

# A Deweyan Defense of Homeschooling

Shane J. Ralston  
Pennsylvania State University-Hazleton  
sjr21@psu.edu

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## Abstract

In this paper, I argue in support of homeschooling under non-ideal educational circumstances, including lack of material resources, a shortage of properly trained teachers, an abundance of curricula remote from the concerns of everyday life and the inability of the existing institutions and institutional actors to generate the proper conditions for what John Dewey terms ‘growth.’ In chapter two of *The School and Society*, Dewey demonstrates how a model of the ‘ideal home’ can impart crucially important lessons about a comparable model of the ‘ideal school.’ Dewey then insists that education should direct the student’s natural impulses, just as the concerned parent guides the growth of the child. There are at least two ways in which to interpret this position. One is that homeschooling is the ideal form of early education. The other is that school life should emulate family life. Though advocates of homeschooling would prefer the former account, the case is difficult to make because (i) Dewey rarely recommended specific institutional forms or practices and (ii) the interpretation does not align with the book’s thesis that the school should be a microcosm for the best and most educative kinds of experience that the larger society has to offer. So, consistent with the overall theme of the work, the better interpretation is that school life should resemble family life. Nevertheless, a Deweyan defense of homeschooling is possible. Of course, Dewey would not agree with the rationale of religious conservatives to home school, namely, that it allows them to impart sectarian values and thereby insulate their children from a secular world. Still, a Dewey-inspired defense proves possible if the practice of homeschooling is the sole alternative to an educational environment that stifles growth, imposes values through bald appeals to authority and denies the opportunity for learning through experimental inquiry and intelligent habit formation. Finally, I examine the policy implications of a Deweyan defense of homeschooling, arguing that homeschoolers and public schooling advocates should find common ground and forge partnerships for their mutual advantage.

**Keywords:** John Dewey, homeschooling, education, pedagogy, family.

## A Deweyan Defense of Homeschooling

If we take an example from an ideal home, where the parent is intelligent enough to recognize what is best for the child, and is able to supply what is needed, we find the child learning through the social converse and constitution of the family.

–J. Dewey (1996, LW 1:23)<sup>1</sup>

. . . Dewey might well have recommended homeschooling.

–P. Lines (2000:77)

In this paper, I argue in support of homeschooling under non-ideal educational circumstances, including lack of material resources, a shortage of properly trained teachers, an abundance of curricula remote from the concerns of everyday life and the inability of existing institutions and institutional actors to generate the proper conditions for what John Dewey terms ‘growth.’ In chapter two of *The School and Society* (1899), Dewey demonstrates how a model of the ‘ideal home’ can impart crucially important lessons about a comparable model of the ‘ideal school.’ Dewey then insists that education should direct the student’s natural impulses, just as the concerned parent guides the growth of the child. There are at least two ways in which to interpret this position. One is that homeschooling is the ideal form of early education. The other is that school life should emulate family life. Though advocates of homeschooling would prefer the former account, the case is difficult to make because (i) Dewey rarely recommended specific institutional forms or practices and (ii) the interpretation does not align with the book’s dominant thesis that the school should be a microcosm for the best and most educative kinds of experience that the larger society offers. So, consistent with the overall theme of the work, the better interpretation is that school life should resemble family life. Nevertheless, a Deweyan defense of homeschooling is possible. Of course, Dewey would not agree with the rationale of religious conservatives to home school, namely, that it allows them to impart sectarian values and thereby insulate their children from a secular world. Still, a Dewey-inspired defense proves possible if the practice of homeschooling is the sole alternative to

an educational environment that stifles growth, imposes values through bald appeals to authority and denies the opportunity for learning through experimental inquiry and intelligent habit formation. Finally, I examine the policy implications of a Deweyan defense of homeschooling, arguing that homeschoolers and public schooling advocates should find common ground and forge partnerships for their mutual advantage.

The paper is organized into three sections. In the first section, I present Jim Garrison's account of Dewey's conception of philosophy *as* education. The second section articulates Dewey's modeling of the ideal school after the ideal family, as it appears in the second chapter of *The School and Society*, and two competing interpretations, only one of which is a superior rendering of the text. In the third section, I argue that even though the religious conservative's rationale for homeschooling would have little purchase, a Deweyan defense of homeschooling under non-ideal conditions is nonetheless possible. The concluding section imagines a possible route toward collaborative engagement between public school advocates and members of the homeschooling movement.

