

## DEWEY AND POSSIBILITY: CHALLENGING NEOLIBERALISM IN EDUCATION

Vasco d'Agnesse

Department of Psychology  
University of Campania Luigi Vanvitelli

**ABSTRACT.** In recent decades, critiques of neoliberalism have been widespread within the scholarly literature on education. Despite the lack of a clear definition of what neoliberalism in education is and entails, researchers from different fields and perspectives have widely criticized the neoliberal educational mindset for its narrowness, lack of democratic engagement, and objectification of educational practices. In this essay, through an analysis of a particular aspect of Dewey's *oeuvre* — namely, Dewey's commitment to the “unattained” and “wonderful possibilities” of experience and education — I argue that educational neoliberalism should be refuted above all on the basis of its lack of intelligence and professional weakness. With regard to this, I contend that educational neoliberalism, despite its relative sophistication, is but another form authoritarian teaching. Dewey, in contrast, challenged the view of education as a means for achieving predetermined goals, and instead conceived of education as an end in itself, something imbued with the unpredictable space of pure possibility.

**KEY WORDS.** John Dewey; neoliberal educational agenda; possibility; intelligence; educational policies

### INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, critiques of the neoliberalism in education have been widespread within scholarly literature in education. Despite the lack of a clear definition of what neoliberalism in education is and entails,<sup>1</sup> researchers from different fields and perspectives have criticized its narrowness, lack of democratic engagement, and objectification of educational practices. Neoliberalism, according to its critics, betrays the nature of education both in theory and in practice, narrowing down the scope and purposes of education, the occasions for educational encounters, and the quality of knowledge emerging from educational contexts.<sup>2</sup> While this article is clearly sympathetic to such concerns, I believe they do not provide the whole story.

Here, I argue that Deweyan thought can provide effective tools for challenging the neoliberal educational framework on a different basis than has been considered to date. Specifically, by analyzing a particular aspect of Dewey's *oeuvre* — namely, Dewey's commitment to the “unattained”<sup>3</sup> and “wonderful possibilities”<sup>4</sup> of experience and education — I argue that the neoliberal educational mindset should be refuted, first and foremost, because of its lack of intelligence and its professional

1. Taylor C. Boas and Jordan Gans-Morse, “Neoliberalism: From New Liberal Philosophy to Anti-Liberal Slogan,” *Studies in Contemporary International Development* 44, no. 2 (2009): 137–161.

2. I devote section 2 to summarizing the criticisms raised against the neoliberal educational mindset.

3. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 2nd ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1929), 182. This work will be cited in the text as *EN* for all subsequent references.

4. John Dewey, *Interest and Effort in Education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 94.

weakness. To this point, I contend that educational neoliberalism is but another form of authoritarian teaching, albeit a relatively sophisticated one.

As stated above, I draw in this analysis on Dewey's commitment to possibility, arguing specifically that this commitment, which is evident throughout Dewey's writings, works both as an explicit commitment (an argument in its own right) and as a vibrant, passionate force that infuses the Deweyan conception of education, intelligence, and experience. Put differently, engagement with radical possibility and the new is both an issue that Dewey explicitly develops and a tension that runs through and breathes life into Deweyan thought; losing sight of this tension carries the risk that an important part of Dewey's endeavor will remain hidden.

Specifically, we run the risk of losing sight of the inner force that structures intelligence and education, namely, "liv[ing] forward"<sup>5</sup> while "pointing to the new possibilities,"<sup>6</sup> and of the basis of freedom and choice, that is, a "sense of possibilities that are unrealized and that might be realized."<sup>7</sup> Even the significance of experience as something to be enlarged and enlightened, emancipated and freed,<sup>8</sup> becomes impoverished when disconnected from the vital tension of "possibilities ... open to us."<sup>9</sup> Thus, in the face of a severe narrowing down of education to a neoliberal apparatus, the Deweyan call toward the meaning of radical possibilities is of invaluable educational significance.

Let me add a caveat about the perspective I adopt in interpreting Deweyan conceptions of education, intelligence, and possibility. I acknowledge that in Dewey's vast body of work, we may find different conceptions of such themes. To cite a few instances, from a Deweyan understanding, intelligence is the capacity to "respond to a meaning which the thing has" (*DE*, 35) or the "ability" to pursue "useful ends" (*DE*, 47), thus foreseeing "the terminus of an act" (*DE*, 120). Moreover, intelligent behavior is to be thought of as "the use of the given or finished to anticipate the consequence of processes going on."<sup>10</sup> Along similar

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5. John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy," in *Creative Intelligence: Essays in the Pragmatic Attitude* (New York: Henry Holt, 1917), 12.

6. John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation between Knowledge and Action* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1929), 312.

7. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; repr. New York: Perigee Books, 1980), 346. This work will be cited in the text as *AE* for all subsequent references.

8. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (1916; repr. New York: Macmillan, 1930), 6, 56. This work will be cited in the text as *DE* for all subsequent references.

9. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1922), 311.

10. John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938), 21.

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VASCO D'AGNESE is Professor of Education in the Department of Psychology at the University of Campania Luigi Vanvitelli, Caserta, Italy; e-mail <vasco.dagnese@unicampania.it>. His research interests include educational philosophy and theory, Martin Heidegger, John Dewey, postmodernism, and educational policies.

lines, education is defined by Dewey as “that reconstruction or reorganization of experience ... which increases the ability to direct the course of subsequent experience” (*DE*, 89–90). From a Deweyan perspective, the living creature is always in pursuit of goals and, therefore, intelligence also lies in having an end-in-view, assessing the possible alternative means of moving to that end-in-view, taking action based on one’s evaluation of alternative means, and following that action with an assessment as to whether it has taken us closer to our end-in-view.<sup>11</sup>

Along with the conception I am defending, Dewey also presents an understanding of intelligence and education as the control or direction of experience. One characteristic of the Dewey’s *oeuvre* acknowledged by many different scholars is the depth, abundance, and even variety of meanings we may find in it — an abundance that may also be frustrating. Without presuming to encompass the whole range of meanings that Dewey singles out, I hope to offer a defensible understanding of intelligence and education as committed to openness and radical possibility.

The article is organized into five sections. In the first, I analyze the neoliberal educational mindset and criticisms of it, and then argue why further work in this direction is required. In the second section, I analyze the relationship between intelligence, action, and possibility as developed in Dewey’s 1917 essay “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy,” a relationship that has far-reaching educational consequences. In the third section, I focus on the role possibility plays with respect to two pivotal educational categories: choice and freedom. In the fourth section, I analyze a major feature of intelligence as conceived by Dewey, namely, intelligence as the means by which we expand events toward an inexhaustible fullness of meanings; this understanding of intelligence, I maintain, recasts the role of education. Finally, in the fifth section, I summarize and conclude my argument. Below, I begin by analyzing what I call the “neoliberal educational gesture.”

