



# Connectedness, Newness and Democracy in Schooling. The Lesson of *Democracy and Education* Essere in relazione, innovazione e democrazia a scuola. La lezione di *Democrazia e educazione*

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## ABSTRACT

Over the last couple of decades, the narrative of educational competitiveness and the current climate of economic efficiency, have narrowed down the role of schooling and education, thus reducing their function to that of mere providers of skills and competencies functional to neoliberal educational apparatus. Neoliberal educational agenda, on the one hand, and the spreading Right-wing populism, on the other, grip education and schooling in a kind of claws maneuver that put at risk priceless educational features, such as students' capacity to autonomously set one's aims and purposes, democratic attitude, and the primacy of the common good. In such a landscape, it is enough clear how a democratic and critical education is cornered. Nonetheless, room for alternative narratives remain. In my paper, by analysing Deweyan oeuvre, I wish to offer an interpretation of education and schooling far removed from the failures of both neoliberalism and populism. Deweyan theory of social intelligence is, in fact, at poles with any reductive conception of education, be such reductionism dependent on neoliberalism or populism. Particularly, Deweyan lesson as it is expressed in *Democracy and Education*, goes deep into the meaning of interrelatedness and connectedness as essential not just to democratic education, but also to intelligence and self-formation. Otherwise stated, the Deweyan lesson about interconnectedness, democracy, newness and education is of priceless educational value.

A partire almeno dalla fine degli anni Novanta, l'enfasi posta dalle politiche neoliberali sulla competizione e l'efficienza economica ha severamente ridotto il raggio d'azione della scuola, quasi confinandola a fabbrica di competenze funzionali a politiche decise dall'alto, non sottoposte alla discussione e al controllo democratico. A ciò va aggiunta la scalata dei recenti movimenti neo-populisti che, dal lato opposto, erodono il ruolo dell'educazione come formazione della coscienza critica e luogo di condivisione e costruzione del nuovo. La concomitanza di questi due movimenti mette all'angolo ogni reale concezione di educazione critica e democratica. In questo lavoro, attraverso l'analisi di parti dell'opera deweyana, chi scrive prova a mostrare come la condivisione è il luogo nel quale non solo si forma la democrazia, ma, più radicalmente, il luogo nel quale l'intelligenza e il sé prendono forma. In tal senso, la lezione deweyana riguarda l'emergenza del nuovo e l'educazione democratica sono di inestimabile valore educativo.

## KEYWORDS

Dewey, democracy, connectedness, schooling, newness.

Dewey, democrazia, relazione, scuola, innovazione.

## Introduction

Over the last couple of decades, the narrative of educational competitiveness (Rutkowski, 2015) and the current climate of economic efficiency (Todd, 2014), which characterises important portions of the educational landscape worldwide, have narrowed down the role of schooling and education, thus reducing their function to that of mere executors of politics decided from above. Neoliberal educational agenda, on the one hand, and the spreading Right-wing populism, on the other, grip education and schooling in a kind of claws maneuver that put at risk priceless educational features, such as students' capacity to autonomously set one's aims and purposes, democratic attitude, girls' and boys' critical agency, reflective thinking and the primacy of the common good.

The quality of relationality between teachers and students, on the one hand, and amongst students, on the other, are deeply affected by these two kinds of forces that have, in a sense, colonized educational discourse and practices, relegating to a residual role – if not to non-sensical discourses – any kind of logic attempting to put togetherness, sharing, and critical thinking center stage (Biesta, 2010; Hogan, Sellar & Lingard, 2016; Peters, 2017).

With regard to the first problem—the rise of a neoliberal educational agenda with its emphasis on individualization and competitiveness – it should be noted that such a “neoliberal cascade” (Connell, 2013) has pushed educational institutions and processes as well as what we may call “educational subjectivities” (of both teachers and students) toward a significant transformation (Ball & Olmedo, 2013). Such a transformation is anything but benign. It implies a lack, if not an eclipse, of invaluable educational features such as democratic sharing among all the actors of educational processes and practices, meaning creation, and the possibility for newness to emerge. The failure to recognize such features and phenomena results in an impoverished conception of education at the individual and collective levels (Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Biesta, 2004, 2006, 2010; Hill, 2004). Moreover: according to the scholars above, a significant problem of the neo-liberal educational agenda is that only one vision of society and education is allowed to enter the educational arena. Otherwise stated, there is no competition between or acknowledgment of different ideas about society and education. In this way, also the agency and critical thinking of students is put at risk, for girls and boys, “reduced to an atomised, isolated monad in pursuit of his or her self-optimising, cannot but be deprived of that common sense and ground that allows one to stand in relation to others in the world.” (Di Paolantonio, 2016, p. 154) Students, then, are pushed to constantly – and uncritically – improve their skills, knowledge and competencies, thus dwelling in a perpetual market arena.

