

# Academic Freedom and John Dewey

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Since freedom of mind and freedom of expression are the root of all freedom, to deny freedom in education is a crime against democracy.

—John Dewey

Academic freedom is a perennial issue in the public schools of America. In societies that are diverse and open, conflicts always abound, and one of the areas of conflict that is never resolved with finality is the proper balance between freedom, responsibility and authority. As with most significant social issues, disagreements regarding the nature and extent of freedom appropriate in our society is reflected in our schools in various ways, among them in disagreements about academic freedom.

Even a brief research effort discloses that serious conflicts concerning academic freedom have been with us throughout the period of recorded history. The record begins with attempts to limit the freedom of teaching of Socrates and proceeds to efforts to restrict freedom for reasons of religion, nationalism, militarism, fear of war, fear of Communism or Fascism, concern for capitalism and others.<sup>1</sup>

## *Academic Freedom and Educational Purpose*

As we examine conflicts related to academic freedom, it becomes clear that one's position will be necessarily influenced by his conception of the purpose of schooling. As early as the turn of the century, John Dewey distinguished between those who would emphasize the transmission of a fixed set of ideas and facts from those whose commitment is to constant inquiry and an intelligently critical approach "to the affairs of life." If the purpose is to create *disciples* rather than *disciplined inquirers*, then the "problem of freedom of inquiry and instruction clearly assumes different forms."<sup>2</sup>

While Dewey's above comments are drawn from an article related to higher education, he expresses similar convictions elsewhere when writing about the elementary and secondary schools. For him, academic freedom was an important aspect of "a democracy of mind" and inextricably tied to his conviction that schools must be democratic if they are to serve and enhance a democratic social order. He proposed in 1903 that ". . . democracy means freeing intelligence for independent effectiveness—the emancipation of mind as an individual organ to do its work. We naturally associate democracy, to be sure, with freedom of action, but freedom of action without freed capacity of thought behind it is only chaos."<sup>3</sup>

In his analysis, Dewey insists that classroom teachers must have a regular and systematic way of influencing the processes of schooling, including the selection of goals, curricula, books, techniques, and materials. He rejects explicitly the management by experts: "The remedy is not to have one expert dictating educational methods and subject matter to a body of passive, recipient teachers, but the adoption of intellectual initiative, discussion, and decision throughout the entire school corps. The remedy of the partial evil of democracy, the implication of the school system in municipal politics, is in appeal to a more thorough-going democracy."<sup>4\*</sup>

After making the case for teachers, Dewey proceeds to develop an equally strong position for the necessity of the learner to be significantly involved in the learning process. The suppression of students is as undemocratic as the suppression of teachers. Dewey's position is not to be misinterpreted as being one of extreme child-centeredness. He is concerned for the development of active, disciplined learners who ably participate in the selection, pursuit and resolution of significant problems. He rejects the school that "has literally been dressed out with hand-me-down garments—with intellectual suits which other people have worn." Schools, where "acquiring takes the place of inquiring." "Until the emphasis changes to conditions which make it necessary for the child to take an active share in the personal building up of his own problems and to participate in methods of solving them (even at the expense of experimentation and error), mind is not really freed."<sup>5</sup>

It is eminently clear that for Dewey the issue of academic freedom was a significant subset of his general concern that schools be democratic institutions. His conception of educational democracy included the conviction that both teachers and students had

\* It seems clear what his reactions would be to recent efforts at programmed instruction and particularly the creation of "teacher-proof" curricula.

decision-making voices in the daily life of the schools, including the selection of curricular goals, means and materials.

*Freedom and Anxiety*

Twenty-four years ago, in 1953, the John Dewey Society sponsored a yearbook entitled *Educational Freedom in an Age of Anxiety*.<sup>6</sup> As the title suggests, one major theme running through the volume is that in anxious times social forces arise that attempt to curtail freedom and diversity, including the freedom of educators.

But isn't every age an "age of anxiety"? Is ours not an anxious and insecure age? Are we not anxious about nuclear proliferation, environmental deterioration, the erosion of morality, the Watergate syndrome, the loss of privacy, the threat of war, overpopulation, the spread of Communist influence in developing nations and about other matters? As the yearbook noted, "... mankind has known no age which was not an age of anxiety; that if any is appraised as more anxious than its predecessors or successors, it is so appraised because it is an age of heightened and more varied freedom as well. Freedom and 'anxiety' are in the nature of things complementary functions of one another, coordinates organic to consciousness in a world of many choices. Which is nominated to signalize an age testifies the mood of the chooser, not the nature of the age."<sup>7</sup>

Thus, we may conclude that every age is "an age of anxiety" and varies only in degree from other anxious times. Furthermore, if Kallen is correct, then our expanding and varied freedom and the expansion of choices is likely to generate increased anxiety, some of which results in attempts to restrict teachers and students in our schools.