### **Dewey's Philosophy *as* Education**

According to Jim Garrison (1998), Dewey offered a vision of philosophy *as* education, rather than a philosophy *of* education. The relevant difference is that in the case of the latter (or philosophy *of* education), philosophical concepts frame an analysis of pedagogy, as philosophers already analyze other areas of study (e.g., science, math, language, sex and love), whereas in the former (philosophy *as* education), education pervades or constitutes all philosophical inquiries, for philosophy broadly-construed is, in Dewey's words, "the general theory of education" (MW 7:303, cited in Garrison 1998:63). Garrison's cogent account of Dewey's educational philosophy involves five key elements: (i) habit, (ii) environment, (iii) growth, (iv) communication and (v) democracy—each of which I will now briefly describe.

## **Habit**

According to Dewey, education conceived as integral to philosophy is a “process of forming fundamental dispositions” so that they “take effect in conduct” (Garrison, 1998:63; MW 9:338). These dispositions are beliefs and, more generally, habits that together form a person’s character. Dewey defines a habit as “a way or manner of action, not a particular act or deed” (LW 12:21). In other words, a habit is a mode of conduct, not the conduct itself. According to Garrison (1998:64), “[p]hilosophy as education involves the critical acquisition of habits of conduct, controlled by the ideal values that nurture human growth.” Values direct choice and action when existing habits prove unhelpful or obstructive to good conduct. Indeed, both values and habits can be evaluated naturalistically, instrumentally or conventionally.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the ultimate test of a habit’s value is whether it directs inquiry in fruitful ways—ways that fund experience with meaning, render new connections, create helpful tools for future inquiries and develop the inquirer’s native abilities.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, the test of a habit’s value is identical to the test for the value of education. Dewey writes: “What he [the student] has learned in the way of knowledge and skill [or habit] in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow” (LW 13-25-6). So, learning occurs through the accretion of intelligent habits that reflexively guide human action and inquiry, and thereby enrich experience.

## **Environment**

For Dewey, the notion of interaction tells us that living organisms, whether sea anemones or human learners, are intimately connected with their environments. According to Tom Burke (1994:23), the “basic picture, generally speaking, is that of a given organism/environment system performing a wide range of operations as a normal matter of course—scanning, probing, ingesting, discharging, adapting to, approaching, avoiding, or otherwise moving about and altering things in routine ways, in order to maintain itself.” Whether within simple biological systems or complex social ones,

environmental disruptions stimulate efforts by organisms to restore equilibrium, to adapt their (functionally-defined) internal and external environments (in a process biologists call ‘homeostasis’) and to subsequently develop in viable and meaningful ways. With respect to education, creating an environment that is conducive to learning is incumbent upon the educator. Indeed, Garrison (1998:69) draws attention to Dewey’s statement that “[w]e [as educators] design environments” (MW 9:23). So, mastery of the subject matter taught is not a sufficient condition for being an effective educator. Rather, good pedagogy integrates the subject-matter and innovative teaching methods within a learning environment that both appeals to and disciplines students’ natural impulses. For example, inquiry-based educational methods leverage the teacher’s ability to design projects that pique the students’ natural curiosity. These same projects should also channel students’ native energies by focusing attention on mastering techniques of inquiry and securing reliable outcomes.

## **Growth**

For Dewey, education is a catalyst for growth. According to Garrison (1998:70), “[t]he aim of education is growth.” But what exactly does Dewey mean by growth? First, let’s examine what Dewey says, and then an interpretation by a recent commentator. Dewey writes:

Since life means growth, a living creature lives as truly and positively at one stage as at another, with the same intrinsic fullness and the same absolute claims. Hence education means the enterprise of supplying the conditions which ensure growth, or adequacy of life, irrespective of age (MW 9:56).

Educative growth occurs when a learner develops her potentialities under propitious circumstances, that is, in circumstances typically supplied by a thoughtful educator. In his recent book, *Inquiry and Education*, James Scott Johnston (2006:106-7) proposes that the term ‘growth’ means three possible things for Dewey. First, it is a biological or “organismic” capacity that humans as well as other organisms have for developing and adapting to their environs. Second, growth indicates the emerging evaluative or “judgmental” skills that humans display in solving problems. Third, it is

“experiential” in the sense that humans can learn from experiences and change their behaviors accordingly, thereby cultivating intelligent habits. Obviously, these three senses of growth are not mutually exclusive, but overlap considerably, especially when humans grow through learning.

Therefore, the learning that takes place both in school and the greater society is a *sine qua non* for realizing Johnston’s three dimensions of growth: biological, judgmental and experiential.

### **Communication**

Education also permits learners to become more effective and sympathetic communicators.