With regard to the second issue at stake, namely, the rise of Right-wing populism, let me quote Peters at length:

In the US under Trump, and also in Europe with the emergence of the Alt-right and the likes of Marie Le Pen, leader of the National Front in France, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Nigel Farage and the UK Independence Party, Heinz-Christian Strache in Austria and the Vlaams Belang Party in Belgium... Right-wing populism is on the rise. It is fiercely anti-immigration and anti-integration, often associated with neo-Nazis and white supremacist groups. It commonly assumes a kind of authoritarianism and anti-liberal stance towards rights, and while it appeals to the ‘common man’ (sic) – sometimes explicitly anti-women and anti-feminist – it paradoxically nevertheless does not subscribe to the notion and practice of equality. (Peters, 2017, p. 2)

Peters' words are quite clear. Through such populism, priceless and founding features of education and democracy are put at risk. Additionally, it has to be noted that these two tendencies – neoliberalism and populism – rather than removing each other, as one would expect, reciprocally reinforces. This is so for, on the one hand, populism grows up and thrives pursuing its narrative of major powers and economic inequality stemming from economic globalization, while neoliberalism, on the other, characterises itself as the one and only bulwark against the menace of disorder and subversion embodied by populism.

In such a landscape, it is enough clear how a democratic and critical education is cornered. Nonetheless, if we believe with Dewey that “Life is a self-renewing process through action upon the environment” (Dewey, 1930/1916, p. 2), and that “Education, in its broadest sense, is the means of this social continuity of life” (ibid.), a different conception of education and schooling has to be pursued. In this paper, by drawing from Dewey's oeuvre, and particularly from his masterpiece, *Democracy and Education*, I go deep into the importance of democracy, togetherness, and newness, thus attempting to sketch out what an antidote to these two force could be. More specifically, in my paper I wish to accomplish a twofold task: on the one hand, I attempt to illuminate features of democracy that, in our uncertain times, are essential to education and schooling. Deweyan work, in this sense, may well be an effective tool to well manage “educational transformation in the globalized world” (Striano, 2009). This is so for the individualistic lesson is challenged in advance by Dewey, who accomplishes the dismantlement of any individualistic accounts of self, identity and intelligence. On the other hand, I hope to unravel features of Deweyan lesson about the connection between school, democracy and education, which, otherwise, could remain hidden or underestimated. Deweyan theory of social intelligence is at poles with any reductive conception of education, be such reductivism dependent on neoliberalism or populism.

The paper is framed into three sections and a conclusion. In the first section, I explain the critical background underpinning my argument, by referring to both Deweyan corpus and scholarly literature on the issue. In the second section, I argue how, in order to understand both the relationship between education and democracy, and Deweyan oeuvre, an understanding of the role newness and uncertainty play in education is required. In the third section, I develop the issues of democracy and connectedness as related to schooling, while singling out the role courage plays in that “reorganization of education” (Dewey, 1930/1916, p. 161) and schooling Dewey pursued throughout his life. In the conclusion, I summarize my attempt.

## 1. Theoretical framework

From *The Metaphysical Assumptions of Materialism* (Dewey, 1882) to *Knowing and the Known* (Dewey and Bentley, 1949), the questions of thinking and inquiry are pivotal to Deweyan oeuvre. They are, in fact, not only the focus of several Deweyan works but also at the intersection of Dewey's conception of experience, education and democracy. Nevertheless, according to Johnston (2002) and Rømer (2012), a Deweyan understanding of thinking, inquiry and reflective thought has been victim to several simplifications. One type of reduction involves considering Dewey a positivist or an advocate of individualistic approaches to education, which is ironic given that the very question of education

in Dewey is grounded on sharing and communication (Dewey, 1930/1916, pp. 6-7, 101-115). There is also another type of reduction of Deweyan thought that is perhaps more subtle but likewise misleading. This reduction works by equating the broad question of experience and thinking to the questions of “inquiry” and “reflective thought”, thus reducing the “mind” to the production of knowledge, experience to “intellectual experience” and human beings to inquirers. Of course, inquiry and reflective thought are central issues to Deweyan thought, and only by means of intelligent action can human beings grow and gain a meaningful existence.

However, when analysing them, we must ask about their origin and function; we must question the ground on which both inquiry and reflective thought lie and the office they attend to. Such “genealogical work” is important to remain faithful to the Deweyan aim, namely, to understand and leave intact “the cord that binds experience and nature” without taking intellectual experience as primary (Dewey, 1929/1925, p. 23).

