

Dewey on Effective Collaboration through Adaptive Schools

Lucinda G.D. Wolters

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University of Kansas

Effective collaboration within educator teams is often advocated for in schools. Indeed, ample literature on the benefits of professional learning communities as a model for collaboration has been touted by experts for decades (DuFour et al. 2010). However, with diverse educator identities, beliefs, skills, and knowledge, the ability to skillfully collaborate is not happenstance, but requires specific teaching and development. Currently, with a worldwide pandemic ambushing school routines and plans, responsive teacher teamwork provides a further layer of need, to develop the necessary professional group skills in this time of enduring adaptivity. To serve our students, proficient collaboration in schools is essential to maneuver the curricular pivots that have suddenly emerged.

Being introduced to some of Dewey's extensive and respected philosophical writings on progressive education has prompted this author's reflection and further consideration of the Adaptive Schools (AS) approach for effective teamwork amongst educators, at a time of upheaval in schools. The following brief paper explores some Deweyan views to determine if he might advocate for the AS ideas and strategies for group commitments and tasks. While Dewey's work is voluminous and, at times, difficult to understand, extrapolating his philosophies on the core concept of democracy, to determine if they align with AS informed teacher collaboration, is the intent of this paper. A short introduction of Dewey's ideas of democracy as they relate to community will begin this paper. Next, an introduction to AS will be provided, with an emphasis on describing how dialogue and discussion are utilized. Finally, a beginning discussion of Dewey's ideas that may coincide with AS approaches, will be outlined. It is the author's hope that Dewey will provide somewhat of a valued mentor, from the past, to spur on and guide this educational leader's musings and choice points as she serves adaptivity in schools.

As an educator and American philosopher, Dewey (1859-1952) wrote extensively about his notions regarding progressive education and the importance for schools to facilitate educative experiences as “a process of living and not preparation for living” (1997, p. 26). Dewey’s ideals about democracy, that extended beyond government roles, was a key tenet in his writings; he advocated for the development of citizens who could function as active participants in a democratic society. Dewey envisioned democracy in schools as “an embryonic community life...active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society” (p. 44). Active involvement and discourse among students and teachers, in which everyone could be engaged and meaningfully participate was “a form of community life” for Dewey (p. 27). In this sense, more traditional approaches of hierarchical directives, informing teacher curricular decisions and students as passive recipients, are not in keeping with what might be considered Deweyan collective engagement, nor an AS approach.

It is the purpose of this paper to provide an initial exploration into whether Dewey might undoubtedly validate AS, and the following provides a brief introduction into this approach. AS is a synthesis and application of educational research compiled by Garmston and Wellman (2016) for the development of strong, collaborative schools, equipped to address complex challenges. Utilizing theoretical lenses in areas such as biology, systems thinking, and social sciences, for example, practical tools and concepts are offered and taught to assist in effective collaborative inquiry. The goal of Adaptive Schools training is for educators to develop their “collective identity and capacity as collaborators, inquirers and leaders” (p. 16).

While each school is unique, social patterns can be identified in all groups, and inform ways to promote thoughtful participation and decision-making. In addition, the concept of adaptivity, defined as “changing form, in concert with clarifying identity” underpins the work, to

ensure schools engage in an ongoing clarification of *who* they are, for the *what* and *how* of curricular implementation. Ultimately, the work of AS is to enlighten relevant learning outcomes for all students (Garmston & Wellman, 2017, p. 6) and strong, skilled collaboration is the thoroughfare.

The use of deliberate forms of talking, namely, dialogue and discussion conversational structures, are essential AS skills. When teacher teams understand these two forms, they have mental road maps to make specific choice points regarding what talking form is needed in each situation. More precisely, dialogue is used to create meaning and shared understanding in a group, about beliefs, values, and assumptions, concerning what they deem are relevant curricular topics. In addition, through dialogue, groups can inquire into others' thinking to invite openness to new ideas to "more consciously participate and more consciously contribute to the whole" (Garmston & Wellman, 2017, p. 31). One specific AS process to engage in sharing such mental habits is called, "Assumptions Wall," to invite groups to articulate underlying views to examine them more closely. Groups can not only create an understanding of others' perspectives, but also determine if their espoused beliefs do indeed inform what they do and adjust accordingly.

Discussion, on the other hand, as promoted by AS, can occur once a group has engaged in dialogue and created shared understanding on important curricular topics. In its more advanced form, discussion leads to collective decisions that are mindful of group values, beliefs, and priorities. It goes beyond serial advocacy of ideas, and includes clarity about the process, clear boundaries on the group's decision-making authority, and standards to guide the meeting (Garmston & Wellman, 2017, p. 32). Productive discussion processes, due to shared ownership, lead to decisions that tend to stay made as a result (p.32)

There is clear intentionality within these two forms of Adaptive Schools conversations, and specific structures are taught and utilized to ensure all voices are heard and involved by balancing participation. Garmston and Wellman (2016) believe “it is dangerous and often counterproductive to put people in a room without frameworks and tools for skilled interaction” (p. 55). There can be a lack of psychological safety when people converse about contentious issues in education without a skill set to navigate these tough topics. Certainly, it appears that schools who attend to these deliberate ways of talking would influence compelling collective goals, that preserve relationships and foster unified commitment.