#### THE NEOLIBERAL EDUCATIONAL GESTURE

In a 2009 article analyzing the range of applications and understandings of neoliberalism, Taylor Boas and Jordan Gans-Morse note that “the term neoliberalism presents a puzzle.”<sup>12</sup> In conducting a content analysis of academic articles published between 1990 and 2004, the two authors found that neoliberalism “ha[d] rapidly become an academic catchphrase.”<sup>13</sup> Retracing the genealogy and transformation of the term from its use by the Freiberg School of German economists to that by Chilean intellectuals, Boas and Gans-Morse note that only after “the term had migrated to Latin America, and Chilean intellectuals starting using it to refer to radical economic reforms under the Pinochet dictatorship, did neoliberalism acquire negative normative connotations.”<sup>14</sup> By the time Boas and

11. I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for this understanding of Dewey’s conception of goals.

12. Boas and Gans-Morse, “Neoliberalism,” 138.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, 139.

Gans-Morse published their article, the negative association was so strong that “no one self-identifies as a neoliberal even though scholars frequently associate others ... with this term.”<sup>15</sup> Neoliberalism, they further concluded, is “effectively used in many different ways, such that its appearance in any given article offers little clue as to what it actually means.”<sup>16</sup>

While Boas and Gans-Morse’s analysis primarily referred to political and economic fields, their claims are also applicable to educational studies. Starting in the 1990s, in fact, a large number of scholarly reflections began to focus on what may loosely be called the “neoliberal educational mindset,” highlighting, in various guises and to different degrees, its dangers and educational fallacies. Insightful though such writings are, they still fail to define the issue they address, namely, educational neoliberalism. However, I wish to argue that this is not necessarily a failure. While it is assumed that to ground a scholarly discussion, there must be agreement regarding what the discussion is about in terms of both content and methods, I believe that some issues permit a slightly different treatment, and neoliberalism falls within this category.

This is the case for two reasons. One relates to the fact that a number of concepts we use in educational research are slippery and complex in nature. Think, for instance, of the concepts of democracy, cosmopolitanism, or education itself: one can hardly provide a consistent definition of these concepts without omitting a number of features and understandings. Such concepts are multidimensional, open to modification, and theory-laden; moreover, their nature changes as research changes and advances — in a sense, the meaning of the term is to be found at the end of the research rather than at the beginning. Specifically, if Boas and Gans-Morse’s criteria were applied to the Dewey’s writings, one would conclude that his whole corpus is inconsistent, for it is rare to find a univocal account of what education, experience, or even logic means according to a Deweyan understanding.

A second reason pertains to the very specificity of the concept of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is not simply an academic term situated at the intersection of a number of disciplines. Neoliberalism has diverse features and acts at different levels: its nature may be understood only by considering the complex intersections and overlaps of these levels. Given the space constraints and purposes of this paper, it is difficult to summarize the whole range of criticisms against neoliberalism in education or to scrutinize the documents and publications through which the neoliberal mindset is delivered worldwide. However, to ground my argument to a minimum degree, some of these documents and critiques must be presented to provide a kind of stipulative definition of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, as I perceive it, entails the following:

- a. *A political and developmental model spanning diverse fields, including education and learning:* This model places a strong emphasis on the

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15. *Ibid.*, 140.

16. *Ibid.*, 138–139.

economy as a natural and unavoidable force for working through unpredictable changes and constant renewal.<sup>17</sup> Within this framework, both “individuals” and “training systems” — as the European Council states — “must adapt to change.”<sup>18</sup> Education and learning are thus positioned as needing to constantly chase new developments in the market economy.<sup>19</sup>

b. *An ideology permeating the social and educational space by which a peculiar vision of individuals, students, and educational institutions is delivered:* This ideology places strong emphasis on ongoing competition at all levels of education and society while weakening a vision of education as a site for sharing and togetherness.<sup>20</sup> Neoliberalism, in this way, also tends to restrict the richness and variety of scopes of education, thus limiting educational possibilities.<sup>21</sup> As a caveat, one peculiar characteristic of neoliberal ideology is that it presents itself, in a sense, as the only game in town. Everything that falls outside the given register of performativity and competition is increasingly regarded as inconsequential. The tautological nature of neoliberalism makes criticizing and challenging its assumptions extremely difficult.<sup>22</sup>

17. Within critiques of the neoliberal educational mindset, there is widespread emphasis on the overwhelming importance it attributes to the economy. In this regard, Mark Olssen and Michael Peters argue that under a neoliberal regime, “education is represented as an input–output system that can be reduced to an economic production function.” Mark Olssen and Michael A. Peters, “Neoliberalism, Higher Education, and the Knowledge Economy: From the Free Market to Knowledge Capitalism,” *Journal of Education Policy* 20, no. 3 (2005): 324. Along similar lines, David Harvey highlights that neoliberalism “seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market.” David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

18. European Council Parliament, “Lisbon European Council: Presidency Conclusions” (March 2000), [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1\\_en.htm](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm).

19. In Wendy Brown’s words, “we are everywhere *homo oeconomicus* and only *homo oeconomicus*.” Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 33.

20. Some scholars go even further, arguing that neoliberal ideology “is quietly undoing basic elements of democracy. ... Neoliberal reason ... is converting the distinctly political character, meaning, and operation of democracy’s constituent elements into economic ones” (Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 17).

21. In this regard, a fundamental reference is the work of Michael Apple. See, particularly, Michael W. Apple, *Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 130; and Michael W. Apple, *Educating the “Right” Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality* (New York: Routledge, 2006). For a thoughtful discussion of how and why standardization works in the neoliberal educational mindset, see Jabari Mahiri, “From 3 R’s to 3 C’s: Corporate Curriculum and Culture in Public Schools,” *Social Justice* 32, no. 3 (2005): 72–88. Regarding the issue of neoliberalism as unavoidable, see David Hursh and Joseph Henderson, who argue that “neoliberalism is often promoted as inevitable so that governing bodies in cities, provinces, and countries are portrayed as having no choice but to adopt neoliberal policies.” David Hursh and Joseph A. Henderson, “Contesting Global Neoliberalism and Creating Alternative Futures,” *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 32, no. 2 (2011): 176.

22. Hursh and Henderson argue that “neoliberal policies” severely limit “public discourse” and “what can be said and thought” within the political, social, and educational arenas. Hursh and Henderson, “Contesting Global Neoliberalism and Creating Alternative Futures,” 176. In this regard, see also Jan

c. *A set of educational policies delivered at both a supra-national and national level that establishes, through the allocation of financial resources, what, when, how, and even why one should learn:* As many scholars have noted, the autonomy of teachers, students, and even parents is severely reduced under neoliberal educational policies and replaced by remote mechanisms of control and accountability.<sup>23</sup> As Simon Marginson notes, neoliberalism “provides performance measurement tools that help governments to micromanage schools and systems, and it uses subsidized competition in governed education systems to manage and control parent and professional behavior.”<sup>24</sup>

d. *A widespread rhetoric that guides the representations of education and schooling we address:* Neoliberalism acts not only through economic penetration but through a fascinating rhetoric and language, one in which “better jobs for better lives”<sup>25</sup> are promised, and a “new vocabulary of performance”<sup>26</sup> reshapes teachers’ and students’ aims and purposes. A strong emphasis is placed on “what is required to succeed”<sup>27</sup> in today’s complex world. Ongoing competition governs the social and educational space,<sup>28</sup> and little room is left for alternative values and meanings. Of course, this rhetoric includes some words advocating for equity, but the spotlight is ever on the same terms and concepts.

It is important to note that neoliberalism’s power of penetration and seduction also lies in its ubiquity. Its language spans from the normative frameworks through which financial resources are distributed to brochures describing specific

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Masschelein and Marten Simons, “The Governmentalization of Learning and the Assemblage of a Learning Apparatus,” *Educational Theory* 58, no. 4 (2008): 391–415.