Such “genealogical work” is important to remain faithful to the Deweyan aim, namely, to understand and leave intact “the cord that binds experience and nature” without taking – intellectual – knowledge as primary (Dewey, 1929/1925, p. 23). Thus, along with the identification of the Deweyan account of “thinking” with “reflective thought” and “inquiry” – an identification that, as a matter of fact, has served as the background for a significant portion of the educational research on Dewey – we can say that, according to Wilshire, “there is another side to the picture” (1993, p. 257). This is a side that is more concerned with uncertainty, interconnectedness and sharing than with stability and equilibrium; that boldly questions the amount of control over the very process of thinking, thus forestalling the question of the “death of subject” (Boisvert, 1998, p. 35) as a transparent and auto-grounded centre of agency; a side that is unsettled by the “mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge” of the world in which man lives (Dewey, 1980/1934, p. 34) and fully aware of how in experience, “the distinct and evident are prized [...] but [...] the dark and twilight abound” (Dewey 1929/1925, p. 20); a side concerned with “[t]he difficulties and tragedies of life” and which boldly states that “the stimuli to acquiring knowledge, lie in the *radical disparity* of presence-in-experience and presence-in-knowing” (Dewey, 1917, p. 48, emphasis added); and that openly speaks about “risk [...] ill-omen [...] and the] evil-eye”, which dwell in our “aleatory world” (Dewey, 1929/1925, pp. 41-42).

Thus, if, according to Biesta and Burbules, Deweyan philosophy “takes *action* as its *most basic* category” (2003, p. 9, emphasis in original), then, according to Dewey, “[t]he distinctive characteristic of practical activity [...] is the uncertainty which attends it. Of it we are compelled to say: Act, but act at your peril” (Dewey, 1929, p. 6). Putting Biesta and Burbules’s argument into Dewey’s own words, we may even say that the heart of even the “*most basic* category” of existence entails peril. Moreover, if the key question of Deweyan pragmatism was “[w]hat shall we do to make objects having value more secure in existence?” (Dewey, 1929, p. 43), then we ought to recognise how, at the same time, “[t]he existential conditions of any existence are indefinitely circumstantial” (Dewey, 1938, p. 319) because, ultimately, “[e]very existence is an event” (Dewey 1929/1925, p. 71).

Significantly, in the opening page of the first chapter of his masterpiece, *Democracy and Education*, Dewey is adamant in stating how “[t]he living thing may easily be crushed by superior forces [losing] its identity as a living thing” (Dewey, 1930/1916, p. 1). Such forces, of course, confront every “living thing”; however, it appears that Dewey places human beings in a special condition. Due

the possibility of rational thought, human beings are more exposed to failure. As Dewey states in *How We Think*, “The power of thought [...] opens to us the possibility of failures to which the animal, limited to instinct, cannot sink.” (Dewey, 1910, p. 19) Thus, on the one hand, Dewey recognises the unity between nature and human beings; on the other hand, he overturns the ‘classic cosmogony’ in which human beings are at the pinnacle of nature. Human beings, in the Deweyan account, are the more fragile and exposed creatures of nature

This side of Deweyan oeuvre, of course, did not go unnoticed. Several scholars have noted it: Garrison (1994, 1996, 1997, 1999, 2003, 2005), above all, who clearly recognised that the Deweyan challenge to Cartesian metaphysics (2003) entails a questioning of the auto-grounded subject that lies in such a metaphysics; Alexander (1987), who analysed the relationship between art and experience and highlighted the role of “‘prereflexive’ experience in Dewey’s thought” (p. 10); Wilshire (1993), who openly spoke about Dewey as “a tragic figure” (1993, p. 257); and Saito (2002, 2005), who challenged the “apparently optimistic worldview” (Saito, 2002, p. 249) that some perceive in Dewey’s work, thereby linking Deweyan thought to “the sense of the tragic that we have lost sight of” (2002, p. 249). In a sense, we can find traces of this Deweyan side in the works of several scholars who, although not involved in highlighting it directly, have shown how the radical Deweyan challenge to Plato’s and Descartes’ “theoretical gaze” entails the dismantling of any safe ground for thinking (Bernstein, 1961, 2010; Biesta, 1994, 2009, 2010; Jackson, 1994/95; Boisvert, 1998; Biesta and Burbules, 2003; Semetsky, 2003, 2008; Margolis, 2010). In their works, the easy and misleading interpretation of Dewey as the promoter of an irenic path to instruction, democratic education and knowledge is challenged, and Deweyan thought comes to light in all its abyssal profundity. This is not to deny Deweyan faith in democracy and knowledge, which would be senseless. Quite the opposite; this is to give full weight to such dimension in all their deepness and complexity. Otherwise stated, democracy, inquiry and the acquisition of knowledge cannot be easily reduced to pre-formed techniques and standardized learning protocols.

