chicago to New York.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 form a kind of interlude that challenges not Dewey's pedagogical practice, but his failure, as a respected educator, to consider generously and support actively the theory and practice of others. Those others include both American and European educators associated with "social efficiency," the vocational theory of the German Georg Kerschensteiner, and the distinctive developmental pedagogy of Maria Montessori. It is here that Knoll's contribution to "the transatlantic exchange of ideas" comes through substantively. Each of these chapters is interesting in their own right. Each highlights Dewey's avoidance of a whole host of important and relevant pedagogical issues and is worth digging into. However, none of them are surprising if you, as I, do not see Dewey as a pedagogue to begin with. Be that as it may, were I the editor, I might have cloistered these chapters in a section of their own, highlighting the important contextualizing Knoll is doing with respect to pedagogical ideas, so as not to dilute the flow of the discussion around the Laboratory School.

I very much appreciate that Knoll brings new sources to bear on the origins and practice of the Lab School, and I also appreciate how hard he works to determine which ideas and advances ought rightly to be credited to Dewey and what Dewey perhaps erroneously gets credit for – as spelled out above. But from an American perspective, I wondered whether the record needed the degree of correction Knoll seems to think it does. I know only too well the truth of Ellen Condliffe Lagemann's 1989 claim that Thorndike won and Dewey lost. Early on, Knoll says that "using his philosophy of pragmatism, [Dewey] refined educational theory, improved teaching methods, enhanced the subject matter, and encouraged curriculum reforms that still persist and *wield pervasive influence* both in the United States and globally to this day" (p. 18, emphasis added). In my 40-year experience in schools, that is simply not accurate. I know few folks who think of Dewey *as a pedagogue* in the laudatory terms Knoll seems to assume. If Dewey is not actually influencing educational policy and practice, why is Knoll hell-bent on defusing this influence?

Knoll puts his intention this way:

the present book ... attempts to counteract hagiographic studies, correct oversimplified statements, reject exaggerated claims, accentuate the transatlantic exchange of ideas, highlight the difficult job the teachers had to do, and unravel at least some of the numerous myths that surround Dewey's work. One shortcoming of the Dewey studies to date will particularly be discussed, namely the assumption that his educational theory and the Laboratory School practice are identical; consequently, its specific relation does not need to be examined in detail. (p. 21)

I have not done a survey of those relatively few educators who even know about the Lab School to ask whether they assume that it was a mirror image of Dewey's theorizing (I hesitate to diminish Dewey's effort to theorize democratic education as rhetoric), but let me ask, does anybody seriously think they could or would be identical? In much educational prescription (and yes, rhetoric) today there is a focus on specifying the elements of curriculum and instruction, and implementing them *with fidelity*. The image of the teacher at work is narrow and prescriptive, not at all the designer image Dewey seems to have in mind. That image is antithetical to a pragmatist mindset of inquiry and reconstruction. And yet,

that is what Knoll seems to expect of the Lab School, that Dewey would tell the faculty how it should be and what they should do, and that they would do it. I know of no sources, including the range of neglected sources that Knoll brings to bear, that would ground a view like that.

In fact, Knoll does not find fault with the Lab School faculty for the failure to implement Dewey's curriculum theory, but blames Dewey for "idealistic" assumptions that handcuffed the teachers. In the Preface he notes, "[w]hile acknowledging Dewey's sound didactic principles, it must be kept in mind that—due to numerous idealistic assumptions about intrinsic motivation, incidental instruction, social control, to name just a few—his curriculum theory cannot simply be adopted and implemented in actual classroom practice" (p. 19). Later in discussing Dewey's version of "learning by doing," Knoll says, "Dewey favored a method that overtaxed the ability and capability of many children and was not applicable in all real-life situations and, certainly, not in all learning situations at school" (p. 174). It is here that Knoll and I part company. I readily admit that one cannot walk into a public school, here in the US or in Germany, and assume that children's intrinsic motivation and self-control are well-developed. Educators have to tap and extend already existing motivations, transform external control into self-control, and look hard for opportunities for incidental instruction. That takes time and commitment, working toward the reconstruction of students' experience of school so that inquiry does not "overtax" their capabilities, but tap their richest potential. But I also know that educators can do that, in the most difficult contexts and with the most disadvantaged students. I have witnessed it. To be pragmatist in one's approach to education is not to be practical. It requires patience and faith. That does not make it impossible, only very difficult. The point is not that a Dewey school is not possible because of some idealistic assumptions. It is that a school that takes Deweyan ideas seriously as moving ideas, ideas that move action, is very difficult to bring to life in the contemporary structures of the school, and in light of the infrastructure of our societal norms and affects.