23. According to Apple’s understanding, teachers and educationalists become “alienated executors of someone else’s plans” (Apple, *Official Knowledge*, 118). For a thoughtful discussion of the meanings of accountability and evaluation in educational neoliberalism, see Gert J. J. Biesta, “Education, Accountability, and the Ethical Demand: Can the Democratic Potential of Accountability Be Regained?,” *Educational Theory* 54, no. 3 (2004): 233–250.

24. Simon Marginson, “Engaging Democratic Education in the Neoliberal Age,” *Educational Theory* 56, no. 2 (2006): 209.

25. OECD, “Test for Schools (Based on PISA): Frequently Asked Questions (and Answers),” <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/oecdtestforschoolsintheus.htm>.

26. Stephen J. Ball, “The Teacher’s Soul and the Terrors of Performativity,” *Journal of Education Policy* 18, no. 2 (2003): 218.

27. Andreas Schleicher, “Use Data to Build Better Schools” (TEDGlobal 2012), [www.ted.com/talks/andreas\\_schleicher\\_use\\_data\\_to\\_build\\_better\\_schools/transcript?language=en#t-984031](http://www.ted.com/talks/andreas_schleicher_use_data_to_build_better_schools/transcript?language=en#t-984031).

28. A number of scholars have singled out competition as the neoliberal educational mindset’s primary value. See, for instance, Marginson, “Engaging Democratic Education in the Neoliberal Age,” 209; Matthew Clarke, “The (Absent) Politics of Neo-Liberal Education Policy,” *Critical Studies in Education* 53, no. 3 (2012): 297–310, 300; and David E. Meens, “Democratic Education versus Smithian Efficiency: Prospects for a Deweyan Ideal in the ‘Neoliberal Age,’” *Educational Theory* 66, no. 1–2 (2016): 211–226.

assessment tools; it informs everything from the political actions and legislation of nation-states to videos developed to promote educational equipment. We find neoliberal logic in a number of documents, reports, publications, and videos from major educational institutions and agencies worldwide.<sup>29</sup> In all of these formats, normative and scientific language combines with gestures aimed at commercial purposes to form a mixture that is difficult to debunk.<sup>30</sup>

The problem is that, through such a mixture, priceless educational aims are put at risk. Reducing persons to their economic value and features tames students' critical agency, imaginative vision, ability to concretely recognize plurality and differences, and talent to imagine the world other than it is by channeling these dispositions toward predefined ends; thus these qualities lose their potential to open new paths. When analyzing documents from certain major educational agencies and institutions worldwide (for example, the European Commission, the OECD's Directorate for Education and Skills, and the U.S. Department of Education), one has the feeling that goals and means, values and ends, ambitions and projects — therefore a whole conception of education and society — have been packaged as a set of mandates by such agencies and then distributed to states, schools, teachers, and students.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, a certain degree of definition is required — without a common curriculum and certain predefined aims, we would have neither a school nor an education. However, what is striking about such documents and recommendations is the straightforward way in which they establish in advance students' ambitions

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29. For a few examples, see OECD's brochure presenting PISA, which indicates that education is to be conceived of in terms of "knowledge management ... [and] students' performance." OECD, brochure on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), (2014), available to download at <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/PISA-trifold-brochure-2014.pdf>. We also find it in the U.S. Department of Education's mission statement, which is defined in terms of "student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness" (<https://www.ed.gov/>). We find it again in the EU's strategic framework, where we learn that the European strategy for education is to meet students' "skills deficit" and foster "global competition" ([http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework\\_en](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework_en)). Moreover, this reframing of education in terms of human capital theory and of curriculum in terms of efficiency protocols that produce a set of given skills is also evident just by glancing at the webpages and names of powerful institutions guiding education and schooling worldwide. For instance, The OECD's Directorate for Education is called the "OECD's Directorate for Education *and Skills*," and the title of the European Commission's webpage devoted to education is "Education *and Training*" (<http://ec.europa.eu/education/>).

30. As an example of such a gesture, consider the following passage from an OECD document about the PISA-based Test for Schools: "It is expected that the PISA-based Test for Schools will provide ... the opportunity ... to improve learning and build better skills for better lives" (OECD, "Test for Schools (Based on PISA): Frequently Asked Questions [and Answers]," <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/oecdtestforschoolsintheus.htm>).

31. Consider as one example the video series titled *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education*. The series, described as "a video series profiling policies and practices of education systems that demonstrate high or improving performance in the PISA tests," is a joint project of the OECD and the Pearson Foundation. For more information about the series and to access videos from it, visit <http://learningisopen.org/oecd/>. For another example, see Andreas Schleicher's TED Talk, "Use Data to Build Better Schools."

and desires: whatever the possibilities of the subjects being taught are, such possibilities are already contained and captured in the neoliberal framework.

Students, in this way, are conceived as recipients for the right skills and knowledge — skills and knowledge that, in turn, should navigate them to a successful life. Of course, this is not to say that neoliberal advocates do not care about the future of the students; rather, the neoliberal ambition to set and establish the features of students' future in advance puts a mortgage on both the present and the future of education, thereby narrowing not just learning and education, but living and society more broadly, through hemming in students' own projects, aims, and desires. In this sense, the neoliberal concept of *homo oeconomicus* is untenable, for economic value and considerations are only one of the outputs — albeit an important one — of a much larger engagement with environment.

It is not far from the truth to say that at the very heart of such a stance is the desire to subsume every educational aim, possibility, or value into its own model — as noted in the European Union's document *Rethinking Education*, "Education and training systems must adapt to the new realities of the 21st century"; individuals too, as is made clear, "must adapt to change."<sup>32</sup> Such a stance supports a notion of education that is ultimately exclusive rather than inclusive, for individuals — both children and adults — are not guaranteed access to education. To gain access, individuals must *previously* meet certain requirements, and if they do not, they must adjust themselves *first* to be included in educational paths.

The neoliberal mindset also affects the relationship between teachers and students. In it, this relationship is framed as a kind of vehicle for reaching the right learning outcomes. Educational relationships are no longer a space in which teachers and students are exposed, engaged in a shared projecting. Students, rather, relate to one another in a standardized arena, striving for the same things, competing, in the words of the OECD's statement, for "better jobs" and "better lives."<sup>33</sup> In this sense, the testing regime, performance-based accountability measures, and the economics-based vision of education operate together effectively, reinforcing one another and thus creating a kind of closed loop that renders inconsistent and unfeasible the ability to consider alternatives.

This is why educational neoliberalism, although sophisticated, is but another form of authoritarian teaching — that is, as any form of education that relies on preconceived, unchallengeable aims, values, and purposes. In fact, the purpose of enhancing, creating, and making room for opposition to or critique of society as it stands is wholly outside the neoliberal mindset. Enacting authoritarian teaching does not necessarily entail requiring students to repeat sentences and ideas over and over again; on the contrary, to enact authoritarian teaching it is sufficient

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32. European Commission, *Rethinking Education: Investing in Skills for Better Socio-economic Outcomes* COM (2012) 69/3, November 20, 2012.

33. See the "About" page for PISA on the OECD website: <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/>.

to cut the cord that binds values, aims, and purposes to the concrete practice of education. When aims, values, and purposes are conceived and enacted from above, by institutions or people that impose without discussion and without the necessary degree of uncertainty, authoritarian teaching is put in place.