Communication plays a crucial role in inquiry or problem-solving, as does language, the quintessential means or, in Dewey’s words, the “tool of tools” (LW 1:134). Etymologically, to communicate is to make common (LW 10:248-9). Logic is the term of choice for Dewey in describing the pattern of inquiry common to scientific and ordinary discourse. Indeed, logic for Dewey signifies the “need for the development of a general theory of language in which form and matter are not separated” (LW 12:4). Form is nothing less than the techniques of inquiry and analysis; whereas matter is the subject-matter or content for inquiry and analysis. Through language use, form and matter, as well as techniques and subject-matter, can be viewed as reciprocally (or transactionally) related aspects of the same process: the process of meaningful communication. By converting objects in everyday experience into “things with a meaning,” communication “whether it be public discourse or that preliminary discourse termed thinking” reconstructs conventional terms into precise instruments for resolving common problems (LW 1:132). In Dewey’s *The Public and Its Problems*, democratic methods encompass communication and collaborative inquiry undertaken by citizens against a rich background of supportive institutions (LW 2:332).

### **Democracy**

Democracy as a social ideal demands education for its (even partial) realization; education that generates growth requires (at least some degree of) democratic engagement. Rather than

recommend specific institutional forms, or “political democracy,” Dewey deployed a set of leading principles (or postulations) that together are termed the “social idea” of democracy (LW 2:325). As postulations, they are intended to direct subsequent investigations; however, taken alone, they have no direct correspondence with any particular set of institutions. So, Dewey’s democratic idea orients the democratic reformer towards a lofty, if somewhat vague, goal: namely, the “creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute” (LW 14:230). Likewise, with respect to democratic education, Dewey rarely recommended particular institutions, curricular designs or administrative reforms as panaceas for the problems confronting educators. Instead, with only a few exceptions, he invited educators to experiment with multiple practices and institutional forms. One of the exceptional cases in which Dewey did recommend concrete democratic-educational reforms can be found in third chapter of *The School and Society* (see below).

### **The School in Society**

Besides habit, environment, growth and democracy, Dewey’s educational philosophy also grapples with the complex relationship between the school and the greater society, including the institution of the family and the traditional functions that it is commonly thought to fulfill.<sup>4</sup> This treatment of the family-oriented portion of Dewey’s educational philosophy begins by considering the second chapter of *The School and Society*, in which the ideal school is modeled after the ideal family—what I term, following Garrison’s similar turn of phrase, ‘education *as* family life.’ Similar to philosophy *as* education, education *as* family life means that education is constitutive of, not merely an aspect of, family life. Then, I explore two ways in which education as family as life can be interpreted: one, as an endorsement for homeschooling and, two, as an argument that life in the school should resemble the best kinds of activities found in institutions outside the school, including the family.

## Schooling and the Life of the Child

The second chapter of *The School and Society*, aptly named “The School and the Life of the Child,” situates the ideal school relative to the ideal home. Both, Dewey argues, should nurture children as “intensely distinct beings that we are acquainted with out of school, in the home, the family, on the playground, and in the neighborhood” (MW 1:22). In contrast, the traditional approach to schooling, what Dewey calls “old education,” neglects the uniqueness of the learner by “handling as large numbers of children as possible,” standardizing teaching methods and curricula, providing “no opportunity for adjustment to varying capacity” and demanding “ready-made results” from students, teachers and administrators (MW 1:23). Dewey asks his audience to imagine “an ideal home,” a place where family life naturally ensues, where child and parent engage in constant conversation, where

. . . statements are made, inquiries arise topics are discussed, and the child continually learns. He states his experiences, his misconceptions are corrected. [ . . . ] [T]he child participates in the household occupations, and thereby gets habits of industry, order, and regard for the rights and ideas of others, and the fundamental habit of subordinating his activities to the general interest of the household (MW 1:24).

According to Dewey’s model of the ideal home, the child learns without the artifice of the classroom, as an active participant, rather than a passive spectator, who asks questions, proposes ideas and toils to complete daily chores, all under the guidance of a concerned parent. What makes the concerned parent an expert teacher, Dewey claims, is that he or she “is intelligent enough to recognize what is best for the child, and is able to supply what is needed” to the child. By integrating learning with family life, the concerned parent generates a series of cascading benefits, particularly the development of social virtues (“industry, order, . . . regard for the rights and ideas of others, and . . . subordinating his activities to the general interest”) that enrich the child’s future adult life.