To consider AS and to take into account Deweyan ideas, it is noted that he describes shared experience, as “the greatest of human goods” (1994, p. 167). One might presume, then, that providing the context and opportunity for teachers to participate in shared experiences with colleagues would be sufficient in his view. One might imagine, with informal back and forth conversations, teachers making connections, describing their stories, and perhaps, voluntarily problem-solving. However, Dewey adds that while an authentic community possesses a “natural sociability” (Simpson & Stack, 2010, p. 56), it needs to go beyond spontaneous interactions and “requires thought and planning ahead” (p. 59). He further explains his reasoning for specific rules to emphasize the need for social control to support individual freedom, thus avoiding “anarchy” since “without rules, there is no game” (p. 52). While he applied the notion of freedom to student learning, it has just as much of an application to professional learning communities, in which talking structures clarify collaborative intentions and actions. Making use of AS conversational skills, such as the Norms of Collaboration (Garmston & Wellman, 2016), in both dialogue and discussion forms, provide guidelines, rather than formal rules, for fruitful interactions among student groups and educator groups.

Delving deeper, when Dewey relays that "communication is a process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession" (1997, p. 9), he seems to advocate for the importance of inquiring into one's thinking and making this visible to others through group discourse. Dewey adds that schools as "social institutions as they exist can be bettered only through the deliberate interventions of those who free their minds" (Dewey, 1994, p. 179), which speaks to the intentional quality and safe context necessary to expand thinking for new, more improved ways of engaging, that includes on-going attention and practice. He further acknowledges that individuals are "quite unaware of the distinguishing peculiarities of their own mental habit. They take their own mental operations for granted, and unconsciously make them the standard for judging the mental processes of others" (1991, p. 48) and adds "our deepest-seated habits are precisely those of which we have the least awareness" (1994, p. 253).

Moreover, he identifies the problem to be "to extract the desirable traits of forms of community life which actually exist, and employ them to criticize undesirable features and suggest improvement" (1997, p. 83). In connection, the AS work promotes the use of cognitive conflict, as opposed to affective conflict, among educators, when they have disagreements about substantive topics related to their work, without taking things personally. Through effective discourse, disagreements are reconciled and lead to an increase in awareness and in commitment to shared goals (Garmston & Wellman, 2016, p. 82). One might predict that Dewey would concur with such increased awareness, although he might need some coaching on how to frame feedback, beyond criticizing.

Further to the above, Dewey recognizes communication as "consummatory as well as instrumental... a means of establishing cooperation, domination and order." (Dewey, 1994, p. 167). Again, in this sense, communication does not have a random quality, but includes clear

guidelines to contain the shared experience. Although his word choice of “domination” here seems somewhat jarring or inappropriate, the spirit of conversational structures continues to benefit. He articulates a need for teachers to have a unified approach, that does not support “dominion over” by any one person, but of collective participation. As such:

each views the consequences of his own acts as having a bearing upon what others are doing and takes into account the consequences of their behavior upon himself, then there is a common mind; a common intent in behavior. There is an understanding set up between the different contributors; and this common understanding controls the action of each (p. 30).

From such a cooperative stance, teacher isolation cannot exist in its traditional, industrialized ways. Dewey promotes a movement away from formal authority through dictated educational outcomes, in which teachers are passive, and promotes “the adoption of intellectual initiative, discussion, and decision throughout the entire school corps” (Simpson & Stack, 2010, p. 146). AS discourse, to be clear, would most certainly align.

Dewey (1997), however, extends, and in fact, warns against groups set at odds against other groups:

"But this same spirit is found wherever one group has interests 'of its own' which shut it out from full interaction with other groups, so that its prevailing purpose is the protection of what it has got, instead of reorganization and progress through wider relationships" (p. 85-86).

In doing so, Dewey creates a view of community beyond the school, possibly not only through parental involvement, but suggests consideration of other stakeholders, in harmony with his foundational concept of democracy. Interestingly, he hints at the value of innovation through his

word choice of “reorganization and progress,” that may result when collaboration is part of schools.

Had the favorable circumstance arisen, through time travel, or some other magical event, in which Dewey was introduced to AS, he may have joyously responded that this was a missing piece for his ideals to be more longstanding and penetrable to public education. This hypothetical, yet plausible, reaction may be due to the practical application of his democratic educational philosophy, beyond his laboratory school. Nevertheless, as educators endeavor to address the complexities of schools during this disturbing, albeit educationally opportunistic, pandemic, it may behoove us to contemplate Dewey’s respected perspectives alongside the AS emphasis on developing skilled collaborators. Landing collectively on informed decisions through skilled dialogue and discussion, that fosters the critical learning our students need, is as compelling as ever.

In closing, during his time, Dewey stated, "The emphasis must be put upon whatever binds people together in cooperative human pursuits and results, apart from geographical limitations" (1997, p. 98). While our globalized world is freed in some ways from spatial barriers through visual technological transports, such as Zoom, positive human pursuits, as educators, and communities, is a weighty priority, within our dangerously polarized world. For the author of this paper, undoubtedly a moral imperative and continued leadership journey, as she embraces the democratic Adaptive Schools work, with recollections of Deweyan ideals.

References

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