

What does “the School as a Community” mean?

–Revisiting John Dewey’s theory of community

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Abstract

How should we understand the school as a community? For schools, what is the meaning of the attribute of community? Analyzing the application of John Dewey’s concept of community in education can help us understand the core purpose of the school as a community. Focusing on the meaning of school as a community in educational background, this paper illustrates the social character of school as a community based on Dewey’s theory of community. It reviews the application of community in various situations including the community based on common life, the meaning of community, and the imagined community, also refers to the social community proposed by Dewey. We then take the University of Chicago’s Elementary School as the case study, which was founded by Dewey to show that how school as a community runs in educational situation. Schools as a place of experience communicated, curriculum as the carrier of experience, and teachers as cooperators, which are embodied in the Elementary School. The idea of school as a community as well its application in practice reveals the schools’ value on constructing democratic society. It sheds light on the understanding of school as a community and directs the practice.

Keywords: community; John Dewey; Elementary school

In April 1899, Dewey proposed in his lecture on the "Elementary School of the University of Chicago" that the school is a miniature community or embryonic society.² This is the fundamental fact, and from this arise continuous and orderly streams of instruction. And the purpose of school education is to cultivate the spirit of social cooperation and community life in children. "Community" is the primary principle of the experimental school, and all school life, including all courses and teaching, revolves on a social basis.³ The aim is not the economic value of the products, but the development of social power and insight.⁴

In an letter to his wife Alice Chipman Dewey in 1894, Dewey explained his visit to a local normal school for training teachers in Chicago where he had recently delivered some lectures on pedagogy. Dewey was frustrated to discover that the teachers had not accurately implemented the psychological principles he had outlined, and so he concluded that to bring about meaningful education reform, he would need to found his own school to test his educational and philosophical principles in educational

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² Dewey, John. *The School and Society*. Rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1915), 15.

³ Dewey, John. *The School and Society*. Rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1915), 13-14.

⁴ Dewey, John. *The School and Society*. Rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1915), 13-14.

practice: “The school is a kind of social life which is abstract and under control—which is directly experimental, and if philosophy is ever to be an experimental science, the construction of the school is at the starting point.”⁵ Then Alice Dewey encouraged him to try out the educational thought into practice. The next year, Dewey outlined his educational vision for the Elementary School of the University, as it was originally called, more formally in a paper entitled “Plan for Organization of the University Primary School” in which he explained that he wished to utilize “the children’s impulses towards, and powers of, expression in such a way that he would realize the social ends to which they may be made serviceable”.⁶

The Elementary School, first known as the University Laboratory School or Dewey School, opened in January 1896 in the Hyde Park around the University of Chicago.⁷ This school was a cooperative venture of parents, teachers, and educators. There were 2 teachers and 16 children at first, then would gradually develop 23 teachers, 10 assistants and 140 children.⁸ John Dewey was appointed the head of the Department of Philosophy, Psychology and Pedagogy at the University of Chicago in 1894, seems to begin thinking about such an elementary school soon after his arrival in Chicago.⁹

Despite Dewey’s enthusiasm and rationale for his school, the first accounts of the experiment were not positive. In 1897 a visitor to the Elementary School offered a mixed review in the *Public School Journal*. While impressed with the “suggestive and inspiring” aims of Dewey’s experiment, the author was struck by the alleged lack of structure at the school, arguing that “no textbooks were used and there were no classes in writing or spelling”, and there was “the least regard shown for those rules of decorum that make community life enjoyable” and “little sense of obligation for the teachers”.¹⁰ In 1899 Dewey published his first book on education *The School and Society*, which was originally composed of only three lectures and an added report entitled “Three years of the University Elementary School”.¹¹ Dewey’s essay on the school was originally an address he had delivered to the school’s parents’ association. By the end of the 1898-1899 school year, Dewey was confident in what he had accomplished at the school.¹² For the 1903-04 school year, Alice Dewey was controversially named president of the newly combined Laboratory School of the

⁵ Dewey, John, Harriet Alice Chipman Dewey, and Harriet Alice Chipman Dewey. *Letters from China and Japan*. EP Dutton Company, 1920.

⁶ Dewey, J. "Plan of organization of the University Primary School". In J. A. Boydston Ed. *The early works of John Dewey, 1882-1898* Vol.5 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 224-243. (Original Work published in 1895)

⁷ See Wirth, Arthur G. *John Dewey as Educator: His Design for Work in Education (1894-1904)* (New York: Wiley, 1966); Westbrook, Robert B. (Robert Brett). *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1991); Mayhew, Katherine., and Anna Camp. Edwards. *The Dewey School: the Laboratory School of the University of Chicago, 1896-1903* (New York, London: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1936); Kliebard, Herbert M. *Forging the American Curriculum: Essays in Curriculum History and Theory*. 1st ed. Vol. 20 (Routledge, 1992).

⁸ Mayhew, Katherine., and Anna Camp. Edwards. *The Dewey School: the Laboratory School of the University of Chicago, 1896-1903* (New York, London: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1936), 7-8.

⁹ Kliebard, Herbert M. *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958* (London: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁰ Brown, George P. "Dr. John Dewey’s educational experiment." *Public School Journal* 16.10 (1897): 533-537.

¹¹ Later editions of *The School and Society* added five additional chapters of original published materials. Fallace, Thomas, and Victoria Fantozzi. "The Dewey School as Triumph, Tragedy, and Misunderstood: Exploring the Myths and Historiography of the University of Chicago Laboratory School." *Teachers College record* (1970) 119, no. 2 (2017): 7-8.