In order to transition to the ideal school, Dewey says that we must “organize and generalize” the advantages of the ideal home. For instance, the ideal home contains “a workshop” and “a miniature laboratory,” as well as an extension “out of doors to the garden, surrounding fields, and forest,” all of which are mimicked in the ideal school (MW 1:50). Dewey envisioned four rooms in the ideal school, each on the corner of a central museum/library and each devoted to an individual area of study (e.g., physical/chemical science, biology, music and art). Four recitation rooms sit half in the four rooms and half in the central museum/library, “where the children bring the experiences, the problems, the questions, the particular facts which they have found, and discuss them so that new light may be thrown upon them, particularly new light from the experience of others, the accumulated wisdom of the world—symbolized in the library” (MW 1:51). Dewey’s school design is based on the hypothesis that if we create shared public spaces for the purpose of pooling our ideas and sharing our experiences (i.e., social intelligence), then we can effectively increase opportunities for discussion and learning. While opportunities for communication are abundant in the ideal home, the objective of the parent-teacher should not be to talk aimlessly with the child-student:

The child is already intensely active, and the question of education is the question of taking hold of his activities, of giving them direction. Through directions, through organized use, they tend toward valuable results, instead of scattering or being left to merely impulsive expression (MW 1:25).

In other words, the aim of schooling is not to curry favor with the child or to permit the child’s natural curiosities to have full reign in determining the content of the curriculum—what is sometimes called ‘child-centered education.’ Instead, appealing to the child’s native interests and impulses becomes an initial entry-point into the educational process, but does not exhaust the instruments for facilitating learning. Whether in the home or the classroom, the progressive educator, on the model of the concerned parent, should provide discipline and guidance, to, in Dewey’s words, “direct the child’s activities, giving them exercise along certain lines . . . [that] thus lead up to the goal” of the child’s growth (MW 1:25-8).

## Two Interpretations of Education *as* Family Life

I would like to suggest two possible and more specific interpretations of education as family life—one that sees the best kind of education as occurring in the home and another in the community school—and then contemplate which interpretation is a superior account of what Dewey meant in the second chapter of *The School and Society*.

**Homeschooling.** One possible interpretation of education as family life is that the home *is* the ideal place in which to educate children. As Dewey notes, it is in the environment of the home that “we find the child learning [naturally] through the social converse and constitution of the family.” If we distinguish schooling and education, then educative experience need not arise exclusively within the school environment. According to John Lyon (1994:3), “[s]chooling . . . is what goes on in the schools; education takes place wherever and whenever the nature with which we are born is nurtured so as to draw out of those capacities which conduce to true humanity.”<sup>5</sup>

Another homeschooling advocate, John Holt (1981, 346), argues for a very Deweyan-sounding idea, “learning by living” or what his followers call “unschooling”:

What is most important and valuable about the home as a base for children’s growth into the world is not that it is a better school than the schools but that it isn’t school at all. It is not an artificial place, set up to make “learning” happen and in which nothing except “learning” ever happens. It is a natural, organic, central, fundamental human institution, one might easily and rightly say the foundation of all other human institutions.<sup>6</sup>

If growth-inducing education occurs more naturally in the home, then the need for the formal school and the professional teacher drop away.

So, we might return to interrogate Dewey: Does educative growth occur solely within the formal school? Dewey’s answer might seem out of character for a university professor: “The everyday work of the school shows that children can live in school as out of it, and yet grow daily in

wisdom, kindness, and the spirit of obedience—that learning may, even with little children, lay hold upon the substance of truth that nourishes the spirit, and yet the forms of knowledge be observed and cultivated; and that growth may be genuine and thorough, and yet a delight” (MW 1:66). So, educative growth for Dewey does not depend exclusively on formal education. Indeed, there is an informal counterpart. Fostering growth, then, means balancing the two, such that educational techniques and curricula are “reorganized,” integrating incidental and unstructured processes of learning into formal school lessons (MW 9:256, Page 2006:54).

**Microcosm.** The other interpretation—and I think the one which better captures Dewey’s meaning—is that the school should be a microcosm for the best or most enriching educational experience that could be had in the wider society. In this way, the community school truly becomes the organization and generalization of the advantages of the home as a place for educating young people. One ground for supporting this interpretation is that (as mentioned earlier) Dewey rarely, if ever, proposed concrete educational reforms, or specific institutional designs. However, there were exceptions to this rule, evidenced in his school design. For Dewey, the “need of a school” arises for two reasons: (i) the “child must be brought into contact with more grown people and with more children” and (ii) “the occupations and relationships of the home environment are not specially selected for the growth of the child,” meaning that the learning that occurs in the home is not consciously designed for that end (i.e., the development of the child’s capacities for problem solving and adjustment to her environment) (MW 1:24).

In the first chapter of *The School and Society*, Dewey explicitly invokes the microcosm concept, stating that “each one of our schools [is] an embryonic community life, active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society and permeated throughout with the spirit of art, history, and science” (MW 1:19). Conceiving the school as a community in miniature does not only benefit the child; it also generates cascading benefits for the greater society, infusing all its

institutions, including the family, with an educative purpose. So, the microcosm account is the superior interpretation of education as family life, for it better captures Dewey's meaning in the *The School and Society*. However, this conclusion by no means undermines the vision of the homeschooling movement or the possibility of a Deweyan defense of homeschooling. Indeed, as we will see, education as family life suggests a promising partnership between homeschooling and traditional schooling advocates.

