

Dewey Outlines Utopian Schools»»»

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The most Utopian thing in Utopia is that there are no schools at all. Education is carried on without anything of the nature of schools, or, if this idea is so extreme that we cannot conceive of it as educational at all, then we may say nothing of the sort at present we know as schools. Children, however, are gathered together in association with older and more mature people who direct their activity.

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The assembly places all have large grounds, gardens, orchards, greenhouses, and none of the buildings in which children and older people gather will hold much more than 200 people, this having been found to be about the limits of close, intimate personal acquaintance on the part of people who associate together.

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And inside these buildings, which are all of them of the nature of our present open-air schools in their physical structure, there are none of the things we usually associate with our present schools. Of course, there are no mechanical rows of screwed-down desks. There is rather something like a well-furnished home of today, only with a much greater variety of equipment and no messy accumulations of all sorts of miscellaneous furniture; more open spaces than our homes have today.

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Then there are the workshops, with their apparatus for carrying on activities with all kinds of material--wood, iron, textiles. There are historic museums and scientific laboratories, and books everywhere as well as a central library.

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The adults who are most actively concerned with the young have, of course, to meet a certain requirement, and the first thing that struck me as a visitor to Utopia was that they must all be

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married persons and, except in exceptional cases, must have had children of their own. Unmarried, younger persons occupy places of assistance and serve a kind of initiatory apprenticeship. Moreover, older children, since there are no arbitrary divisions into classes, take part in directing the activities of those still younger.

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The activity of these older children may be used to illustrate the method by which those whom we would call teachers are selected. It is almost a method of self-selection. For instance, the children aged say from about 13 to 18 who are especially fond of younger children are given the opportunity to consort with them. They work with the younger children under observation, and then it soon becomes evident who among them have the taste, interest and the kind of skill which is needed for effective dealing with the young.

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As their interest in the young develops, their own further education centres more and more about the study of processes of growth and development, and so there is a very similar process of natural selection by which parents are taken out of the narrower contact with their own children in the homes and are brought forward in the educational nurture of larger numbers of children.

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The work of these educational groups is carried on much as painters were trained in, say, Italy, when painting was at its height. The adult leaders, through their previous experience and by the manner of their selection, combine special knowledge of

children with special gifts in certain directions.

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They associate themselves with the young in carrying on some line of action. Just as in these older studios younger people were apprentices who observed the elders and took part along with them in doing at first some of the simpler things and then, as they got more experience, engaged directly in the more complex forms of activity, so in these directed activities in these centres the older people are first engaged in carrying on some work in which they themselves are competent, whether painting or music or scientific inquiry, observation of nature or industrial cooperation in some line. Then the younger children, watching them, listening to them, begin taking part in the simpler forms of the action--a minor part, until as they develop they accept more and more responsibility for cooperating.

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Naturally I inquired what were the purposes, or, as we say now, the objectives, of the activities carried on in these centres. At first

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nothing puzzled me more than the fact that my inquiry after objectives was not at all understood, for the whole concept of the school, of teachers and pupils and lessons, had so completely disappeared that when I asked after the special objectives of the activity of these centres, my Utopian friends thought I was asking why children should live at all, and therefore they did not take my questions seriously.

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After I made them understand what I meant, my question was dismissed with the remark that since children were alive and growing, "of course, we, as the Utopians, try to make their lives worth while to them; of course, we try to see that they really do grow, that they really develop." But as for having any objective

beyond the process of a developing life, the idea still seemed to them quite silly. The notion that there was some special end which the young should try to attain was completely foreign to their thoughts.

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By observation, however, I was led to the conclusion that what we would regard as the fundamental purposes were thoroughly ingrained in the working of the activities themselves. In our language it might be said to be the discovery of the aptitudes, the tastes, the abilities and the weaknesses of each boy and girl, and then to develop their positive capacities into attitudes and to arrange and reinforce the positive powers so as not to cover up the weak points but to offset them.

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I inquired, having a background of our own schools in mind, how with their methods they ever made sure that the children and youth really learned anything, how they mastered the subject matter, geography and arithmetic and history, and how they ever were sure that they really learned to read and write and figure. Here, too, at first I came upon a blank wall. For they asked, in return to my question, whether in the period from which I came for a visit to Utopia it was possible for a boy or girl who was normal physiologically to grow up without learning the things which he or she needed to learn--because it was evident to them that it was not possible for any one except a congenital idiot to be born and to grow up without learning.

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When they discovered, however, that I was serious, they asked whether it was true that in our day we had to have schools and teachers and examinations to make sure that babies learned to walk and to talk.

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It was during these conversations that I learned to appreciate how completely the whole concept of acquiring and storing away things had been displaced by the concept of creating attitudes by shaping desires and developing the needs that are significant in the process of living.

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The Utopians believed that the pattern which exists in economic society in our time affected the general habits of thought; that because personal acquisition and private possession were such dominant ideals in all fields, even if unconsciously so, they had taken possession of the minds of educators to the extent that the idea of personal acquisition and possession controlled the whole educational system.

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They pointed not merely to the use in our schools of the competitive methods of appeal to rivalry and the use of rewards and punishments, of set examinations and the system of promotion, but they also said that all these things were merely incidental expressions of the acquisitive system of society and the kind of measure and test of achievement and success which had to prevail in an acquisitive type of society.

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So it was that we had come to regard all study as simply a method of acquiring something, even if only useless or remote facts, and thought of learning and scholarship as the private possession of the resulting acquisition. And the social change which had taken place with the abolition of an acquisitive economic society had, in their judgment, made possible the transformation of the centre of emphasis from learning (in our sense) to the creation of attitudes.

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They said that the great educational liberation came about

when the concept of external attainments was thrown away and when they started to find out what each individual person had in him from the very beginning, and then devoted themselves to finding out the conditions of the environment and the kinds of activity in which the positive capacities of each young person could operate most effectually.

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In setting creation, productivity, over against acquiring, they said that there was no genuine production without enjoyment. They imagined that the ethics of education in the older period had been that enjoyment in education always had to be something deferred; that the motto of the schools, at least, was that man never is, but always is to be, blest; while the only

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education that really could discover and elicit power was one which brought these powers for immediate use and enjoyment.

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Naturally, I inquired what attitudes they regarded as most important to create, since the formation of attitudes had taken the place with the young of the acquisition of information. They had some difficulty in ranking attitudes in any order of importance, because they were so occupied with an all-around development of the capacities of the young. But, through observation, I should say that they ranked the attitude which would give a sense of positive power as at least as basic and primary as the others, if not more so.

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This attitude which resulted in a sense of positive power involved, of course, elimination of fear, of embarrassment, of constraint, of self-consciousness; eliminated the conditions which created the feeling of failure and incapacity. Possibly it included the development of a confidence, of readiness to tackle

difficulties, of actual eagerness to seek problems instead of dreading them and running away from them. It included a rather ardent faith in human capacity. It included a faith in the capacity of the environment to support worthwhile activities, provided the environment was approached and dealt with in the right way.