Thus, educationally speaking, the neoliberal educational commitment to the “right skills... for tomorrow’s economy”<sup>34</sup> and to “student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness”<sup>35</sup> is not just a means by which schooling is increasingly reduced to training for particular skills and the whole range of human potentialities is narrowed down to what is functional in the here and now. Such a commitment is, above all, educationally unfounded. One of the major assumptions of neoliberal educational logic is that individuals, in the end, must adapt themselves to what is required by societal and economic needs, thus transforming themselves and their competencies according to such needs. Education and change are thus conceived as forces from above that shape individuals by providing them with the “right skills” for “successful work ... and life.”<sup>36</sup> Whether this approach is labeled good, unavoidable, or narrow is not important, in my opinion; the problem with this approach is that it is professionally weak. As Dewey states, in education, “purely external direction is impossible. The environment can at most only supply stimuli to call out responses” (*DE*, 30).

Finally, the neoliberal mindset does not allow for competition between or even acknowledgment of different perspectives on society and education; the competition occurs within the system — namely, between schools, teachers, and students — and not between different systems or models of society.

Through a Deweyan lens, we see that neoliberal educational demands are rooted in a logical mistake; they equate the wide, deep, and to some extent undefinable range of students’ possibilities with an abstract model of what student’s skills, knowledge, and desires should be. Education, along with skills, knowledge, and perception, are grounded on experimental and envisioned possibilities that demand hearing, engagement of imagination, and attentiveness in order to grow. They demand a fullness of connections and the enlargement of meanings. Otherwise, they waste away. Importantly, making room for the work of pure possibility actually allows the pursuit of efficiency: the imagination and attitude needed to conceive of a world that differs from the given, from a Deweyan perspective, produce “infinitely more efficient work” than that which results from “a cutting loose from all connections” (*DE*, 345–346). Consequently, I believe that Deweyan

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34. See the video titled “Andreas Schleicher, Director of the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills, on the PISA-based Test for Schools” (November 12, 2014), available at <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/pisa-based-test-for-schools-multimedia.htm>.

35. See the Institute of Education Sciences’ “What Works Clearinghouse” page at <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>.

36. OECD, brochure on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/PISA-trifold-brochure-2014.pdf>.

thought provides a tool for refuting neoliberal educational logic on the basis of its professional and logical weakness above all.

At this point, I should add a caveat regarding the choice to employ Dewey's works to challenge the neoliberal educational mindset. Dewey's aim, as is well known, was never to address education from an abstract, "philosophical" perspective. On the contrary, time and again, Dewey was concerned with the task of understanding education as a "necessity of life," as the title of the first chapter of *Democracy and Education* so powerfully suggests. According to the Deweyan framework, education is connected with the "self-renewing process" of "the living thing" (*DE*, 1–2). He states, "The primary ineluctable facts of the birth and death of each one of the constituent members in a social group determine the necessity of education" (*DE*, 4). Dewey, then, conceived of education as the foundation from which human beings face "the problem of how to engage in life"<sup>37</sup> — an argument that neoliberal supporters will certainly agree with. In employing a Deweyan framework, therefore, we cannot be charged with being removed from reality and uninterested in the concrete circumstances of living. One point I wish to make is that the endeavor of understanding and facing the concrete circumstances of living requires precisely the sense of radical possibility that living entails. I begin by exploring the relationship between intelligence, action, and possibility as a paradigm for education.

#### THE "PRAGMATIC THEORY OF INTELLIGENCE" AS A PARADIGM FOR EDUCATION

In "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy," Dewey, as he draws his essay to a conclusion, defines what "the pragmatic theory of intelligence means" and describes its aims and purposes. This passage presents an analysis of the connection between intelligence, action, and possibility that has far-reaching educational consequences:

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. Action restricted to given and fixed ends may attain great technical efficiency; but efficiency is the only quality to which it can lay claim. Such action is mechanical (or becomes so), no matter what the scope of the preformed end, be it the Will of God or Kultur. But the doctrine that intelligence develops within the sphere of action for the sake of possibilities not yet given is the opposite of a doctrine of mechanical efficiency.<sup>38</sup>

In this passage, presented in plain syntax, we find a dense and deep entanglement of meanings. Several themes cherished by Dewey are developed and connected in a web of significances that unfolds and enriches the meaning of these themes: action, intelligence, experience, purposes and ends, society and mind illuminate one another, thus presenting an open and powerful conception of life. For the sake of clarity, I will analyze each statement in detail, explicating

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37. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 81.

38. Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy", 63.

how the passage reveals a conception of education far removed from educational neoliberalism.

In the first statement, Dewey singles out three questions: the meaning of intelligence, the function of mind, and the role of the ends with respect to experience. This statement also displays what Deweyan pragmatism — in Dewey's words, "the pragmatic theory of intelligence" — means. Dewey states that "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." Here, against any interpretation that seeks to restrict the aims of intelligence and mind to specific functions — such as skills acquisition or human capital development — Dewey affirms that mind's proper scope is to enrich and enlarge one's purposes and ends. Significantly, no single definition of what those ends and purposes should be is provided: enlarging human ends and purposes is a task in its own right, and these ends and purposes are expected to increase in complexity and to fulfill the condition of being new. As David Granger has noted, from a Deweyan perspective, any account of experience should also "increase our ability to liberate and expand the potential meanings of things."<sup>39</sup> By extension, when the possibility of enlarging and enriching the scopes and purposes of living is restricted in advance, as is the case with neoliberalism, intelligence is impoverished as well.

The sphere of human aims, along with the relationship between mind and experience, is further clarified at the end of the sentence, where Dewey states that the function of mind is to free experience "from routine and from caprice." In this statement, Dewey also suggests what a well-rounded, worthy experience should be: something far removed both from repetitive, mechanical actions and habits and from continuous and senseless changes. Here, Dewey warns us that while the new by necessity implies change, it can never be reduced to change alone. In other words, we may well encounter changes that are devoid of newness — precisely the kinds of changes the neoliberal conception of economy seems to suggest.

The second sentence works to deepen and clarify the first. Here, Dewey states that according to the "pragmatic lesson ... the use of thought" is not related to "purposes already given either in the mechanism of the body or in that of the existent state of society." Rather, the use of thought works "to liberate and liberalize action." With action understood as the "*most basic category*" of Deweyan pragmatism,<sup>40</sup> we come to a pivotal point. In Deweyan transactionalism, we come to know something only by means of action — and, indeed, in Deweyan transactionalism, knowledge lies in recognizing the relation between actions and outcomes.<sup>41</sup> For an action to be productive, though, it must be free. It seems to

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39. David Granger, *John Dewey, Robert Pirsig, and the Art of Living: Revisioning Aesthetic Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 7.

40. Gert J. J. Biesta and Nicholas C. Burbules, *Pragmatism and Educational Research* (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 9 (emphasis in original).

41. Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, 194.

me that such freedom must be understood not just negatively — that is, as free of any obstacles or barriers that can block or impede the fulfillment of freedom. Of course, such freedom is a prerequisite for accomplishing an action *as action*. In the description he offers in this passage, however, Dewey brings to the fore a deeper sense of freedom: freedom as openness, as being free *for*, where what this “for” is remains open and indeterminate.

This conception of intelligence as related to freedom has far-reaching educational consequences. It indicates that the human capacity for projecting and freeing experience is always beyond any actualization of this capacity. Put differently, there is always more to experience than we may capture at any given moment; however, such a beyondness of experience is not easily available. The generative power of human experience is something obtained by means of intelligence — that is, it is something that can and should be learned. Only through the intelligent work of thinking and education may we liberate action, thus freeing and releasing experience toward new possibilities.