Before ending this review, I want to take up two questions that Knoll puts before us: 1) Why might Alice and John Dewey want to tell the story of the Lab School? Is whitewashing the record the only possible reason? 2) If the Laboratory School was a successful experiment, why didn't it prompt wholesale adoption throughout the American system?

Why tell the story of the Lab School in the text that became *The Dewey School* (1936)? For Knoll, the answer can be found in the Deweys' failed attempts to solicit others to complete the work. He calls *The Dewey School* "a framed and partisan narrative ... sugarcoating the schools' failures and errors to a significant degree" (p. 318). He points out that in the end, 25% of the report came from Dewey, and argues that "we should not take Mayhew and Edwards' report at face value because it's essentially hagiographic" (p. 343).

As a university educator who has collaborated on a variety of educational experiments with school-based colleagues, I know full well why we want to get the first-person story of such efforts into the public eye, and it is not (or at least not only) self-aggrandizement.<sup>3</sup> When one is in the throes of making theory practice and using practice to reshape theory, it is nigh on impossible to find the time to document successes and failures in ways that both the public and practicing colleagues can digest. When an experiment ends (because of university politics, failures of funding, departure of key figures, or for some other reason), one is acutely aware that what was learned is worth preserving, not as gospel truth but as in-the-moment documentation of experience. This does not demand only scientific studies, but also ethnographic detail. There is an effort to get some concrete ideas and practices into the record for future consideration and study.

As a result, I think that we should take the Mayhew and Edwards book exactly at face value *for what it is*, not a dispassionate evaluation of successes and failures, but as a near contemporaneous record

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<sup>3</sup> Full disclosure: I am currently midstream in telling just such a story through a podcast called *Chasing Bailey*. The podcast documents a several-year effort to transform a school that was failing on every measure imaginable. The story has little in common with the story of the Lab School *except* that both efforts involved on-going inquiry and both success and failure, and both efforts encountered as many hurdles from the outside as from the inside.

– one that can be analyzed later on by scholars like Knoll, and perhaps found wanting in a variety of ways. That does not discount the power such stories have for motivating action on the part of other educators.

Why didn't Dewey's Lab School become the standard? For just the reasons Knoll suggests, and a few more. It was a seven-year effort with a very small number of children who did not represent the wide range of students that actually existed, in large part because of the privilege of their parents. But there are other reasons to be considered, reasons linked to the American tradition of local control, the lack of a central apparatus for dictating school programming, and longstanding cultural conflicts that are woven into American society and American schooling. Douglas Simpson and Michael Jackson (1997) provide some background on this that is sympathetic to Dewey in their *Educational Reform: A Deweyan Perspective*. What would educational reform look like in Dewey's pragmatist world? It would not be a prescribed model implemented universally but a continual encounter with and reconstruction of experience.

In fact, the history of American schooling in the 20th and 21st centuries contains multiple Dewey-like experiments, from the Eight-Year Study of progressive high schools, to the open classrooms of the 1960s, to the Coalition of Essential Schools in the 1990s spearheaded by Ted Sizer and Deborah Meier, to my own modest involvement in a public middle school transformation in Nashville, Tennessee, in the last decade. Aside from these often poorly funded and difficult to maintain experiments, the places where students consistently enjoy voice and choice, where incidental learning is allowed and encouraged, and where students demonstrate intrinsic motivation and self-control are almost always well-resourced private schools.

That the Lab School didn't mirror Dewey's ideas is not at all surprising. That the Lab School might become a blueprint for all schooling is unthinkable. Nor was it intended to be. Consider Dewey's own view about a model school articulated in *School and Society*. A model is not intended to be copied; it is intended to demonstrate that putting ideas into practice is possible. For all its flaws, flaws that Knoll documents thoroughly, the Lab School remains a model, one that, according to Dewey, "affords the demonstration of the feasibility of the principle, and of the methods which make it feasible" (1899, p. 102).

Overall, Knoll's work will fascinate the scholar of Dewey-as-pedagogue because of its new sources and because the author works hard to tell the story behind the story, by developing personalities and motivations. I do not agree with many of Knoll's attributions of intention, but I find all of them worth considering. For Knoll, Dewey is a flawed pedagogue whose place in the pedagogical universe should be revised. Still, after digesting Knoll's work with real interest, his stature as an educator has not, in my mind, diminished.

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