### **Reasons for Homeschooling**

The reasons that parents decide to school their children at home vary widely: (i) to impart sectarian values to their child, (ii) to opt out of a low quality or failing public school system, (iii) to show respect for the child's autonomy (particularly the personal choice to be homeschooled), (iv) a desire to strengthen family ties and (v) to produce a child-progeny through intensive mothering.<sup>7</sup> Despite the variety of rationales for homeschooling, Mitchell Stevens, in his book *Kingdom of Childhood* (2001:8), reports that there is one "big item on which they [home schoolers] agreed": namely, "that their children's self-development was worthy of virtually any sacrifice," and in this way, he comments, "home schoolers are much like all good parents, of course." In this section, I focus on the first two, labeling them the 'religious conservative' and 'non-ideal circumstances' reasons, since opinion polls reveal that they are the most commonly cited (see below).

**Religious Conservative.** In the past twenty years, the homeschooling movement has become closely associated with the religious, and especially the Christian, Right. According to the U.S. Department of Education's "Homeschooling in the United States: 2003" Survey, 72 percent of respondents indicated that "to provide religious or moral instruction" was a critical factor in deciding to home school their children.<sup>8</sup> The religious-conservative rationale for homeschooling is that the home environment permits religiously devout parents to instill sectarian values through instruction and to otherwise insulate their children from the morally-degenerative and secularizing influences of

the public school. According to Geraint Parry, liberal educational programs can offend “those who wish to share their own non-liberal doctrines and consequently to adopt more negative attitudes to what they variously see to be the spread of the contagion of secularism, anti-traditionalism or laxity of manners.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, homeschooling provides an alternative for those parents intent upon inculcating religious and conservative values in their children, as well as shielding their young minds from the corrupting influence of a liberal society, its secular values and the schools which would transmit them.

**Non-ideal Circumstances.** Though the movement has become closely associated with the religious Right, support has also come from the counter-cultural Left and, along the way, many homeschoolers have embraced non-ideological or pedagogical reasons for preferring homeschooling, such as discontent with the quality of public school education. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s “Homeschooling in the United States: 2003” Survey, 68 percent of respondents cited “dissatisfaction with academic instruction at other schools” as their prime reason to home school.<sup>10</sup> With the quality of public schools on the decline, non-ideal conditions for generating educative growth—shrinking school budgets, lack of accountability for low-performing teachers and insufficient resources (textbooks, laboratories, libraries, etc.)—have proliferated.

Another closely related objection is that formal schooling has no practical relevance to the concerns of ordinary people and the problems they encounter in everyday life. This critique emerges in Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*, particularly in his discussion of the distinction between informal or “incidental” education and formal or “intentional” education (MW 9:11-12). Dewey complained that grade school curricula in early twentieth-century America had become “merely academic,” about “imparting information,” “abstract and bookish,” “compartmentalized” and based on measurements of “pure intelligence” or I.Q., rather than the development of practical skills and contextualized knowledge (MW 9:11, 12, 345).<sup>11</sup> According to many education scholars and policy analysts, little has

changed in U.S. schools in the past eighty years.<sup>12</sup> As more emphasis is put on teaching students to perform well on standardized tests, resorting to homeschooling has become one way of integrating informal education, or ‘learning-by-doing’, back into impoverished school curricula. Indeed, Reba Page (2006:40) acknowledges the intimate connection between the homeschooling movement and Dewey’s critique of formal education: “Although news articles are necessarily inconclusive, I see the parents’ responses [i.e., their decision to home school] mirroring the problem with curriculum that Dewey reiterates throughout *Democracy and Education*—the knowledge taught in schools is remote from and dead to concerns of life that are crucial to our humanity.”

Given decreasing quality and relevance of education provided by public schools, and the seemingly insurmountable obstacles to changing the institutional status quo, it is a reasonable response for caring parents to opt out of the public school system, choosing instead to home school.