¹² Dewey, J. "The University Elementary School". In J. A. Boydston Ed. *The Middle works, 1899-1924* Vol.1. 1899-1901 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), 317-318. (Original Work published in 1899)

University of Chicago, which the Parents' Association of the Laboratory School continued to call "the Dewey School".¹³ In Spring 1904, Alice was informed that her appointment was not being renewed.¹⁴ Upset over how the situation was handled, Alice and John Dewey submitted their resignations, and the school ended abruptly.¹⁵ The various educational explorations carried out by the experimental school stopped, and the educational concept of the school as a community gradually faded out of the academia.

Since the 20th century, with the continuous impact of globalization and high-technology, our society has gradually developed from the industrial era focusing on production efficiency to the knowledge-based economy era characterized by individualized innovation - an era of "one-upmanship".¹⁶ The relationship between people is surrounded by various competitions, but the competition between individuals cannot satisfy the self-renewal and sustainable development of society. On the contrary, it leads to a certain degree of social segregation, and individuals cannot fully develop in a competitive environment. Peter argued about the learning organization and emphasized learning through collaboration-based teams as an important means of continuous organizational renewal.¹⁷ This has important implications for the whole society, especially school education. Hord first argued "Professional Learning Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Development" in a research report published in 1997.¹⁸ Schools as a community reappears and related concepts such as learning community, practice community, and professional learning community have become hot topics in the field of education.

The school reform began to promote cooperation among teachers and joint participation in the management of the school, to advocate a new school culture based on cooperation and sharing, and to create inclusive, dynamic and continuous learning schools.¹⁹ A community is a unique link between students and teachers, constructing shared values and ideals that are more important than any one party alone, and providing them with an ongoing sense of identity, belonging, and security.²⁰ Although the theories of school as a community developed, the practice of the community has slowly developed. It is not enough to argue that students study in groups and teachers prepare lessons collectively, which is cooperation to form a community.

The main focus of this paper is how to understand the school as a community. First, I

¹³ O'Connor, Nellie Johnson. "The educational side of the Parents' Association of the Laboratory School: From a parent's point of view." *The Elementary School Teacher* 4.7 (1904): 532-535.

¹⁴ Menand, Louis. *The metaphysical club: A story of ideas in America*. (Macmillan, 2002), 290.

¹⁵ Dewey, J. "The University Elementary School". In J. A. Boydston Ed. *The Middle works, 1899-1924* Vol.1. 1899-1901 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), 320. (Original Work published in 1899)

¹⁶ Bauman, Zygmunt. *On Mass, Individuals, and Peg Communities: Part 2: Mass and Community*. Sociological Review Monograph (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 102-113.

¹⁷ Senge, Peter M. *The Fifth Discipline: the Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. Milsons Point, N.S.W: Random House Australia, 1992.

¹⁸ Hord, Shirley M. "Professional learning communities: Communities of continuous inquiry and improvement." *Change Strategies*, 1997, 71.

¹⁹ Huffman, Jane Bumpers, and Kristine Kiefer Hipp. *Reculturing schools as professional learning communities*. R&L Education, 2003.

²⁰ Sergiovanni, Thomas J. *Building community in schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), xxix.

would like to clarify the connotation of community and identify its meaning in different contexts. The paper attempts to figure out that Dewey induced the ideal the democratic community in terms of the common goals, communal understanding and shared action by members of the group. For him, education is the foundation and inherited function of each community, and also constitutes the benchmark measuring the quality of community. From the standpoint of community and its relation with education, Dewey also depicted the school as a miniature community where the social life is embodied, the interests of diverse groups are balanced, and the cooperative enquiry can be found among children and teachers. Finally the paper elaborates the application in education practice in the case study, we will explore unity of Dewey's philosophy of education and his social and political philosophy, as well as the core purpose of school as community.

The meaning of community

Community is a concept invoked by scholars, organizers and institutions with little reflection or understanding about how community forms. Contemporary use has expanded the use of community rather than clarified its use. The term "community" continues to imply relationships that are more than merely transactional, contractual, or prescribed.²¹ Invocations of community have a nostalgic component, often preferring the direct and fac-to-face over the abstracted forms of interaction implied by "society" or "bureaucracy".²² The literature on community would help us to understand the term "community" by outlining some definitions and concepts.

1. Community based on common life

The term "community" has varied uses but limited theoretical exploration. A community based on shared life refers to a collection of groups that live in a common area and have one or some common characteristics, such as a global community, a family community, and a community with a common future for mankind. This characteristic is based on the commonality of the living area in which it is located. And this kind of community emphasizes the commonality and regionality of the community.

Early usage of the term indicated some "body of commons" of fellowship between people.²³ When early sociologists studied community, they paid more attention to commonality, that is, the common characteristics of a group. The term "community" would share some roots with leftist political terms like "commune" and "communist",²⁴ but "community" could be used to describe groups of nearly every kind across the political spectrum.²⁵ Critics of the term argue that the widely varied and contradicting usage of "community" make the term almost useless, but there is a

²¹ Yudice, Geroge. "Community." In Bennett, Tony, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris, eds. *New keywords: A revised vocabulary of culture and society*. (Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 49-50.

²² Joseph, Miranda. *Against the romance of community*. University of Minnesota Press, 2002, 53-55.

²³ Yudice, Geroge. "Community." In Bennett, Tony, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris, eds. *New keywords: A revised vocabulary of culture and society*. (Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 51.

²⁴ Yudice, Geroge. "Community." In Bennett, Tony, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris, eds. *New keywords: A revised vocabulary of culture and society*. (Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 52.