In this passage, then, Dewey presciently provides a refutation of the current neoliberal educational culture in which the testing regime and human capital theory dovetail with one another to form a conception of education subjugated to external economic needs. According to Dewey’s conception, in contrast, education, in addition to being something capable of autonomously establishing its aims and purposes — or, in Dewey’s words, something having “no end beyond itself,” something that is “its own end” (*DE*, 59) — is also the basis on which action is rendered free, and ends and purposes come to be established as such. This means that schooling — along with the legacy of habits, ways of knowing and behaving that are necessary for inclusion — should also pursue and enhance this experimental attitude that lies at the core of intelligent action and the regeneration of society. Moreover, education and learning should also pursue a genuine experimental attitude in which “experimental” is regarded in its deeper sense of something yet un-experienced, something unknown obtained through “the creative work of the imagination in pointing to the new possibilities.”<sup>42</sup>

The central part of the passage, while helping to clarify what was previously expressed, also works to refute in advance both functionalist views of education and positivist interpretations of Dewey’s *oeuvre*: “Action restricted to given and fixed ends may attain great technical efficiency; but efficiency is the only quality to which it can lay claim. Such action is mechanical (or becomes so), no matter what the scope of the preformed end, be it the Will of God or Kultur.” Here, Dewey’s words are sharp, and he calls against any kind of authoritarianism or totalitarian thought. As Larry Hickman puts it, this assertion is a rejection of “reification of all sorts.”<sup>43</sup> When the aims and purposes of action are already established and there is

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42. *Ibid.*, 312.

43. Larry A. Hickman, *John Dewey’s Pragmatic Technology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 10.

no room for changes or further development, action loses its specific significance, regardless of how high or noble such aims are and what authority dictates those aims. This is because the significance of action also lies in addressing and producing the new, and education reflects exactly such a broad and persistent commitment to newness.

Thus, we may see that Dewey's statement refutes in advance any input-output teaching method — in other words, any method that aims to construe sovereign devices as governing the concrete practice of schooling. To be clear, when policy-makers, teachers, and educators turn to specific test results or supposed societal and economic needs to justify the application of one method or another, not only do they cut at the root of democratic education, betraying the meaning of schooling (as scholars challenging the neoliberal mindset have noted), but they also make a logical and professional mistake, for they submit themselves and education to the potential slowness of a mechanical device.

Now we reach the concluding sentence of the passage, in which "a doctrine of mechanical efficiency" is contrasted with intelligent action: "However, the doctrine that intelligence develops within the sphere of action for the sake of possibilities not yet given is the opposite of a doctrine of mechanical efficiency." It seems to me that this statement, although concerned with explaining the aims and nature of intelligent action, can be taken as a paradigm of what education is about and what the guiding force of education should be, namely, the pursuit "of possibilities not yet given." Paraphrasing Dewey, education (as opposed to mechanical thinking and methods in teaching) develops "within the sphere [and] for the sake of possibilities not yet given" — that is, both the proper cultural medium and the internal task of education entail pointing to what is not already contained within the boundaries of actual interpretations. Dewey's promising and beautiful words entrust education to the open, unpredictable space of what is not yet. In a sense, the rationale for education is the unforeseeable.

#### POSSIBILITY AS RELATED TO CHOICE AND FREEDOM

Thus far, I have analyzed the role intelligence plays in relation to possibility, connecting this role to the aims and purposes of education. In this section, I analyze the role possibility plays with respect to two pivotal educational categories, choice and freedom, in order to illuminate the professional weakness of educational neoliberalism. Let me begin with a passage from *Human Nature and Conduct*, wherein Dewey elucidates the relationship among possibility, freedom, and control:

What we want is possibilities open in the world not in the will, except as will or deliberate activity reflects the world. To foresee future objective alternatives and to be able by deliberation to choose one of them and thereby weight its chances in the struggle for future existence, measures our freedom. ... The question is not what are the antecedents of deliberation and choice, but what are their consequences. What do they do that is distinctive? The answer is that they give us all the control of future possibilities which are open to us. And this control is the crux of our freedom. Without it, we are pushed from behind. With it we walk in the light.<sup>44</sup>

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44. Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, 311.

This passage highlights the role of “possibilities open in the world” as connected to freedom and control, and as opposed to abstract will. On this topic, Dewey’s call is passionate and vibrant. One thing worth noting about the above passage is that the Deweyan endeavor appears to move between two different stances: the first of these is the desire to highlight the openness—even the inexhaustibility—of the possibilities we may find in the world, and the second is the need to pin such possibilities down to an actualization. My point here is not to create a dualism between openness and actualization, which would be senseless. In fact, Dewey specifically highlights the point that possibilities must be “possibilities open in the world not in the will.” Possibilities, when detached from one’s being in the world and the organism–environment connection, are just free-floating fantasies. Additionally, throughout his work, Dewey pursued the dismantling of any form of dualism; according to a Deweyan understanding, as living beings, we continually engage with and, at the same time, produce culture, environments, and knowledge of all kinds. “Dewey construed humans as living creatures who ... seek new enjoyments and renewals in each transaction,” Leonard Waks explains; “They are always on the go, charged by all of their ends.”<sup>45</sup>

Thus, far from offering a dualistic account of the dynamic between choice and possibility, Dewey calls our attention to the fact that, when engaging in deliberation and choice, one should not lose sight of the ever-open territory of possibility, a territory that constantly generates the condition of choice. Otherwise stated, when one loses sight of the power of possibility, one loses sight of freedom and thus of the possibility of deliberation and choice. Of course, freedom is a complicated condition to pursue, both in theory and in practice; indeed, Dewey uses the word “crux” to highlight this difficulty and perhaps even the rending nature of freedom.

This complexity is evident in the second sentence of the passage, where Dewey invokes a kind of logical chain that indicates the “measure” of one’s freedom, a measure signifying that complete freedom is most likely unattainable. This is because freedom always entails dealing with environmental conditions, causing a kind of friction with the context at hand generated by the “struggle for future existence.” The logical chain Dewey sets out starts with foreseeing “future objective alternatives” and proceeds through one’s capacity for deliberation and choice. I contend that for such a process to work, one should always bear in mind and enlarge the space in which “future objective alternatives” arise—that is, the open space of pure possibility.

This is true because if it is undeniable that freedom is pursued through concrete processes whereby many alternatives are restricted to a line of action, then we must bear in mind that any actualization comes from the open territory of being-possible, without which neither the different alternatives nor the line of action pursued

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45. Leonard J. Waks, “John Dewey on Listening and Friendship in School and Society,” *Educational Theory* 61, no. 2 (2011): 191–205.

exist. Put differently, there is always more to the world than our deliberation may capture of it. Choice and deliberation, however necessary they may be, are also partial because the "potency" of "new adjustments" to the world is inexhaustible (*AE*, 17).

Possibilities, according to Dewey, are indeed means of action, both collective and personal; remembering Dewey's famous definition of democracy as "primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (*DE*, 101), the division between the personal and the collective is meaningless. We should also note that such inexhaustibility is not just the ground upon which choice may arise; it is also recreated and reopened by means of choice. To be clear, any choice that is made opens up further space for possibilities, which are both potentially inexhaustible and unpredictable. When one loses sight of this unpredictability, as educational neoliberalism does, education is reduced to a means of meeting external needs, as current criticisms of neoliberalism accurately highlight; furthermore, this failure to value unpredictability represents a professional mistake, for it confuses the open range of possibilities that education entails and produces with what is predictable here and now from a specific perspective. Neoliberalism, then, jeopardizes the very efficacy of prevision because for prevision to work and be useful, we must bear in mind the very unpredictability of educational processes.