**A Deweyan Defense.** As mentioned earlier, Dewey would clearly reject the ‘religious conservative’ rationale for homeschooling. Although religious faith can play an important role in an individual’s spiritual life, the imposition of sectarian values, appeals to supernatural authority and the denial of scientific legitimacy through control of the learning environment limit, rather than expand, opportunities for educative growth.<sup>13</sup> Also, there is significant disagreement among home schoolers as to whether informal or unstructured ways of learning should be integrated into homeschooling curricula.<sup>14</sup> So, this would be another point of disagreement between Dewey and some advocates of homeschooling. In an article in *The Public Interest*, Patricia Lines (2000:76) insists that “Dewey did not advocate for homeschooling.” However, two sentences later, she qualifies her statement: “But given the choice between homeschooling and a rigid school system intent only on imparting information, Dewey might well have recommended homeschooling” (Lines 2000:77). Although Lines’s statement does not unqualifiedly support homeschooling (or the homeschooling interpretation of education *as* family life), it suggests that a Deweyan defense of homeschooling gains considerable traction when

compared with a single alternative: viz., the flawed system of traditional education that Dewey strongly criticized. If formal or public schooling provides inadequate opportunities for growth, then Dewey's argument for modeling the ideal school after the ideal home converges with the non-ideal circumstances reason for homeschooling. Given the ubiquity of non-ideal conditions and significant administrative-political obstacles to reform, progress toward realizing the ideal school might prove difficult, if not impossible, nothing more than a utopian aspiration or a form in Platonic heaven. In light of Lines' (2000:77) point that "Dewey might well have recommended homeschooling" in the face of non-ideal circumstances, we can confidently conclude that even though Dewey did not recommend it, homeschooling as a tentative solution to the problem of failing public schools is a perfectly defensible and a perfectly Deweyan position.<sup>15</sup>

It should also be noted that the Deweyan defender of homeschooling should not abandon the struggle for improved public schools. In a melioristic vein, home schoolers should seek to realize those conditions necessary for a thriving public school system.<sup>16</sup> Persistence in this struggle, however, does not undermine the homeschooler's mission or derail the homeschooling project. For the Dewey-inspired school reformer, homeschooling can be a short-term alternative in a long-term plan for improving the public schools.

## Conclusion

I would like to sum up this discussion by considering whether it would be possible to reach an accord between homeschooling and public schooling advocates and, if so, what such an agreement would look like. According to Dewey, "[a]ll social movements involve conflicts which are reflected intellectually in controversies" (LW 13:3). The homeschooling movement is no different, and its proponents' controversial claim that the best quality schooling occurs in the home is a direct challenge to the conventional wisdom that it should occur in the classroom. Indeed, the conflict, according to Dewey, "only set[s] the problem" for inquiry, and begs for "a plan of operations

proceeding from a level deeper and more inclusive than is represented by the practices and ideas of the contending parties” (LW 13:3). Any collaboration between homeschooling and public schooling supporters, I propose, should embody the spirit of what Garrison (1998) calls ‘philosophy *as* education’ and what I refer to as ‘education *as* family life.’

Unfortunately, misperceptions about homeschooling and homeschoolers are rampant in American society. David Guterson (1992:5) claims that “forces of ideology and culture . . . [s]ocial consensus and our common mythologies” have made it nearly impossible “to treat fairly the notion that not every child need necessarily attend school, that many might indeed flourish beautifully outside it, and that our society might derive significant benefit by promoting and nurturing what we have come to call *homeschooling*.” Even though homeschooling is legal in all fifty states, misperceptions persist and, in some cases, have given rise to unwelcome government regulation. For instance, it is widely thought that homeschooled children are under-socialized given that they lack contact with adults and children outside their immediate family—a misperception that could be perpetuated by one of Dewey’s own reasons for schooling, namely, that the “child must be brought into contact with more grown people and with more children” (MW 1:24).<sup>17</sup> However, the preponderance of empirical evidence suggests otherwise.<sup>18</sup> Another common misperception is that homeschooling parents are unable to uphold minimum academic standards.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, some state governments have passed legislation to require approval of the homeschooling curricula, regular visits from state officials, standardized testing and certification of homeschooling parents.<sup>20</sup> Unsurprisingly, this kind of intrusive regulation has caused increasing tensions between homeschoolers and state authorities.

However, if we agree with Dewey that the ideal school should be modeled after the ideal home, then it stands to reason that public school officials could learn something from home schoolers and their many successes.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, in the spirit of philosophy *as* education and

education *as* family life, public schools and state authorities should collaborate with home schoolers—for instance, sharing best practices, model curricula, successful teaching methods, and effective schemes for evaluating student performance; not merely offering one-way regulation, but two-way partnerships, so that all parties may teach and be taught in turn.<sup>22</sup>

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> J. Dewey, “The School and the Life of the Child” in *The School and Society* (1899). Citations are to Dewey (1996), following the conventional method, LW (Later Works) or MW (Middle Works) or Early Works (EW), volume: page number. The chapter was originally delivered as the second of three lectures to parents and others with an interest in the University Elementary School affiliated with the University of Chicago in April 1899.