*From Universities to Kindergartens*

Historically, the classic struggles over academic freedom occurred primarily in the universities. Sub-collegiate institutions tended to accept as authoritative the decisions of administrators and school boards in matters controlling both the ends and means of instruction. The American teacher often had neither the interest nor the competence to challenge ordinary community expectations or the directives of his school board. If a challenge was mounted, the teacher generally lost out and moved to another job or another community.<sup>8</sup>

This pattern of quiet acquiescence on the part of high school and elementary school teachers has changed significantly during

the past several decades and dramatically during the recent years. While many socio-cultural factors contributed to this extension of academic freedom, two are worthy of special note. The first is the rise of powerful teacher organizations, notably the N.E.A. and the A.F.T., which provide the organizational, moral and financial support required to fight through the protracted struggle often necessary to secure one's rights as a teacher. Secondly, since most teachers are now educated in conjunction with a liberal arts preparation, they are more committed to the development of open-mindedness and a critically reflective disposition in their students. Organizational power and intellectual awareness combine to enable teachers to challenge violations of their academic freedom.

#### *Academic Freedom Is A Constitutional Right*

While the historic roots of academic freedom are embedded in philosophic commitments, the Constitution provides the legal bases for its assertion and protection. The U. S. Supreme Court recognized on various occasions that academic freedom falls under the protection of the free speech clause of the First Amendment.<sup>9</sup>

Recent cases that show the applicability of the First Amendment to the protection of academic freedom arose from the use of controversial language in the classroom. One of the best known cases concerns a high school teacher of English, Robert Keefe, of Ipswich, Massachusetts. As a creative teacher, he wanted to expose his students to timely and provocative contemporary writing. On the first day of school, in September 1969, he gave each member of his class a recent issue of *The Atlantic* and assigned the lead article "The Young and the Old."<sup>10</sup> The selection, which discussed dissent, protest, radicalism and revolt, contained the word "motherfucker," repeated a number of times. Keefe prepared the class for the assignment with care, explained the origin and context of the term and provided an alternate assignment for students who might be offended.

While there was no negative student reaction to the assignment, a number of parents objected and protested to the school board. The school board asked Keefe to promise never to use the word again in class. When he replied that in good conscience he could not make such a promise, Keefe was suspended and dismissal proceedings were initiated against him.

Keefe went to court and claimed that his civil rights were violated and the courts upheld his claim. An analysis of this case, as well as others, shows that the principle of academic freedom ap-

plies to protect unpopular teaching methods as well as controversial language in the classroom. However, like other constitutional rights, this one is not absolute. The court was satisfied that Keefe had a legitimate educational reason for the use of the article. Furthermore, the language used was appropriate in light of the age and experience of the students. Finally, it was not legally obscene or libelous.<sup>11</sup>

Judge Aldrich of the U. S. Circuit Court clearly recognized that some parents find such language highly offensive. Should parental objections justify restricting the teacher's right to use the controversial language? "If the answer were that the students must be protected from such exposure," wrote Judge Aldrich, "we would fear for their future." He concluded that the sensibilities of offended parents "are not the full measure of what is proper in education.

While the *Keefe* decision was not a Supreme Court case, it drew on earlier cases from the high court to indicate that the unwarranted inhibition of the free speech of teachers not only affects the teachers who are restricted but also has an "unmistakable tendency to chill that free play of spirit which *all* teachers ought especially to cultivate and practice."<sup>12\*</sup> Although the *Keefe* case involved a teacher of English, undoubtedly the same legal principles apply to protect the academic freedom of social studies teachers as well as those in other fields.

#### *The Social Purposes of Academic Freedom*

Two misconceptions about academic freedom are commonly held by educators and the lay public alike: that the basic purpose of academic freedom is to protect the individual teacher and that there are no limitations to such freedom.

Concerning the latter, Dewey accepted the position of President Harper of the University of Chicago, as expressed in his Convocation Address of December, 1900. President Harper believed that the "privilege"<sup>\*\*</sup> of academic freedom is abused by professors who (1) promulgate as truth, ideas not yet established scientifically; (2) use the classroom to spread partisan political views; (3) use sensational methods to influence their pupils or the public; and (4) speak authoritatively outside their area of expertise.<sup>13</sup>

\* For a more complete discussion of *Keefe*, as well as other cases, see Louis Fischer and David Schimmel, *The Civil Rights of Teachers*, Harper and Row Publishers, 1973.