²⁵ Joseph, Miranda. *Against the romance of community*. University of Minnesota Press, 2002, 53.

common trope in the use of community: the narrative of loss and recovery. No matter how large the area of common life is, it can be called a community.²⁶ These views will be considered as established facts, that is, as long as people live together, they will inevitably produce and develop certain commonherent -- behaviors, customs, languages. On this point of view, the Community not only describes static populations, but also presents a kind of human lifestyle and its common civilization results in this process.

In fact, people living together inevitably be subject to the living area or space limitations. Because of this, people may be familiar with each other by interacting interactions, ensuring that they are interspersed with the integration of the people's vision constitutes "common life." Community's basic feature is that there is a group of people organized according to the region, and these people are different degrees to root in which each other lives in an interdependent relationship.²⁷ In general, the community is concerned about the interaction and the common life between people in a particular area.

2. Community based on values

Understandings of "community" have big influences from Classical Greece and Rome, where ideas of community existed between tensions of the earthly and particular *polis* and the universal and divinely ordered *cosmos*.²⁸ Classical Greek understandings assumed "community" was the highly exclusive political community of citizens²⁹, and that ideal would influence a great deal of future ideas. Classical Romans as well as early Christians who inherited a great deal of the Classical Roman world, moved the idea of "community" as something local and particular to something that would be a universal order.³⁰ The idea of a universal order implies "community" as something ideal rather than actual, and a forming of bonds that does not require a state or institution.³¹ Classical roots of community establish the term as something used to invoke different and often contradicting concepts that are both descriptive and normative.

The community based on values reveals the mechanism that maintains the continuation of the community, that is, the shared "meaning" system constructed by members according to the moral or value standards formed by common understanding, which ensures the compactness and persistence within the community. The grouping of people without a clear identification of state or culture implies the potential of limitless connection undone by organizing and state-building. The arguments made by sociologists and moral philosophers until the late 20th century involved the restoration of the values and practices of the past community into

²⁶ Mciver, R. M. "Community: A Sociological Study." *Philosophical Review* 27.2 (1918).

²⁷ Lind, Andrew W., and Robert Ezra Park. "Human Communities: The City and Human Ecology." *American Sociological Review*. American Sociological Society, 1954, 620-621.

²⁸ Delanty, Gerard. "Reinventing community and citizenship in the global era: A critique of the communitarian concept of community." *Communitarianism and citizenship* 33 (1998), 39.

²⁹ Delanty, Gerard. "Reinventing community and citizenship in the global era: A critique of the communitarian concept of community." *Communitarianism and citizenship* 33 (1998), 9-11.

³⁰ Delanty, Gerard. "Communitarianism and citizenship." *Handbook of citizenship studies* (2002), 161-167.

³¹ Delanty, Gerard. "Communitarianism and citizenship." *Handbook of citizenship studies* (2002), 165-170.

modern times rather than returning to a past.³² Later postmodern understandings of community would define the term as vaguely connected to culture rather than politics. The understanding of community as “cultural” rather than “political” provides space for intercultural communication and understandings of community through culture.

Tönnies used the method of typology to propose the important dimension of community.³³ He distinguished two ideal types as community and society to analyze the way of life of human groups, revealing that in addition to common territory, community also needs some deeper and lasting commonality. That is, people's self-evident common understanding in common life, and on this basis, a set of common value orientations are constructed to form an intimate relationship of honor and disgrace among members. This relationship is called ideological commonality. Therefore, the commonality presented by a community based on values is some kind of shared moral standards, values and identities. They constitute the system of meaning that sustains the community.

Community is more of the moral value,³⁴ and Greek nation-states are often regarded as a model for community based on value. At that time, the nation-state not only meant that a group of people lived together, but also pointed to a group lifestyle with common interests and ethical orientation. They consciously shaped the common beliefs and common values of the nation-state through various means such as common blood and language, common sacrifices, and political habits.³⁵ Plato saw the city-state as a community that brought together all souls.³⁶ The so-called soul refers to knowledge and ability, embodied in political or ideological virtue. This spiritual common factor gave birth to people's mutual identification and common understanding in the life of the city-state.³⁷

The biggest conceptual difference between a community based on values and a community based on common life is that the community based on values is formed through the relationship between its members—whether it is mechanical, loose, or organic, tight, taking society and community as two groups with different attributes through the relationship formed between members, thereby revealing the essence of the relationship within the community. The community based on common life does not consciously distinguish the society from the community, but rather studies the relationship characteristics of a certain group from the external interaction of the members.

³² Delanty, Gerard. "Reinventing community and citizenship in the global era: A critique of the communitarian concept of community." *Communitarianism and citizenship* 33 (1998), 13.

³³ Tönnies, Ferdinand. *Community & Society (Gemeinschaft Und Gesellschaft)* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1957), 11-12.

³⁴ Tönnies, Ferdinand. *Community & Society (Gemeinschaft Und Gesellschaft)* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1957), 11-12.

³⁵ Rowe, C. J., and Malcolm Schofield. *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought*. Edited by C. J. Rowe and Malcolm Schofield. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

³⁶ Plato., J. Llewelyn Davies, David James Vaughan, and J. Llewelyn (John Llewelyn) Davies. *The Republic of Plato*. 3rd ed. London: Macmillan, 1866.

³⁷ Weber, Max, Talcott Parsons, and Max Weber. *Max Weber: The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Paperback edition. New York: Free Press, 1964.