<sup>2</sup> Value judgments can be assessed naturalistically, that is, in terms of whether they permit humans to adapt to their natural and social environment. Dewey (LW 7:285-309) (with James Hayden Tufts), “The Moral Self,” in *Ethics* (1932 revision). They can also be assessed instrumentally, that is, in terms of their efficacy or success in achieving favored ends. Finally, they can be evaluated conventionally, that is, by recourse to widely approved or potentially approvable community standards. Dewey’s theory of value requires that we locate the conditions of justification for our value judgments in both the individual’s community (i.e., in terms of standards of general approval) and human conduct itself (i.e., in terms of instrumental efficacy), not in *a priori* criteria, such as divine commands, Platonic Forms, pure reason, or a fixed Aristotelian *telos*. Dewey (LW 5:278-88), “Three Independent Factors in Morals,” and Id. (LW 5:278-88) (with James Hayden Tufts), “Moral Judgment and Knowledge,” in *Ethics* (1932 revision).

<sup>3</sup> James Scott Johnston nicely makes this point: “Education is the formal means for the development of the habits and attitudes of inquiry such that growth can occur.” *Inquiry and Education: John Dewey and the Quest for Democracy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 110.

<sup>4</sup> Set aside is the issue of whether non-traditional family structures are admissible conceptions of the family. Though I personally believe that single parents and same-sex couples with children should be considered families, I appeal to what people widely consider a traditional family structure so as not to delay the inquiry by taking a detour into this contentious social issue. Still, the issue should be returned to, especially when considering what homeschoolers, many, though not all, of whom are religious and committed to a highly traditional conception of a family as a mixed-sex couple with children.

<sup>5</sup> Also, for some anecdotal evidence for the superiority of homeschooling to community schooling, see Nancy Wallace (1983). Research has shown that homeschooling also has a series of cascading benefits, from increased self-esteem to less need for peer approval to greater leadership potential as adults. See Basham et al. (2007:17).

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Isabel Lyman (1998:6). Jane Roland Martin (1995) also sees the school as an extension of the home learning situation, but in a more literal sense than Dewey, accentuating the home-like qualities of the school. I am indebted to Leonard Waks for this point. Other homeschooling advocates who were contemporaries of Dewey’s include A. A. Berle (1912) and Warren Burton (1863).

<sup>7</sup> Besides teaching religious values, these are the three top reasons for homeschooling based on recent polls. Lyman (1998:9). Likewise, Jane Van Galen (1991:67) distinguishes between two kinds of families that decide to home school: (i) ideologues and (ii) pedagogues. Patricia Line (2000a:79) notes that “[w]hile both progressive and religious reasons for homeschooling remain important, a plurality of families say they are turning to homeschooling because they are dissatisfied with the quality of the public schools.” On the intensive mothering phenomenon, see Douglas and Michaels (2004), Belkin (2003), Sellers (2003) and Young (2003). I am indebted to Katherine Kinnick for this point.

<sup>8</sup> Statistical Analysis Report (2003).

<sup>9</sup> Geraint Parry (1999:33), cited by Eric Thomas Weber (2008:376).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> The experimental curriculum at Dewey’s Laboratory School in the University of Chicago sought to correct these failings of the public school system. While student projects began with the manipulation of “fundamental social materials” such as “housing (carpentry), clothing (sewing), [and] food (cooking),” it led to “derived modes of expression, which bring out more distinctly the factors of social communication—speech, writing, [and] reading.” Dewey, “Plan of Organization of the University Primary School,” EW 5:229-230. Also, see Mayhew and Edwards (1936).

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<sup>12</sup> See Popham (2005), Gunzelmann (2007) and Murphy and Meyers (2007). Much of the contemporary critique of American schools centers on the overuse of standardized performance measures for student achievement, the failure of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, the need for flexibility in designing teaching materials (rather than being forced to “teach to the tests”) and teacher demands for more context-sensitive criteria to assess student success. Naoko Saito (2005:149) captures the spirit of this critique: “The language of education is at present dominated by a debased jargon of economics (‘the bottom line’ and ‘competitiveness’) and technology (‘teaching as a technology’), with the emphasis on performance targets, efficiency, and effectiveness. Such discourse is more typically found in the language of excellence and standards in connection with academic performance and achievement. Contemporary attempts to raise standards tend to take reductive, positivistic forms based upon a firm belief in definite criteria. [. . .] Such a language of education is a thin and misleading abstraction from the real experience of teachers and students.” Also, Larry Hickman (2006:77) comments: “[T]he Bush administration’s legislative initiative has instituted testing whose results are interpreted at the wholesale level and without regard to the particular challenges of individual students, teachers, and schools.”