Then, consistently to the framework above exposed, in this section I wish to analyse this side of Dewey’s thought as related to democracy and connectedness. Remaining faithful to pragmatist principles, I will attempt to argue the consequences of such an emphasis on the Deweyan conception of thinking, knowledge, and education. My point is that Dewey, throughout his work, conducted a systematic critique of the concept of rationality as mastery and control over the world, control being understood as a kind of algorithm or strict protocol to apply over things and experience. Rather, world, experience and things, in Deweyan conception come into the world through ongoing sharing, interpretation, construction, activities that can only be performed when dwelling with others in a shared environment. Such a conception, while not indulging to any kind of lack of responsibility, puts the classroom dimension center stage. Girls and boys, under the guidance of teachers, participate in the ongoing educational conversation by means of their own critical agency, diversity of experiences and thoughts. That is the “reflective subject”, namely, the subject that grounds itself in the power of reflection, comes to be transformed by such an understanding, for this reflection is continuously challenged and transformed by the unpredictable encounters we make throughout living.

Even the significance of democracy – certainly a pivotal issue in Deweyan thought – has to be understood in its radical meaning, that is, as the way by which not just the interaction amongst human beings arise, but, moreover, as the

way by which human the subject as such comes into the world. Along the way, we will come to understand how uncertainty is also essential to democracy. This is so, as I wish to argue further in more detail, for things, world and experience are literally shaped by communication and ongoing contact with others and more numerous and varied such contacts are, richer is the space in which mind is shaped. Mind, in fact, in a Deweyan understanding, is something in ongoing contact with world. And it is exactly such an ongoing contact that produces both uncertainty and meaningfulness. With regard to the issue of mind, in *The Quest for Certainty* Dewey states,

The old center was mind knowing by means of an equipment of powers complete within itself, and merely exercised upon an antecedent external material equally complete in itself. The new center is indefinite interactions taking place within a course of nature which is not fixed and complete, but which is capable of direction to new and different results through the mediation of intentional operations. (Dewey, 1929, pp. 290-291).

Thus, the Deweyan challenge to the Western “metaphysics of presence” (Garrison, 2003, p. 356) goes straight to the core of the subject’s question. Such a twofold critique of rationality and subject as mastery and control over the world, rather than fueling a nihilistic/relativistic account of education, results in a reinforcement of education as the way to engender new meanings and new experience. Moreover: exactly “the mediation of intentional operations” through which mind and experience are shaped comes to be the proper terrain of schooling and education, which should be conceived as free to establish their own ends, outside of any economic or political pressure. Of course, this is not to say that economy or politics should not have a stake in schooling and education, for such an argument would make little sense. Education, in being a preparation for society, has to be also developed through ongoing contact with the political and economic sphere. Accordingly, curriculum should be conceived as something dynamically interacting with the fast development of a society in all of its aspects.

However, such an interrelatedness has not to be intended as subjugation or dependency, for a pivotal function of education is also that of imagining and promoting new models of living together. If newness is something worth to pursue, education, following Dewey, has to be free to establish its own aims (Dewey, 1930/1916). Such a work may be performed only by also distancing from the present moment and conditions, thus making room for what is unforeseeable from what we are now. Of course, such a work is difficult to pin down and perhaps even risky to pursue. Nonetheless, when made subservient to external economics or political needs, education impoverishes and perhaps even passes away. In what follows, I attempt to argue how risk, courage and uncertainty are essential features of any education, which wish to achieve something beyond the present condition.

## 2. Uncertainty and newness as essential for education to happen

When analysing Deweyan oeuvre, newness and uncertainty are not the first issues that come to mind. This is true for almost two reasons: first, Dewey did not systematically discuss them, as he did, for instance, for issues such as democracy, inquiry, experience, thinking or art; second, even when analysing such issues by extrapolating them from works devoted to develop other arguments, the two

terms infrequently recur in Deweyan works. Nonetheless, it is my contention that without an understanding of the role uncertainty and newness play in education and thinking, an important part of Dewey's endeavour remains hidden. Specifically, we run the risk of losing sight of both the inner force structuring learning and education, namely, "liv[ing] forward" (Dewey, 1917, p. 12) while "pointing to the new possibilities" (Dewey, 1929, p. 312), and the risk entailed in the very activity of thinking. As Dewey stated in *Democracy and Education*, "All thinking involves a risk. Certainty cannot be guaranteed in advance. The invasion of the unknown is of the nature of an adventure." (Dewey, 1930/1916, p. 174) This is because the lack of certainty, and the tension toward new possibilities entail courage: in the face of the unknown, of an "uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable" world (Dewey, 1929/1925, p. 43), we have no guarantee of success. Moreover: in attempting to imagine and enact new possibilities, in pursuing new paths, we may lose what we have already acquired, for learning and education do not work cumulatively.