Turning to the issue of choice, we may note that, viewed through a Deweyan lens, choice is not only related to unpredictability and limitlessness. Importantly, choice also stands on the open and uncertain terrain of "precarious possibilities." As we learn in *Human Nature and Conduct*, "Choice is an element in freedom and there can be no choice without unrealized and precarious possibilities."<sup>46</sup> What strikes me about the passage under consideration in this section is that what could easily be labeled as two negative features of possibility — namely, precariousness and lack of actualization — are instead the very ground upon which choice may be fulfilled. Moreover, outside of "unrealized and precarious possibilities," choice, simply put, does not exist. Dewey positions both the capacity and the need for choice between two kinds of uncertainties: the precariousness from which choice arises and the unpredictability that choice opens up. Intelligence helps us navigate this in-between space without reducing the process to mechanical deliberation. In addition, it is exactly our capacity to maintain sight of the open, uncertain, and limitless territory of pure possibility while pinning those possibilities down to concrete lines of action that is worth teaching and learning.

Importantly, this uncertainty does not work to undermine educators' responsibility. On the contrary, in taking a Deweyan approach, we are simultaneously involved in and intentionally producing experiences, content, and knowledge of all kinds. This understanding of Dewey's approach does not deny teachers' and educators' commitment and responsibility; rather, it is a relocation — and, perhaps, a broadening — of their function: teachers and educators are one of the starting

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46. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 309.

points for the meaningful growth of students. Moreover, because what such starting points will bring about is fundamentally unpredictable, teachers and educators must carefully think through where, how, when, and whether to place new points of interaction.

Perhaps one of the more interesting elements of Deweyan educational philosophy is that while undermining at its very basis the possibility of finding some linear causality between educators' actions and students' experience, he reinforces both educational endeavor and educational agency. We are continuously called upon to remake our existence, and thus we are continuously called toward the educational work required for such a remaking. If one were to look for a possible "starting point" in Deweyan educational thought, perhaps it can be found in Dewey's concern with and attention to preserving the openness and the uncertainty of the educational endeavor itself and the ever-open realm of possibilities that education engenders. With Dewey, we come to see that human beings are, in a sense, always beyond themselves and beyond their own understanding because their understanding is ever advancing.

Dewey puts uncertainty center stage in another way as well. When introducing his masterpiece, he states that "[l]ife is a self-renewing process through action upon the environment" (*DE*, 2). If we shift the focus of attention from life to what the role of action is, we note that action is the source both of life developing and of the environment's changes. This is to say that every manifestation and form of life — human beings included — springs and develops from action. Bearing in mind that the outcomes of action will never be predictable in all of their features, no matter how much we stop and think, we come to understand why a great part of living will always remain essentially unpredictable and beyond our capacity for inquiry.

Relatedly, in an incidental passage from *Experience and Nature*, we find the following: "interpretation [is] always an imputation of potentiality for some consequence" (*EN*, 188). Behind Dewey's plain and essential language, there is a decisive assertion of the radical uncertainty of human knowing. I wish to draw attention to three words in this quotation: (1) "imputation," (2) "potentiality," and (3) "some consequence." Above all, we have to understand what an imputation is. To impute is to assign a value or a function to something by means of the signs or clues we find when analyzing that thing. Imputation, then, is always indirect and tentative — not by chance, legally speaking, an imputation is something to be verified, ascertained during the trial process by means of debate. Moreover, the imputation Dewey describes is not in reference to a clear, precise issue. Rather, when interpreting, we have "an imputation of *potentiality*" — that is, an indirect inference of something that, in turn, can realize or nullify itself. Moreover, in being potentially also indeterminate, we do not even know what such a something is. In fact, when we attribute a potentiality to an object, we do not always specify the end (the final state, so to speak) of such a potentiality. Potentiality is accordingly a radically open term. In the quotation above, potentiality is described as a "potentiality for some consequence" — that is, a potentiality for something to happen. In other words, it is a potentiality for something we do not yet see

and know. By definition, intelligence — in being oriented toward the future, in being deeply connected to forecasting and imagination — has to do with risk and uncertainty. This is a Deweyan understanding of the knowing act.

As noted earlier, according to Deweyan transactionalism, we only come to know something by means of action — and, indeed, in Deweyan transactionalism, knowledge is defined as recognizing the relationships between actions and outcomes. With this in mind, 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, “thought ... is creative — an incursion into the novel” (*DE*, 186).

Importantly, not only does Dewey emphasize the uncertainty of knowing, but he also works to undermine every final and permanent understanding of living. In *Experience and Nature*, he asserts that the world is an “impressive and irresistible mixture of sufficiencies, tight completenesses, order, recurrences ... and singularities, ambiguities, uncertain possibilities” (*EN*, 47) that is always beyond our comprehension. His point, negatively put, is that understandings are always precarious. Positively put, it is that such a beyondness of the world is, at the very same time, the root of beauty and interest, and, moreover, a reminder against any totalitarian thought. There is always more to world than thinking can capture.

This passage also has important educational relevance. First, when teaching and educating, one has to bear in mind the uncertainty underpinning any act one accomplishes and puts to the fore. This call for humility works to undermine the kind of straightforwardness that pervades the learning culture students experience in high-stakes testing classrooms, one in which there are predefined sets of skills that students have to acquire in order to meet predefined changes. Second, with change and uncertainty located at the “vital” root of the world — and of education — the aims of learning are different. Learning, in other words, should also point toward uncertainty and even unpredictability. I do not wish to underestimate that learning also has to do with acquiring certain content and skills, without which even socialization and the introduction of newborns in a given culture and society would be impossible — in other words, learning also requires memorization and repetition of gestures. However, the problem concerns the nature and the place such activities should have in learning processes. Following this path, learning has eminently to do with unexpected situations.

Teachers must be aware of what students are up to, and thus must exercise the necessary degree of control over classroom activities. They must be capable and competent, but the discussion should not be limited to the abilities and knowledge they need to use in order to master situations, for situations, in the Deweyan framework, are always-already behind and beyond knowledge, with knowledge being dependent on situation.<sup>47</sup> Put in slightly different terms, even if teachers

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47. Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, 68.

were capable of mastering and controlling all the features of educational situations — which, as I have argued, is theoretically and practically impossible — this would not be the most desirable educational situation, for we would lose the opportunity to make room for newness — what Dewey calls “a new birth in the world” (*AE*, 267). Instead, we would merely be on the right track for achieving something preestablished.

Dewey, then, repositions educational, intentional agency away from control and mastery and in the direction of growth and openness. Thus, Deweyan educational thought is also a call against every possible totalitarian thought, and his point is at once an educational, existential, epistemological, and ethico-political one.