<sup>13</sup> In Dewey’s *A Common Faith*, the meaning of ‘religion’ extends beyond religious institutions to religious experience, generally. By drawing “the distinction between ‘religion’ as a noun substantive and ‘religious’ as an adjectival,” he intends to demonstrate that while the term ‘religion’ may be limited to “a special body of beliefs and practices having some kind of institutional organization,” the term ‘religious’ cannot; instead, religious points to “attitudes that may be taken toward every object and every proposed end or ideal” (LW 9:8). Dewey proposes that, rather than understand religious experience as access or revelation to a “a separate kind of thing” (for instance, a Platonic Form or a divine source of authority), it is better to appreciate it as having “religious force because of what it does in and to the processes of living” (LW 9:11)—in other words, because of its far-reaching consequences or the way it affects the actual conditions of lived experience. Since the word ‘religious’ is so freighted with meanings and associations concerning the divine, supersensible and supernatural qualities of objects (many originating in the writings and rituals of organized religion), Dewey recommends that language users “drop the term ‘religious,’” substitute terms such as “‘adjustment’ and ‘orientation’” and “ask what are the attitudes that lend deep and enduring support to the processes of living” (LW 9:11). Finally, Dewey insists that when freed from appeals to ignorance and the supernatural, religious experience can help strengthen the bonds of community. Indeed, the religious quality of experience has been responsible for the “enormous expansion of associations formed for educational, political, economic, philanthropic and scientific purposes, which has occurred independently of any religion” (LW 9:42). See Eldridge (2003) and Ralston (2007).

<sup>14</sup> Guterson (1992:6) writes: “The homeschooling movement is also polarized by a general disagreement regarding educational methods. At one extreme are the orthodox ‘structuralists’ whose homes are essentially miniature schools with formal and conventional curricula. At the other are advocates of ‘unstructured learning’ . . . whose guiding principle is trust in the child’s innate ability to learn even if parents do *no* formal teaching.”

<sup>15</sup> A similar point is made about a Deweyan argument for teaching ethics in the high schools in Ralston (2008:11).

<sup>16</sup> Dewey states his melioristic faith: “When we have used our thought to its utmost and have thrown into the moving unbalanced balance of things our puny strength, we know that though the universe slay us still we may trust, for our lot is one with whatever is good in existence. We know that such thought and effort is one condition of the coming into existence of the better.” “Existence, Value and Criticism” in *Experience and Nature*, LW 1:314. See also Koopman (2006) and Fishman and McCarthy (2007).

<sup>17</sup> This critique that homeschooled children are undersocialized is often paired with the criticism that homeschooling families tend to “cocoon” together and to “personalize” the transmission of information from one generation to the next. See Michael W. Apple (2000: 262).

<sup>18</sup> See Basham et al. (2007:16-17); Lines (2000a:82); and Lyman (1998:11-12).

<sup>19</sup> Lines (2000a:78) explains why this is a misperception: “According to the surveys, the typical homeschooling family is religious, conservative, white, middle-income, and better educated than the general population.” Basham et al. (2007:12) also acknowledge that “[h]ome schooling parents have above-average levels of education. Among American parents who home school, 75 percent have studied beyond high school compared with 56 percent of parents nationwide.”

<sup>20</sup> Massachusetts, Minnesota and New York have the most intrusive homeschooling regulations, such as curriculum approval, visits to the home, standardized testing and required certification of parent-teachers. The states that require no authorization from state and school authorities to home school are Idaho, Oklahoma and Texas. Lyman (1998:12).

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Basham et al. (2007:7) distinguish between high regulation, moderate regulation and low regulation states and note that “there are 41 states that have no minimum academic standards for parents who home school their children.”

<sup>21</sup> While the success stories are too numerous to comprehensively list, Isabel Lyman (1998) relays a number of them, from home-schooled Rebecca Sealton’s victory in the 1997 National Spelling Bee to high-school educated parent Joyce Swann’s homeschooling of her nine children, seven of whom have gone on to earn master’s degrees. “Homeschooling: Back to the Future?” 15. Basham et al. (2007:15) observe that “[i]n recent years, home schooled students are gaining admission and scholarship to the most prestigious universities.”

<sup>22</sup> This is a version of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s (2008:xxix) turn of phrase, found at the outset of *Representative Men*. “[A]ll are teachers and pupils in turn.” Indeed, such family-school collaborations have already begun in many of the states. Patricia Lines (2008a:80) reports that “Alaska has served homeschooling students for decades through correspondence teaching. In California, a child may enroll in a public school independent-study program but base his studies in the home (the state does not like to call this ‘homeschooling’). Some states, such as Washington and Iowa, give families the right to enroll their children part-time in their local public schools and allow the district to claim a portion of the state’s per pupil assistance for the enrollment.” See also Lines (2000b).