3. Imagined community

Narratives and understandings of community understand community as something that exists both the past and the future. Whether it is a community based on shared life or a community of values, both contain a presupposition that the community is an objectively existing social group. But in both these cases, when we seek a community, it is not so much that we find group relations and ways of life that have a certain character, but that we want it to be community. We usually construct this community for better survival and development, so as to explain the sense of identity or belonging of its members in the community.³⁸

Many studies have made us aware of the inventive nature of many of the traditions of nationalism, especially the invention of the nation itself as a concept.³⁹ As for the nature of the Nation-state, Anderson explains more comprehensively and argues that the nation-state is an "Imagined Community".⁴⁰ In his view, the so-called emotion of a nation's common sense is, merely the "imagination" that printed capitalism repeatedly creates in a specific territory. Besides, a national tradition is a series of "inventions" by western countries to consolidate the established political order after the 1870s. The foundation of national identity is the existence of some so-called "essentiality", and the process of identity is a fundamental constructing process in the community.⁴¹ The truth is that the nation-state is not a natural occurrence, but instead through an unchanging mass of people.⁴² Nor does any ethnic group have pure blood and consistent culture. The reason why they accept national identity is that in the specific time and space, the organisation of the nation-state has the function of gathering the masses and keeping them safe. Therefore, national identity is completely different from the traditional collective identity based on blood, ethnicity even language, historical and cultural identity.⁴³

Although Smith does not oppose the nation-state as a kind of "state construction," he argues that this "Imagined Community" is not entirely out of imagination and fiction.⁴⁴ The origins of many nation-states tend to use the "ethnic" identity as a resource. Moreover, the nature of the ethnic community is neither primitive nor entirely subjective, but a combination of historical experiences and symbolic cultural activities, such as languages, customs and religions.

Overall, it is obvious how diverse these papers seem, but they have touched a common heartstring, that is, the nation-state is an imaginary community with political authority and territorial sovereignty, based on the myth of national homogeneity and

³⁸ Tönnies, Ferdinand. *Community & Society (Gemeinschaft Und Gesellschaft)* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1957), 19.

³⁹ Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger, eds, *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁴⁰ Benedict R. O'G Anderson and Societies American Council of Learned, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London:Verso, 2006).

⁴¹ E. J. Hobsbawm and Societies American Council of Learned, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁴² Delanty, Gerard. *Community: comunidad, educacion ambiental y ciudadania*. London: Routledge, 2003:3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴⁴ A.D. Smith, *Theories of Nationalism* (Holmes & Meier, 1983).

cultural identity.⁴⁵ Although the above-mentioned community connotation can provide many characteristics of the community, their relationship with education is not very clear. The concept of community proposed by Dewey is directly related to education and carries out educational practice. So our research question is that how should we understand the school as a community? And the second question is for schools, what is the meaning of the attribute of community?

Dewey's explanations of community

During his time at the University of Chicago, Dewey not only studied Pierce's pragmatism, but also taught the philosophy of pragmatism.⁴⁶ He argued that all educational aims and purposes should be instrumental, and that thoughts and beliefs are like hands, tools to cope with the environment.⁴⁷ Learning was not the fragmented intellectual information provided by the course, but the knowledge continuum of interactive, unforeseen activities. And knowledge and activity are inseparable.⁴⁸ Therefore, education should help students express themselves through social activities, coordinate their behaviours, and acquire the tools for success.

It would be difficult to distinguish between society and community.⁴⁹ In Dewey's view, if we focus on the social reality, rather than being limited to its inner meaning, then we could see the diversity of society, not a unity. Society emphasizes the uncertainty and freer role of community forces that take place in our daily interactions and interpersonal encounters, in infinitely variable ways, involving both "good" and "bad" groups. Community is Dewey's standard to measure the value of social lifestyle, which reflects the characteristics of democratic society.

The age of the community in which man regulated and judged his own life by reference to the embodiment of his ideals in the habits of the community to which they belong has passed away, and society is now farther away from it.⁵⁰ The two are not necessarily formed because of geographical relations, nor for a common purpose. Sometimes a book or a letter can make people thousands of miles apart to build a closer relationship than the households who live in the same room. The various parts of a machine cooperate to the greatest extent possible for a common purpose but cannot be called a community. The community in society mainly includes the following two characteristics⁵¹: First, the community is not an ideal society that we imagine in our minds that corresponds to the actual society. Dewey argued that this concept should be based on the real society. Second, an ideal Community cannot just repeat those characteristics found in the reality, but draw good points from the actual social life, and use them to criticize the bad characteristics and propose improved

⁴⁵ Benedict R. O'G Anderson, op.cit. 83-87; Hall, Stuart, and Paul Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (Sage: Sage Publications, 1996), 15-30.

⁴⁶ Menand, Louis. *The metaphysical club: A story of ideas in America*. (Macmillan, 2002), 312.

⁴⁷ Menand, Louis. *The metaphysical club: A story of ideas in America*. (Macmillan, 2002), 314.

⁴⁸ Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. (New York: The Macmillan company, 1916), 389.

⁴⁹ Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. (New York: The Macmillan company, 1916), 25.

⁵⁰ Dewey, John. *Dictionary of Education*. New York, New York: Philosophical Library, 1959.

⁵¹ Dewey, John. *Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us*. In *The Later Works of John Dewey*. Vol. 14. (South Illinois University Press, 1988), 227.

methods.⁵²

Community is another expression of democratic society. The connotation of the community also reflects the characteristics of a democratic society. Democracy, on the one hand, has a greater number and variety of common interests, while at the same time emphasizing awareness of the common interests as a factor of social control. On the other hand, there is a freer interaction between the various groups in society, through which social habits are changed. In Dewey's definition, democracy is not only a form of government, but also a way of life. The concept of community is to better explain the democratic society as a kind of lifestyle.