I believe that, consistent with the Deweyan spirit, we must conceive of the "invasion of the unknown" (Dewey, 1930/1916, p. 174) as an invasion provoked by our decisions to stage new interactions with environment, thereby re-framing our being "in-touch" with the world (Biesta and Burbules, 2003, p. 10): "As a matter of fact, the pragmatic theory of intelligence means that the function of mind is to project new and more complex ends - to free experience from routine and from caprice. Not the use of thought to accomplish purposes already given either in the mechanism of the body or in that of the existent state of society, but the use of intelligence to liberate and liberalize action, is the pragmatic lesson" (Dewey, 1917, p. 73). To liberate and liberalise action entails moving toward the unknown, and we can accomplish this movement by the interruption of the ongoing flow of experience.

I believe that Dewey himself was adamant about this:

But knowledge that is ubiquitous, all-inclusive and all-monopolizing, ceases to have meaning in losing all context; that it does not appear to do so when made supreme and self-sufficient is because it is literally impossible to exclude that context of non-cognitive but experienced subject-matter which gives what is known its import. [...] When intellectual experience and its material are taken to be primary, the cord that binds experience and nature is cut. (Dewey, 1929/1925, p. 23).

Here, Dewey makes two clear statements: a) intellectual experience is neither "ontologically" primary nor it is desirable to take it as primary; and b) the import of "what is known" is obtained from the "context of non-cognitive but experienced subject-matter" – more specifically, something "experienced" and "non-cognitive", that is, something that underlies knowledge and gives knowledge its import. In other words, not only does the import of knowledge exceed the boundaries of knowledge, but the import of consciousness also springs from the ongoing flux of experience as our being-embedded-in-the-world.

If my argument makes sense, we can understand education as the aware interruption of the normal state of affairs in which we are engaged. Such a decision can only concern something that is, literally, unpredictable. This unpredictability does not so much involve the fact that the future is not at our disposal but the fact that in the moment of the interruption, we decide to establish a new course of events, namely, a new future; we make an "intentional change in direction of events" (Dewey, 1929/1925, p. 316). We may even say that such a decision stages a

new beginning in our experience. In a sense, we are both fully aware of such interruption and fully ignorant of its consequences.

As Dewey states, “The exercise of thought is, in the literal sense of that word, inference; by it one thing carries us over to the idea of, and belief in, another thing. It involves a *jump, a leap, a going beyond* what is surely known to something else accepted on its warrant.” (Dewey, 1910, p. 26, emphasis added). Significantly, Dewey uses the same words when speaking about the operation of inference: “Since inference goes beyond what is actually present, *it involves a leap, a jump*, the propriety of which cannot be absolutely warranted in advance, no matter what precautions be taken. Its control is indirect, on the one hand, involving the formation of habits of mind which are at once enterprising and cautious; and on the other hand, involving the selection and arrangement of the particular facts upon perception of which suggestion issues.” (ibid., p. 75, emphasis added)

Inference and the exercise of thought, then, are directed toward uncertainty for the very reason that such a jump gains its meaning from its uncertainty, and, indeed, “[t]o consider the *bearing* of the occurrence upon what may be, but is not yet, is to think.” (Dewey, 1930/1916, p. 172, emphasis in original). At the very same time, we can conceive of education as provoking what is not yet by an interruption of the ongoing flow of experience (English, 2013).

Thus, when Dewey states that we may direct the course of nature to “new and different results through the mediation of intentional operations” (Dewey, 1929, p. 291), he does not refer to a direct and precise action on an element of the environment. Instead, he refers to the very relationship between experience and education, a relationship that he explained in *How We Think*:

Experience is not a rigid and closed thing; it is vital, and hence growing. When dominated by the past, by custom and routine, it is often opposed to the reasonable, the thoughtful. However, experience also includes the reflection that sets us free from the limiting influence of sense, appetite, and tradition. Experience may welcome and assimilate all that the most exact and penetrating thought discovers. Indeed, the business of education might be defined as just such an emancipation and enlargement of experience. (Dewey, 1910, p. 156).

Thus, on the one hand, experience, as our ongoing being-embedded-in-the-world, is something that transcends us in the sense that we are within experience as a part of its ongoing flow; this is why experience, in a sense, has us. On the other hand, we can break the flow, thereby marking a new beginning in the ongoing course of events. Such a breaking, such an interruption – which, in Deweyan terms, is “the business of education” – needs to be understood as the possibility to engender experience because education, as thinking, “run[s] beyond what is, as yet, actually *given* in experience” (Dewey, 1917, p. 186, emphasis in original).