My contention here, however, is that without the commitment to such a newness and uncertainty, learning itself makes little sense. Of course, children and adults alike may well learn and acquire this or that skill, content, or curricular subject. They may well become competent and capable of mastering this or that activity. That said, the very activity to imagine beyond the given, and thus to challenge given realities, necessarily lies outside protocols and given frameworks. This is why schooling should also, at some point, suspend itself precisely in order to achieve itself. This, of course, is not to say that schooling should not have standards defining what counts as good practices. Agreement among teachers is essential, as well as a shared sense of what the aims of common work are. Still, in order to pursue such a newness — or, in Deweyan terms, such “a new birth in the world” (*AE*, 267) — we also need teaching practices that do not define in advance their own boundaries and rules. Of course, as noted previously, in this we find a kind of paradox: such practices put both teachers and students in the condition of not knowing whether they are able to achieve something at all, for sometimes it may be difficult even to define the status and the rules under which activities should operate. Without such a temporary suspension of achievement, however, we run the risk of achieving only what has already been achieved. Thus, both teachers and students risk being coerced to repeat what is already given; we run the risk of losing the very possibility for newness because the source of newness is the kind of experimental attitude that does not know its own nature.

Even the “greater diversity of stimuli,” the “liberation of powers,” the “widening of the area of shared concerns, and the liberation of a greater diversity of personal capacities” that Dewey calls for in order to enact democracy have an inherent connection to unpredictability and risk (*DE*, 101). In making education predictable in all of its features, we run the risk of erasing its deep sense — and also the deep sense of democracy and togetherness. If schooling has to do with the enhancement and promotion of new modes of subjectivity and new ways of being together, such an experimental attitude should be put center stage. And such a commitment to new modes of subjectivity and togetherness is highly relevant today, as we are currently confronted with a severe narrowing of educational possibilities.

Educationally, if schooling is to be more than the place where given contents are learned in order to manage given tasks, then it is necessary to make space for

unstructured activities — that is, space that allows for new experiences. Moreover, for learning to occur, teachers must create something that is, to some extent, not knowable in advance — something they cannot predict and control in all of its features.

A teaching practice committed to achieving these goals would require ongoing attention to students' behaviors, habits, knowledge, and emotions. Importantly, on this interpretation, teachers' actions become relocated within students' experience rather than standing about or outside that experience. Of course, this is neither a denial of the different roles teachers and students have nor praise for an inconsistent — and even irresponsible — model of teaching that erases the asymmetrical dynamic between teachers and students. Rather, following David Hansen, this practice requires paying attention to “what can be called ‘the space between.’ This space resides between the self-that-was and the self-in-formation ... between the way of life that had been treated as given and the way of life now seen as art-full.”<sup>48</sup>

This endeavor, as Hansen implies, requires teachers to be sensitive to the subtlety and even the ineffability of students' experience. Of course, this is a difficult task that is impossible to measure and difficult even to evaluate. It is thus an attitude of care and attention and an endeavor in which teachers dwell rather than perform. It is a matter of ongoing empathy, dialogic interaction, and interpretation that requires patience, tolerance of frustration, and even endurance; an attitude that involves hearing rather than asserting, hanging back, and bracketing one's own presuppositions as much as possible rather than stating in advance what awaits, as educational neoliberalism does more often than not.<sup>49</sup> When dwelling in such work, success, ranking, and competition — the watchwords of the neoliberal educational framework — are not helpful. Furthermore, such work does not guarantee its own success in that it seeks to interpret what is to some extent invisible.<sup>50</sup> When one loses sight of the open and uncertain terrain of students' possibilities, though, teaching is reduced to a rather meaningless activity limited to the training and reproduction of skills and capacities required by what society, according to some major educational agencies, is supposed to be.<sup>51</sup>

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48. David T. Hansen, “Dewey and Cosmopolitanism,” *Education & Culture* 25, no. 2 (2009): 126–140.

49. See, for instance, authoritative statements from leading members of the OECD, such as Angel Gurría. As one example, the web page for the video series *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education* includes the following statement: “PISA tests provide a mirror to all countries that demonstrates what is possible” (<http://learningisopen.org/oecd/>).

50. Andrea English, “Dialogic Teaching and Moral Learning: Self-Critique, Narrativity, Community, and ‘Blind Spots,’” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 50, no. 2 (2016): 160–176.

51. See, for instance, OECD's rhetoric regarding evaluating whether “boys and girls [are] equally prepared for life” and the similarly totalizing idea of measuring “whether 15-year-olds around the world are well-prepared to participate in society” ([www.oecd.org/edu/school/programme-for-international-student-assessment-pisa/equally-prepared-for-life-how-15-year-old-boys-and-girls-perform-in-school.htm](http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/programme-for-international-student-assessment-pisa/equally-prepared-for-life-how-15-year-old-boys-and-girls-perform-in-school.htm)). See also What Works Clearinghouse's narrative about “positive action” and “step to success” as educational standards (<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>).

If we wish to provide a contrast to the neoliberal educational endeavor, the Deweyan account of possibility is a powerful tool. Education, for Dewey, is an inexhaustible activity, one in which we have to put imagination to work, that is, to think and act otherwise. As Dewey states, "Men ... used their imaginations to conceive a world different from that in which their forefathers had put their trust" (*DE*, 335).

The issue of inexhaustibility as it relates to imagination and meaning is the focus of a passage from *Democracy and Education*, at the beginning of chapter 16:

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. (*DE*, 243)

This passage deserves close attention. First, it is worth noting that Dewey does not identify action itself as the focal point of human life and development; rather, he draws our attention to the meanings that such an action "may assume." The use of the verb "may" is also highly significant. I believe that this verb represents an ever-present potentiality of further meanings; meanings, from a Deweyan perspective, are always open to further creation and interpretation and thus are potentially unlimited. This is not to say that meanings are independent of any context or intention, which would make no sense. Meaning is not a matter of input–output or mechanical efficiency. In education, meaning is something to expand by means of imagination rather than something to simply understand and align with — and therein lies another weakness of educational neoliberalism.

This interpretation of meanings is reinforced by the Deweyan dismantling of any fixed essence,<sup>52</sup> a dismantling that goes to the very roots of human understanding, namely, perception. In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey, in the course of discussing what it means to assign a meaning to a thing, states that "To perceive is to acknowledge unattained possibilities; it is to refer the present to consequences, apparition to issue, and thereby to behave in deference to the connections of events" (*EN*, 182). This statement repositions perception away from any iconic theory of it and toward a dynamic, embedded understanding that takes as its starting point the shifting relationship between past, present, and future, on the one hand, and the subject–environment embeddedness, on the other. One's perceptions, far from constituting a more or less accurate photograph of the world, are projections of what the organism makes in its environment in the temporal continuity of past, present, and future. The substance of objects rests upon what those objects mean in terms of their possibilities. Otherwise stated, the perception of an object arises from what one wants to and can do with it, and since what one can do varies depending on who one is and what one wants, perception varies as well. From this point of view, asking for a right, correct, or unchangeable

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52. Jim Garrison, "Realism, Deweyan Pragmatism, and Educational Research," *Educational Researcher* 23, no. 1 (1994): 5–14; and Hickman, *John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology*, 10.

perception makes no sense because differences in perception are not just due to differences in sensory organs. Differences and even variety in perceptions depend on differences and variety in doings and aims, for perception relies on possibility. The well-known Deweyan demolition of any essentialist philosophy also passes through a new understanding of the very basis of experience and knowledge — perception — that, far from being a matter of mirroring and representation, is a matter of open, ongoing embeddedness in environment.