Dewey interprets Tönnies' distinction between society and community from another perspective. In Tönnies' definition, community is a group relationship opposite to society, that is, a communicative organism closely linked by traditional natural emotions, and a complete unity of human will in a primitive or natural state. And the society is understood as a mechanical aggregation and artefact.⁵³ But Dewey did not take the typological approach to the community as the antithesis of society, he acknowledged the complexity of society and community itself. From a holistic perspective, a community is a form of democratic society with "participatory, material, intellectual and aesthetic interests" and "many different and free contacts with other forms of association".⁵⁴ Rich in ethical tendencies and moral connotations, it can effectively contain and cure the moral decline since the age of human industrialization.

Community needs to be realized through communication. Communities are neither formed naturally in common life, nor are they formed spontaneously only through ties such as common purpose. The community is not pre-established as an ideal existence, and then all members need to obey the various norms or rules of the community. "Cooperation" in this case does not guarantee the formation of a community in which people work towards a common purpose, but which does not involve their relevant interests. Because the purpose of cooperation is only related to a part of members, the results cannot be shared. Therefore, only when all the participants have their own concerns about the activity and can contribute to the decision of the activity, thereby generating shared views and understanding, can a community be finally created. Communication ensures that members have similar emotions and a common understanding in the community.⁵⁵

A community maintains its development through constant self-renewal, and this self-renewal relies on the educational growth of immature members of the group.⁵⁶ The social function of education is that the social group trains the immature members into its own social model, that is, the socialization of the individual. And the quality of

⁵² Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. (New York: The Macmillan company, 1916), 83.

⁵³ Tönnies, Ferdinand. *Community & Society (Gemeinschaft Und Gesellschaft)* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1957), 21-25.

⁵⁴ Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. (New York: The Macmillan company, 1916), 83-85.

⁵⁵ Dewey, John. "Creative Democracy—the Task before us". In J. A. Boydston Ed. *The Later works of John Dewey* Vol.14 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 227.

⁵⁶ Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. (New York: The Macmillan company, 1916), 83-85.

education is closely related to the value and lifestyle of society. Community, as a democratic social way of life, in which various social interests not only penetrate each other, but also actively demand progress and adjust habits, makes it more concerned with systematic education than other social groups. Because a democratic society must require all its members to have received such education, otherwise it cannot become a democratic society or community. It emphasizes the participation of all members and denies the imposition of external authority, which also means that members' inclinations and interests in resources that participate in the common good must be relied upon in lieu of external authority. And this interest can only be formed through education.⁵⁷

Therefore, Dewey insisted that the school was the first and foremost a social institution. And education was a social experience, and schools were only a part of social life made up of multiple institutions. As an organizational institution, a school was an intermediary between families and other social organizations and should play a role of natural transition.⁵⁸ Dewey reminded us that education was a social process and a function of society, and should be based on the current social environment. School as the community emphasized that this kind of school education was an important way to build a democratic society.

Developing the school education—school as a community

The aim of the Elementary School is a laboratory to test the philosophical ideas during its development, embodied the pragmatism that John Dewey and other professors were working out during this period. As Dewey argued in 1908 in “The Bearings of Pragmatism upon Education”: “the education based upon the pragmatic conception would inevitably turn out people who were alive to the necessity of continually testing their opinions and beliefs by putting them into daily application, and of revising their beliefs based on the results of such application.”⁵⁹ In the educational experiment, teachers needed to be responsible and free, so that they could test and revise their educational ideas. Democracy and pragmatism make the same demands of their adherents: to actively pursue the best answers to the essential questions. A democratic organisation enabled a school community engaged in experimentation to benefit most fully from the expertise of all its members in the community. Robert Westbrook argues that the pragmatists relied on the “community of competent inquirers” to fix a belief.⁶⁰

As Dewey asserted “through the free and mutual harmonizing of different individuals, the work of the world is better done than when planned, arranged, and directed by

⁵⁷ Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. (New York: The Macmillan company, 1916), 98.

⁵⁸ Dewey, John. *My Pedagogic Creed*. In *My Pedagogic Creed by John Dewey and the Demands of Society upon Pedagogy* by Albion W. Small. New York and Chicago, E.L. Kellogg & Company, 1897:7.

⁵⁹ Dewey, John. "The bearings of pragmatism upon education." *Middle works 1899-1924 Vol.4* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1977), 188.

⁶⁰ Westbrook, Robert B. *Democratic Hope* (Cornell University Press, 2015). On the Chicago School and the importance of the Elementary School for the dissemination of ideas from the Philosophy Department, see Rucker, Darnell. "The Chicago Pragmatists." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 6.1 (1969).

some".⁶¹ Social experiments should be planned. All concerned would enter into the planning to insure the success of any social undertaking, and all must accept their plan as tentative, to be tested by events.⁶² What this means for the teachers in the Elementary School, a predominantly female group, was that their ideas counted.