Again, in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey is even more explicit. When speaking of inference, he states that such a pivotal means must be conceived of as “always an invasion of the unknown, a leap from the known” (ibid., p. 186). The term invasion is also meaningful. An invasion is something not at our disposal; it is something we have to undergo or endure. When we are invaded by something, that something is not under our own power. Quite the opposite: it is something that disposes of us. Being invaded means the loss of self-control and self-governance. The question is pivotal because Dewey is not speaking about affects or desires or pain; Dewey is speaking about the intentional, rational act of infer-

ring something. Stated differently, Dewey discloses an inescapable condition of uncertainty at the core of human thinking. Again, I believe such an uncertainty must be understood in terms of possibility. Not only does the very act of thinking involve risk, but experience, too, is always more than we can understand because “in any object of primary experience there are always potentialities which are not explicit; any object that is overt is charged with possible consequences that are hidden; the most overt act has factors which are not explicit.” (Dewey, 1929/1925, p. 20)

For Dewey, then, the goal is not so much to encompass experience by thinking but to enlarge or engender new experience by thinking and education. Because “we live forward” (Dewey, 1917, p. 12), the engendering of experience which education is, is an open affair. Thus, the attempt to master and encompass education by projecting in advance its ends or outcomes is, in Dewey’s understanding, both inconsistent and undesirable because “education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself” (Dewey, 1930/1916, p. 62) and “[g]rowing is not something which is completed in odd moments; it is a continuous leading into the future” (Dewey, 1930/1916, p. 65). Then, we may say that in any thought or act, something radically unpredictable lies at its root. However, to be faithful to Deweyan educational philosophy, uncertainty and danger also are the door to creativity and the future. As Dewey states, “[T]hought [...] is creative – an incursion into the novel” (1930/1916, p. 186).

It is my argument that exactly such a commitment to novelty may be an antidote to both the narrowing down and betrayal of education enacted by neoliberal agenda and populism. When students are educated to not fear the new, to be themselves the authors and the makers of such a novelty, any kind of simplistic or narrow approach to education is displaced in advance, for new and more comprehensive meanings are continuously created and constructed. In that peculiar space that schooling is, students, under the guidance of teachers, may experiment and, in a sense, put in action new meanings and configurations, new modes of interpreting, intending knowledge and society. Such is the experimental attitude underpinning schooling and education. Of course, this is not to say that the development of knowledge and competencies should not have a part in schooling and curriculum, which would be senseless if not irresponsible at all. Quite the opposite: by developing knowledge and competencies, by putting knowledge and competencies at work, new configurations of such competencies may arise. This is also the sense of schooling as a laboratory in which the future is shaped. Such a conception finds in Deweyan understanding of knowledge and democracy two pillars (Bellatalla, 1999; Cambi and Striano, 2010). Discussing such pillars is the focus of the third section of my paper.

### 3. Democracy and the need of connectedness

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey devoted a significant part of his endeavour to develop the significance of the meaning for education. Such a discussion is related to the function of knowledge. Knowledge – that is, the result of thinking (Dewey, 1930/1916, p. 177) – springs from “existential conditions” (Dewey, 1938, p. 319), as Dewey states in his monumental *Logic*. However, what should be noted is that the human capacity for meaning-construction extends far beyond the scientific and formal domain of knowledge (Spadafora, 2009) because such a capacity is “inexhaustible.” As Dewey states,

Nothing is more striking than the difference between an activity as merely physical and the wealth of meanings which the same activity may assume. [...] There is no limit to the meaning which an action may come to possess. It all depends upon the context of perceived connections in which it is placed; the reach of imagination in realizing connections is inexhaustible. (Dewey 1930/1916, 243, emphasis added)

With this statement, we realise that the Deweyan emphasis is not so much on actual meanings that are already understood and stabilised, and attention is also not directed toward an already defined method to establish meanings – e.g., the scientific method. Rather, Dewey emphasises the open and undefined dimension of possibility, the not-yet. Dewey calls our attention to “the wealth of meanings which the same activity *may* assume” and to the fact that such a potentiality for meaning has no limit, for “the reach of imagination in realizing connections is inexhaustible,” that is, it is always beyond what we actually achieve, whatever methods we employ. This “inexhaustible reach” is also called into question by the Deweyan understandings of democracy, communication and society. These understandings, as I argue in what follows, call into question the very conception of togetherness, community and education one wishes to pursue. Then, let us then examine the Deweyan definitions of society and democracy starting from the lesson of *Democracy and Education*.