\*\* Note that in earlier times academic freedom was often thought of as a "privilege," while today it is clearly established as an enforceable "right," at least in public institutions.

Both Dewey and Harper went on to recognize, however, that although there are limits to academic freedom and although these limits are at times abused, "the abuse of it is not so great an evil as the restriction of such liberty."<sup>14</sup>

It is reasonable to propose that while Dewey and Harper were addressing the question of the limits and abuse of academic freedom by college and university professors, similar principles would apply to teachers of social studies. It is also probable that communities as well as the courts would tolerate less abuse during the age of compulsory schooling than at the collegiate level.

While questions about the limits of academic freedom and its abuse often arise, it is difficult to find intelligent discussion of the basic purpose of such freedom. More often than not it seems to be taken for granted, claimed but not examined, or asserted as an occupational benefit individual teachers have.

Once again, speaking from the more comprehensive concern for the democratic way of life, Dewey placed this freedom into its more inclusive social context. It is impressive that the following statements, written in 1936, are so on target today.

In no phase of social endeavor is the realization of the social content of freedom more important than in the struggle for academic freedom. Everyone who has read the pleas made in the early struggle for universal and free schools in this country knows the emphasis that was put upon education as a necessary condition for creation of the kind of citizenship indispensable to the success of the democracy. Today freedom of teaching and learning on the part of instructors and students is imperatively necessary for that kind of intelligent citizenship that is genuinely free to take part in the social reconstructions without which democracy will die. The question is now whether democracy is a possible form of society when affairs are as complex and economic power is as concentrated as today. Since freedom of mind and freedom of expression are the root of all freedom, to deny freedom in education is a crime against democracy.<sup>15</sup>

In his usual abhorrence of dualisms and other artificial fragmentations of complex relationships, Dewey is concerned for the social purposes to be served by the protection and enhancement of educational freedom. For him this would include the free and collaborative participation of teachers, students, administrators as well as the community in the decisions that are vital to schooling.\* Rather than a merely defensive use of academic free-

\* Todd Clark reaches similar conclusions in his analysis of the Kanawha County controversy. For his and other recent analysis of academic freedom, see the special issue of *Social Education*, Vol. 39, No. 4, April 1975.

dom, to parade the principle when a teacher is in trouble, he would propose that its spirit be a key guiding principle in all aspects of schooling. If we are to be serious in our stated educational goals and purposes, then the means and methods of schooling must also reflect the foundational values of our way of life, including an intelligent commitment to the functional values of freedom. In Dewey's words:

Politically we have found that this country could not endure half free and half slave. We shall find equally great difficulty in encouraging freedom, independence, and initiative in every sphere of social life, while perpetuating in the school dependence upon external authority. The forces of social life are already encroaching upon the school institutions which we have inherited from the past, so that many of its main stays are crumbling. Unless the outcome is to be chaotic, we must take hold of the organic, positive principle involved in democracy, and put that in entire possession of the spirit and work of the school.<sup>16</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Those interested in historical analyses of the problem of academic freedom might profit from reading Richard Hofstadter and Walter P. Metzger, *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955).

<sup>2</sup> John Dewey, "Academic Freedom," *Educational Review*, January 1902, pp. 1-14.

<sup>3</sup> John Dewey, "Democracy In Education," *The Elementary School Teacher*, Vol. 12, No. 4, December 1903.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>6</sup> H. Gordon Hullfish, Ed., New York, Harper and Row.

<sup>7</sup> See the chapter by Horace Kallen, in H. Gordon Hullfish, *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>8</sup> For a systematic historical analysis, see Howard K. Beale, *Are American Teachers Free?* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, *Keyishian v. Board of Regents of New York*, 385 U.S. 589 (1967); *Adler v. Board of Education*, 342 U.S. 485 (1952); and *Wieman v. Updegraff*, 344 U.S. 183 (1952).

<sup>10</sup> Robert J. Lifton, "The Young and the Old: Notes on a New History," Part I, *The Atlantic*, 224, No. 3 (September 1969), p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> *Keefe v. Geanakos*, 418 F.2d 359 (1st Cir. 1969).

<sup>12</sup> Quoting from *Wieman v. Updegraff*, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>13</sup> John Dewey, "Academic Freedom," *Educational Review*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> John Dewey, "The Social Significance of Academic Freedom," *The Social Frontier*, March 1936, p. 165.

<sup>16</sup> John Dewey, "Democracy In Education," *The Elementary School Teacher*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 203.

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