1. The school serves as a place for the experiences exchange

School life is integrated with the social environment outside the school, so he founded the Elementary School of the University of Chicago in 1896. The Elementary School's organization structure was designed to capture and document the educational ideas of the teachers at the centre of the educational inquiry. In 1902 Dewey wrote to the University of Chicago's president Harper, in defense of the inclusion of teachers' articles in a volume, argued his opinions of the role of the teachers in the school's work, "if the school does not stand in a position of a research laboratory, there is no reasons for its existence."⁶³

As my suggestion some members of the teaching force in the Elementary School tried to prepare articles which would like to interpret upon psychological grounds the result of educational experience gained in certain lines of instruction in the Elementary School. I supposed it was perfectly clear, not only from the name, but from the history and idea of the school that it bore the same relation to the Department of Education that the Laboratory of Physics or Chemistry does to those departments, and consequently, that people who, upon the appointment from the University to do work in the Laboratory, would be competent to furnish materials.⁶⁴

At the beginning of its founding, Dewey put forward four hypotheses that needed to be tested: the first is how to make children's home life and school education more closely linked. Second, how could we connect what children learn in school with their experiences then would have a positive impact. The third is how to stimulate children's interest in literacy, numeracy and manual skills in the context of other courses and manual occupations. The fourth is how to stay focused.⁶⁵ In Dewey's view, since it was an experiment, the assumptions he proposes were not the standard that must be implemented. He once said to the school's first teacher Clara Mitchell, "The program I set for the school is not a mandatory rule. If you feel that it binds your mind, then please throw it away."⁶⁶

In order to provide children with a community life experience, the experimental

⁶¹ Dewey, John. "Democracy in education." *The elementary school teacher* 4.4 (1903): 197-198. See Seigfried, Charlene Haddock. *Pragmatism and feminism: Reweaving the social fabric* (University of Chicago Press, 1996). Also see Knight, Louise W. *Citizen: Jane Addams and the struggle for democracy* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁶² Mayhew, Katherine Camp, and Anna Camp Edwards. *The Dewey school: The laboratory school of the University of Chicago, 1896-1903*. (Transaction Publishers, 1936), 309-310.

⁶³ Dewey, John. "The university elementary school: History and character." *University Record* 2 (1897): 72-5.

⁶⁴ John Dewey to William Rainey Harper, November 7, 1902 from Hickman, L. "The correspondence of John Dewey, 1871-1952 (I-IV): electronic edition." Charlottesville, USA: InteleX Corporation (1992).

⁶⁵ Mayhew, Katherine Camp, and Anna Camp Edwards. *The Dewey school: The laboratory school of the University of Chicago, 1896-1903*. (Transaction Publishers, 1936), 24-27.

⁶⁶ Dewey, John. "To Clara Mitchell, Nov. 29, 1895 (record 00272) in The Correspondence of John Dewey, Vol 1: 1871-1918, CD-ROM version, ed. Larry Hickman (Carbondale: Center for Dewey Studies, Southern Illinois University, 2005).

school should be built on the principle of community. The disconnect between education and society and children's lives in traditional schools was broken by integrating life in school with a rich social environment, allowing children to engage in the occupations of their families and relatives. For example, there were shops and factories in the Elementary School. On the one hand, it enabled students to participate in the common school life to the greatest extent, not just passively receive education. On the other hand, schools constantly adjusted themselves and made efforts to improve the society through their interaction and influence with the community.

The organizational form of children in the Elementary School was not graded according to age, but adopted a mixed model, where students of different ages and interests learnt together. Because in a social environment, people of different ages, abilities, and interests were not deliberately identified.⁶⁷ Through communication, children's cooperative spirit and collective identity could be cultivated. With the increase in the number of teachers and students, the school adopted the form of grouping according to students' interests and hobbies. At the same time, the use of mixed forms was reserved for singing and gaming activities.⁶⁸

2. Curriculums in the Elementary School

The school tested the four hypotheses at the beginning of its establishment. Through continuous experiments and adjustments, the school had gradually worked out a relatively stable model. Dewey believed that many school curricula at that time mainly focused on children's reading, writing, and arithmetic skills, ignoring the integrity of children's development, especially their social connections. The integrity means that human abilities are the organized results of instinctive active tendencies through the use of certain materials. This form of training in the separation of ability and learning materials made school education divorced from children's life experience and social life.⁶⁹

The social development of children was largely an adaptation to collective life. The primary focus of the school curriculum was therefore to select materials with social characteristics in subjects, to give children the freedom to play and learn in collective behavior, and to allow them to express personal preferences based on collective interests or goals. Furthermore, homework represented a social context in education. Homework thus revealed the social value of the curriculum, thereby ensuring that children's interests and experiences in life are closely linked to the school curriculum.

Active work, social life background subjects and intellectual tool knowledge were the three major types of curricula in the Elementary School. These courses were interrelated and cross-processed. Educational activities began with active assignments. Through activities, children continued to learn to master scientific methods, contact history, culture, and use instrumental knowledge such as reading,

⁶⁷ McDermott, John J. "The Philosophy of John Dewey." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 11.3 (1975).

⁶⁸ Dewey, John. *The school and society: Being three lectures*. University of Chicago Press, 1899, 126-127.

⁶⁹ Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. (New York: The Macmillan company, 1916), 68-70.

writing, and numeracy.⁷⁰ By providing these materials and conditions, the School attempted to overcome the fundamental problem of education, that is, "reconciling psychological and social factors" to promote children's self-expression in ways that achieve social goals. At different developing stages, the School changed the arrangement of activities according to the different learning themes.