When discussing what a society is and what it is supposed to achieve, Dewey is quick to connect society to communication: society, Dewey states, “not only continues to exist *by* transmission, *by* communication, but it may fairly be said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication.” (Dewey, 1930/1916, p. 5) Thus, society, namely, the very structure of our being-together, is always, in a sense, in evolution, crossed by uncertainty, even suspended. Because society exists only “*in* transmission” and because the act of transmission is the event that occurs in-between persons, society exists only in this state of togetherness, of being-in-between, of being-in-suspension.

This is so for transmission depends not only on one’s intentions and one’s communicative acts or only on other people’s listening and interpreting, but also on what occurs in the ungraspable space between one’s speaking and other people’s listening, between one’s intentions and other people’s interpreting. This space, as Bhabha would have highlighted about ninety years after (2004), is not a sum, a mix or a product of speaking and listening but something other, something that is unpredictable for all participants. Thus, society and being-together stand on what can be called the suspended, generative space of transmission. Such an understanding is reinforced by the Deweyan criterion of connectedness:

A being whose activities are associated with others has a social environment. What he does and what he can do depend upon the expectations, demands, approvals, and condemnations of others. A being connected with other beings cannot perform his own activities without taking the activities of others into account. For they are the indispensable conditions of the realization of his tendencies. (Dewey, 1930/1916, p. 14)

In this passage, Dewey simultaneously accomplishes not only the dismantlement of any individualistic accounts of self, identity and intelligence but also the fulfilment of his theory of social intelligence. What one “does” and “can do,” in fact, depend on the dimension of connectedness: “expectations, demands, ap-

approvals, and condemnations of others” are essential to both the realisation and the possibility of one’s actions. Accordingly, without the active presence of other people, neither actual actions nor potential actions are possible to enact or even conceive of. This reading, in turn, emphasises another dimension of the Deweyan account of possibility, an account that allows Dewey to open a deep and fecund educational terrain for two reasons. First, a) in the Deweyan account, every individualistic approach to action and education is challenged in advance because one’s purposes, desires, projects, and actions originate from and depend on the public space that is opened by connectedness – a dimension that, as I argue, has important educational bearings. Second, b) to the extent to which even the very possibility of acting is dependent on the active presence of other people and their unpredictable “expectations, demands, approvals, and condemnations,” *possibility in connectedness* becomes the central aspect of every account of action and education that one wishes to explore and pursue. Additionally, others’ “expectations, demands, approvals, and condemnations” are uncertain and even, in some ways, unpredictable; uncertainty and unpredictability become central features of every account of action and education that we wish to produce.

Otherwise stated, openness and the widening of possibility become central features of educational situations and events; as stated above, in education, we always have openness and possibilities – or potentiality – in connectedness. Without sharing and living together and thus exposing oneself to other people, possibility and potentiality are futile goals to pursue.

And the famous definition of democracy Dewey gives works in the same direction:

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. These more numerous and more varied points of contact denote a greater diversity of stimuli to which an individual has to respond; they consequently put a premium on variation in his action. They secure a liberation of powers that remain suppressed as long as the incitations to action are partial, as they must be in a group which in its exclusiveness shuts out many interests. (Dewey, 1930/1916, p. 101)

Through this passage, Dewey accomplishes what may well be called a revolution in our understanding of democracy: from a form of government to a form of living, that is, the space in which the self comes to be formed. This form of living shapes individuals whilst providing them with the conditions to flourish and develop in a thorough and continuous sharing of desires, projects, actions, and understandings. This possibility for development applies to the meaning of one’s actions, thoughts, and desires and is always-already embedded in the living conditions from which such actions, thoughts, and desires emerge. Moreover, the Deweyan understanding of democracy is also a call for openness and possibility because, in the end, one cannot know and forecast how a “variation” of one’s actions and “more numerous and more varied points of contact” are supposed to conduct one’s life. This inability to predict precisely the outputs of democracy is also why democracy, as a form of living and educating, produces uncertainty. If

we remove this uncertainty from educational and democratic processes, we would remove, simultaneously, the very root of democracy and education.