First, active work mainly involved two topics: homework and social work that served the family, which were directly related to children's experience. Homework involved outdoor walking, lunch preparation, crafts, occupational observations, business activities and so on. The significance of active homework was not the homework itself, but to enable students to understand the social production activities outside the school through homework, and to exercise their abilities in all aspects.⁷¹ For example, cooking activities became more complex with age. The school started cooking activities in kindergarten, and most of the ingredients children got at this stage just were grains and fruits. While seven-year-old children mainly got fruits and vegetables, they were more exploratory and willing to seek and discuss solutions. They could touch abstract numbers and understand the moisture, fiber, starch of vegetables.⁷² The school also experimented with ginger cooking in the school year 1898-1899 and 1899-1900 in relation to physiology, especially nutrition, and hygiene.⁷³ The school offered 1.5-2 hours of cooking classes every week, of which the first 30 minutes were mainly used for discussion and the remaining time was used for experiments. This made it easy for children to learn to use the scientific method. Furthermore, Textile activities were also an important way for children to expand their knowledge. It gave students insight into how early humans did simple tasks in their natural state.⁷⁴ 7-year-old children were exposed to animal tissues such as wool, and the inner fibers of linden bark are selected and dyed. The 11-year-old students realized the similarities and differences in the way of weaving in different civilizations by studying the different patterns of weaving in the world.⁷⁵

Second, social life background subjects mainly included history and geography, which provided children with a context for social life. Based on children's life experiences, teachers encouraged students to act and write stories on their own. Dewey pointed out that history was not a record of past events; it was a way of understanding what a society was made of and how it evolved. And literature should also be learned through history.⁷⁶ Dewey found through the first two years of experiments that 8-10-year-old students quickly completed the study of primitive social life. Students aged

⁷⁰ Dewey, J. "Plan of organization of the University Primary School". In J. A. Boydston Ed. *The early works of John Dewey, 1882-1898* Vol.5 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 174. (Original Work published in 1895)

⁷¹ Dewey, John. "The university elementary school: History and character." *University Record* 2 (1897): 72.

⁷² Harmer, Althea. "Elementary Cooking in the Laboratory School." *The Elementary School Teacher* 3.10 (1903): 706-709.

⁷³ Mayhew, Katherine Camp, and Anna Camp Edwards. *The Dewey school: The laboratory school of the University of Chicago, 1896-1903*. (Transaction Publishers, 1936), 299-305.

⁷⁴ Harmer, Althea. "Introduction to the Primitive Textile Work in the Laboratory School." *The Elementary School Teacher* 3.10 (1903): 710-717.

⁷⁵ Mayhew, Katherine Camp, and Anna Camp Edwards. *The Dewey school: The laboratory school of the University of Chicago, 1896-1903*. (Transaction Publishers, 1936), 194-196, 68-69.

⁷⁶ Dewey, John. "The university elementary school: History and character." *University Record* 2 (1897): 72.

13-14 better understood Roman society and culture than children aged 10.⁷⁷ In this way, students learn history from the age of 7, starting with primitive life, such as Indian tribes or African primitive tribes. 9-year-old students entered the second stage of growth and showed a tendency to master the method. They turned to learning about the origins and formation of America, starting with their familiar Chicago history.⁷⁸

Third, intellectual experiment mainly included Inquire through the scientific method. This course was mainly based on the students' psychological development and interests, obtained in the process of learning the first two courses. Unlike other traditional public schools, the Elementary School also adjusted the learning content according to the needs of children in time. For 13-year-old students, the teacher paid more attention to the use of language, connecting what happens in ordinary times to inventions and discoveries.⁷⁹

Overall, the storytelling, script writing and other activities carried out in the first two courses can not only exercise students' reading and expression skills, but also teach students to use rhetoric in writing and improve their thinking logic. The weighing of ingredients in cooking, the use of measurement units in woodworking activities, and the use of numbers in trade activities also brought algorithms into contact with social life. In this way, these three types of courses were closely linked and mutually reinforcing. The first two types of courses provide a lot of opportunities for the use of literacy and numeracy.

3. Teachers as collaborators

The teachers in the Elementary School played the important role or researchers in this educational laboratory. Different from the single teaching method of traditional school, the teaching method of the Elementary school was more diverse. Consistent with the rich curriculum, teaching was also based on the experience and interests of teachers and students. In the experiment, teachers continued to use their personal imagination to guide students' activities, and students also develop multi-faceted abilities by participating in learning activities they are interested in based on their existing life experience.⁸⁰ Some teachers such as Katherine Camp and Althea Harmer published their articles in academic journals such as *Elementary School Teacher* and *Elementary School Record*. Central to the work of the Elementary School teachers was the responsibility of developing the children's capacity to solve the problems.⁸¹

There was a cooperative relationship rather than competitive between teachers and students in the school. Everyone was aligned with each other and cooperates together to achieve the common purpose. During the teaching activities, children were thinkers and explorers, and teachers were assistants. Furthermore, children chose materials

⁷⁷ Dewey, John. *The School and Society*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1907), 122.

⁷⁸ Mayhew, Katherine Camp, and Anna Camp Edwards. *The Dewey school: The laboratory school of the University of Chicago, 1896-1903*. (Transaction Publishers, 1936), 144-145.

⁷⁹ Mayhew, Katherine Camp, and Anna Camp Edwards. *The Dewey school: The laboratory school of the University of Chicago, 1896-1903*. (Transaction Publishers, 1936), 234-236.

⁸⁰ Harmer, Althea. "Introduction to the Primitive Textile Work in the Laboratory School." *The Elementary School Teacher* 3.10 (1903): 710-717.

⁸¹ Durst, Anne. "Venturing in Education: Teaching at the University of Chicago's Laboratory School, 1896 - 1904." *History of education* (Tavistock) 39, no. 1 (2010): 55-73.

freely, and teachers guided them to carry out activities in an orderly manner to achieve the goals desired by children. Dewey discussed that the experimental school experienced many failures in the early days, The organization of the school is not good, the teaching staff share the administrative work, and the financial work is the responsibility of the education department. And the key factor was that it only paid attention to the quantity of cooperation and ignored the quality.⁸² After 1899, the school appointed a president who was responsible for contacting parents, trainee teachers, and receiving visitors. And a vice-president was in charge of the curriculum.