However, Dewey was well aware that to put at work such a conception would be a difficult task. When writing about the profound reorganization of education he had in mind, Dewey spends crucial words. With regard to this, let us consider a passage from *Democracy and Education*, which explicitly relates courage, perseverance and education:

A reorganization of education so that learning takes place in connection with the intelligent carrying forward of purposeful activities is a slow work. It can only be accomplished piecemeal, a step at a time. But this is not a reason for nominally accepting one educational philosophy and accommodating ourselves in practice to another. It is a challenge to undertake the task of reorganization courageously and to keep at it persistently. (Dewey, 1930/1916, p. 161)

In this passage, Dewey calls for a deep and wide “reorganization of education”, a reorganization that is both theoretical and practical, one that encompasses all levels of educational processes, ranging from schooling to curriculum, to teachers’ role. From the beginning of the passage, the emphasis is put on the difficulty and the slowness of such challenging work: it is “a slow work”, one which “can only be accomplished piecemeal, a step at a time”. A work requiring perseverance and, we may add, even remarkable patience in tolerating failures and frustrations. However, at the end of the passage, Dewey puts courage as a basis for such a work: courage has to sustain the entire movement of such a reorganization. This is true for given realities may count on a kind of silent, widespread approval, and, moreover, on the sturdy force of routine. Otherwise stated, one may reasonably ask why one should undertake such a challenge, because in the end, the existence of something is, in and of itself, a sign of its efficacy. Yet, this is not the whole story. Longevity and duration are not always connected to what is right, nor always to efficacy. Duration may also be the arrest of that experimental attitude towards which schooling should be oriented, where experimental is taken in its broad and deep sense, of something yet un-experienced, something unknown – something requiring both intelligence and courage to be pursued.

Significantly, the link between courage and intelligence, on the one hand, and courage and persistence, on the other, is explicitly made by Dewey. The former is put forward, again, in *Democracy and Education*, when Dewey calls toward the task of “develop[ing] a courageous intelligence” (ibid., p. 373). Intelligence, in being oriented toward the future, in being deeply connected to forecasting and imagination, has to do, by definition, with risk and uncertainty. Otherwise stated, if schooling wish to sustain and promote intelligence, an intelligence devoted not just to reproduction, newness and uncertainty should have a stake in the educational process.

## Conclusions

In my paper, I have attempted to argue that education and schooling, in order to fulfill their own aim, have to be open to newness and even uncertainty. This is so for one pivotal function of schooling is exactly the imagination of new ways and models of living and being together. I have constructed my argument in connection to Deweyan oeuvre, focusing particularly on *Democracy and Education*. It is

my contention, in fact, that the message Dewey left us in his masterpiece is even more actual in current times, times where schooling and education run the risk to lose their proper function under the twofold pressure of neoliberalism and rising populism. Consistently to the aims pursued thus far, I would conclude my attempt by quoting five Deweyan statements on growing and education that, although located on different pages of *Democracy and Education*, they all point in the same direction and display the same entanglement of meanings. I quote them one-by-one and then provide my commentary.

Since in reality there is nothing to which growth is relative save more growth, there is nothing to which education is subordinate save more education." (p. 60) "Since growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself." (p. 62) "Growing is not something which is completed in odd moments; it is a continuous leading into the future." (p. 65) "[T]he result of the educative process is capacity for further education." (p. 79) "[T]he aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education or that the object and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth. (p. 117)

What strikes me in these passages, is that, in the end, not one definition of growing or education is given. We are told that "there is nothing to which growth is relative save more growth" and that "education is all one with growing." However, we are not told what education is, what it entails, or what this coincidence with growing causes. We find ourselves going through an ever-growing circle. Moreover, in saying that education "has no end beyond itself" and that "the result of the educative process is capacity for further education," Dewey puts education at the junction of potentiality and actualisation. Education is pure actualization, for it "has no end beyond itself" and "it is its own end." That is, in challenging a long-standing tradition that sees education as a means of achieving something, Dewey puts education at the top. It is a pure end. However, education is also an ever-growing force that develops continuously without having a pre-defined direction. Importantly, this development does not lead to something other than education or growth, for "in reality there is nothing to which growth is relative save more growth, there is nothing to which education is subordinate save more education." Growth and education have the pure possibility to expand themselves. What this expansion causes is left open by Dewey. "Ends are, in fact, literally endless, forever coming into existence as new activities [that] occasion new consequences. 'Endless ends' is a way of saying that there are no ends that is no fixed self-enclosed finalities." (Dewey, 1922, p. 231) Simultaneously, Dewey argues that "[d]iversity of stimulation means novelty, and novelty means challenge to thought" (Dewey, 1930/1916, p. 98), but what this diversity should be and how it should be enacted and, in turn, what novelty is and entails are left unspecified.

In conclusion, I emphasise how Dewey throughout his work constructed an ethic of interrelatedness and openness, which shows how our educational effort, far from being captured in preconceived frameworks, opens us to our own ever-growing possibilities. In the leap of education, we cannot know in advance where we will land. Moreover, to define our landing in advance runs the risk of restricting both the concept and the practice of education. For this reason, the leap of education constitutes a move toward both loss and meaningfulness and to both uncertainty and radical openness. The question regarding what education is and what it entails is left radically open, for education belongs to the not-yet.

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