As far as children are concerned, the teachers as collaborators meant a new form of teacher-student relationship and teaching form. In the Elementary school, the relationship between teachers and children was not teaching and receiving, and teachers were no longer limited to providing ready-made teaching materials to students. It was not just to emphasize children's active discovery and stand idly by, but to participate in students' activities together. At the same time, teachers did not compare or grade children's homework and other activities. For example, in the lower grade classes, children started with consultation with the teachers. They would review what they have learned before, and then plan the next activities and assigned tasks.⁸³ Although it was sometimes difficult for teachers to predict the accidental events in this process, children could naturally enter their respective roles through such activities, since they could still rely on their own efforts without the guidance of teachers. Therefore, in the cooperative relationship established with the children, the teachers were not only providing some kind of help to the children, they were also a learner themselves. In the process of observing children's activities, teachers could learn how to examine children from a broader knowledge level, so as to better realize their value as a teacher.

Although teaching at the Elementary School made great demands on the teachers' energies and time, the experience also provided these teachers the chance to enquire deeply into questions at the center of their profession. Especially for the female teachers in the school, it offered them an opportunity to assume the teaching responsibility, with the accompanying satisfactions, rarely found in other American schools. In these teachers' public writings, school reports and correspondence, the teachers outline for us the important part they played in the daily routine of this educational experiment. What emerges was a description of a school in which teachers and students alike were engaged intellectually and socially with one another and with what they called "subject matter" in a way that was unlike other schools of its time. For this reason, they often taught and learned in front of a crowd.

The cooperation between teachers was mainly divided into two forms: formal meetings once a week and daily communications. At the meeting, teachers and administrators carefully checked the work of the previous week according to the master plan, reported and discussed the difficulties encountered in the process of implementing the master plan, and made corresponding revisions and adjustments.

⁸² Dewey, John. "The Dewey School". In J. A. Boydston Ed. *The Later works of John Dewey* Vol.11 1935-1937 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 152-154.

⁸³ Dewey, John. "The Dewey School". In J. A. Boydston Ed. *The Later works of John Dewey* Vol.11 1935-1937 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 156-158.

At the end of the semester, teachers summarized and reported, criticized, and learned from experience.⁸⁴ This also strengthens the connotation of the school as a community. Furthermore, daily communication often happened at lunch or after school. Especially as children moved from one stage to another, this kind of communication between teachers was more frequent and important, which could help teachers understand children's interests more quickly.

For parents, teachers were also collaborators of children's education and school management. Since a considerable part of the funds of the Elementary School was sponsored by parents, the parents collectively set up "The Parents' Association".⁸⁵ The association was not limited to funding relationships but was a member of a broader school community which was concerned with children's growth and the school development. These committees meet once a month, and the content of the meeting was usually the principles and implementation of the school's work. Among them, parents and teachers put forward their own issues and discussed them at the meeting. Experts and teachers would respond to suggestions and criticisms made by parents.

Teachers, as collaborators, could enhance parents' empathy for teachers' work through such communication in the Elementary School.⁸⁶ Teachers may also better understand children through communication and adjust their own methods and strategies in education, so as to ensure the consistency of children's education in the home and school, and the school can develop better.

Conclusion

The four hypotheses put forward by Dewey at the beginning of the school's establishment had been continuously responded to in the experiments. Teachers and students participated in the activities and experiments, especially the experimental exploration of the teachers, which promoted the development of the school. The establishment, management, subject selection, and teaching of the school were actually in the hands of the teachers. Pedagogical principles and methods were also constantly innovating, not pre-arranged.⁸⁷

In conclusion, Dewey's thought and practice about the school as a community embodies Dewey's ideal democratic society. His concept of community is no longer limited to geographical scope or formal level, nor is it limited to the level values, but focuses on living together and interprets the community from the social nature of democracy. Community is constructed in society rather than naturally formed. It is necessary for the formation of a democratic society and is formed through the participation, communication, responsibility and cooperation of all people. To build such a community, it would depend on the corresponding qualities of the members of

⁸⁴ Mayhew, Katherine Camp, and Anna Camp Edwards. *The Dewey school: The laboratory school of the University of Chicago, 1896-1903*. (Transaction Publishers, 1936), 69-70.

⁸⁵ Mayhew, Katherine Camp, and Anna Camp Edwards. *The Dewey school: The laboratory school of the University of Chicago, 1896-1903*. (Transaction Publishers, 1936), 398-400.

⁸⁶ Tanner, Laurel N. "The meaning of curriculum in Dewey's Laboratory School (1896-1904)." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 23.2 (1991), 101-117.

⁸⁷ Dewey, John. *The school and society: Being three lectures*. University of Chicago Press, 1899.

the community. The cultivation of this quality needs to be cultivated from an early age, so education has become a necessary way to establish a democratic society with the nature of a community.

The school is a miniature community or embryonic society. Dewey's democracy is not a political term or a form of governing, but a way of life as a community. A democratic society is the limit that can be developed by the actual conditions of life at this stage, not a utopia that is conceived out of reality. As a member, we need to work hard to build such a society. Therefore, if a democratic society is to be realized, the school has the responsibility of cultivating and developing children's community identity or democratic identity.⁸⁸ This educational thought allows us to better understand the social nature of school education, and to recognize and transform school education in the real social and cultural background.

⁸⁸ Westbrook, Robert B. "Schools for industrial democrats: The social origins of John Dewey's philosophy of education." *American Journal of Education* 100.4 (1992), 401-419.