#### BREAKING CONSTRICTIONS, EXPANDING EVENTS

In this section, I analyze a major feature of intelligence as conceived by Dewey, specifically, intelligence as the means by which we expand events in open and even unpredictable ways, thus breaking “constrictions that hem us in and ... burdens that oppress” (*AE*, 346). Through this understanding of intelligence, I contend, the possible roles of education are recast. I start my argument with a passage from *Human Nature and Conduct*:

But intelligence treats events as moving, as fraught with possibilities, not as ended, final. In forecasting their possibilities, the distinction between better and worse arises. Human desire and ability cooperates with this or that natural force according as to whether this or that eventuality is judged better. We do not use the present to control the future. We use the foresight of the future to refine and expand present activity. In this use of desire, deliberation and choice, freedom is actualized.<sup>53</sup>

This passage is devoted to deepening the question of freedom as related to intelligence. Although it clearly states that the agent for actualizing freedom is intelligence, I argue that the ground on which Dewey develops his understanding — the premise, in a sense, of his discourse about freedom — is the open space of possibilities surrounding human living, without which neither intelligence nor freedom are possible. It is crucial to bear in mind that freedom, according to Dewey, is the basis of our conception of communication, democracy, and growth. In this sense, we may even say that Dewey's *oeuvre* is a continuous endeavor to understand and expand freedom and its conditions.

We may note this in the first two sentences of the above passage, where we learn that “intelligence treats events as moving, as fraught with possibilities, not as ended, final” and that “[i]n forecasting their possibilities, the distinction between better and worse arises.” This is to say that the office of intelligence lies not only in treating “events ... as fraught with possibilities”; more radically, intelligence may exist only insofar as an abundance of possibilities exists. In contrast, in a world made up of “ended” and “final” events, intelligence would disappear. This is true because the very condition of intelligent thinking and behavior — specifically, the possibility for things to be otherwise — would disappear. Importantly, “the distinction between better and worse” — that is, the condition in which any organism can survive and flourish — arises in a world “fraught with possibilities.” This fullness of possibilities, then, is the proper terrain upon which intelligence may attend its own office.

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53. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 313.

It should be highlighted that intelligence is not just the means by which we make decisions about the possibilities open before us; in fact, Dewey states that “intelligence *treats* events as moving, as fraught with possibilities, not as ended, final.”<sup>54</sup> Consistent with Deweyan transactionalism, events in themselves are neither moving nor final; they become moving or final when they are attended by intelligence. In other words, the specific quality of an event, its finality or movement, depends on how we address it. Thus, Dewey’s statement must be taken as advice regarding what the office of intelligence should be. Intelligence is not just the means by which decisions are made and deliberations are conducted; intelligence also works to expand events in open and unpredictable ways toward an inexhaustible fullness of meanings.

We must bear in mind that throughout his work, Dewey challenged any representational theory of intelligence and consciousness, that is, any theory in which “consciousness is like the eye running over a field of ready-made objects, or a light which illuminates now this and now that portion of a given field” (*EN*, 308). Thus, to the extent that we regard the office of intelligence as limited to discovering or choosing among given alternatives, we are precisely within the paradigm that Dewey challenged because the aim of intelligence is not to unearth preceding conditions or to discover the “first beginning” of perceived objects and situations. Instead, the office of intelligence is future-oriented and prospective, which is one of the consequences of Dewey’s shift from philosophy as analytical thinking to philosophizing as pragmatic transactionalism. In this sense, intelligence is not so much about discovering but about advancing possibilities, knowledge, and education.

This interpretation is reinforced by the passage’s final sentences, in which Dewey overturns both scientific and philosophical understanding of the continuity of the past, present, and future. Here, we read that human beings “do not use the present to control the future”; rather, they “use the foresight of the future to refine and expand present activity.” In other words, the present is made possible, refined, and expanded according to the future possibilities involved in it. Even ideals are to be understood in terms of the possibilities they entail. As Dewey asserts in *Art as Experience*, “Ideals express possibilities, but they are genuine ideals only insofar as they are possibilities of what is now moving. Imagination can set them free from their encumbrances and project them as a guide in attention to what now exists” (*AE*, 112). It is worth noting that, once again, Dewey does not pay attention to what has already happened as he attempts to forecast and orient what will happen; instead, under the aegis of imagination, the future possibilities involved in the present become the guide for understanding “what now exists.”

Dewey returns to this view in the concluding pages of *Art as Experience*, where we learn that “A sense of possibilities that are unrealized and that might be realized are, when they are put in contrast with actual conditions, the most

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54. *Ibid.*, (emphasis added).

penetrating 'criticism' of the latter that can be made. It is by a sense of possibilities opening before us that we become aware of constrictions that hem us in and of burdens that oppress" (*AE*, 346). In this regard, it is crucial to understand that the contrast between "actual conditions" and a "sense of [unrealized] possibilities" is not only necessary to open future paths to pursue; it is also the basis for penetrating "actual conditions." Thus, possibility and the openness of meanings are the very conditions by which we are able to understand the present. Bearing in mind that such openness is exactly what the neoliberal educational mindset denies, we see that neoliberalism also denies the very condition for understanding and penetrating the present. Specifically, neoliberalism, in putting openness at risk, simultaneously jeopardizes the condition necessary for any intelligent comprehension of the present.

Furthermore, possibilities provide the force and the push to transform actual conditions, breaking "constrictions that hem us in" and liberating the self and the community from "burdens that oppress." This clear and vibrant Deweyan ethical call stands upon the open terrain of the "possibilities opening before us." This is the case because, from a Deweyan perspective, future possibilities are the means by which the present is shaped and changed. According to Dewey, "To the being fully alive, the future is not ominous but a promise; it surrounds the present as a halo. It consists of possibilities that are felt as a possession of what is now and here. In life that is truly life, everything overlaps and merges" (*AE*, 18). Perhaps no philosopher has expressed in such a clear manner how new possibilities constitute the leading force of the present. Deweyan thought helps us to see that, despite its rhetoric about continuous change and endless transformation, educational neoliberalism is conservative at its core. In current times, when education is narrowed down and stretched between the menace of rising populism and the cage of the neoliberal apparatus, the Deweyan call for "the wonderful possibilities involved in an imaginative experimentation with things" seems to me of invaluable educational significance.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, we see that Dewey conceives education and change as tensions passing through individuals and communities, moving forces that have their roots in the free sharing of one's projects, desires, and aspirations. In this sense, to paraphrase Dewey, education might best be characterized as "a venture into the unknown" (*AE*, 272), one in which the self is pushed to leap beyond the known and the safe, and toward the broader territory of the uncertain that surrounds given paths. Accordingly, education is directed toward "unattained possibilities" (*EN*, 182) as its own proper aim. Imagining and shaping a "future which is the projection of the desirable in the present and to invent the instrumentalities of its realization"<sup>56</sup> is, from a Deweyan perspective, the educational endeavor *par excellence*.

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55. Dewey, *Interest and Effort in Education*, 94.

56. Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy," 69.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that in Dewey's philosophy, possibility is the basis of and the driving force by which a number of issues arise. Possibility, in Dewey's writings, is the grounds on which choices are made and freedom is concretely explored. Possibility is also an essential element of any action one wishes to accomplish — as Dewey states, "To have a mind to do a thing is to foresee a future possibility" (*DE*, 120). Possibility is the basis on which the present is refined and expanded and ideals are expressed and evaluated. Possibility also is the condition for analyzing, penetrating, and challenging given realities and is the basis for experimentation and feeling. Even perception relies on the work of possibility, and intelligence stands on the existence of the possibilities open before us. In sum, from a Deweyan perspective, possibility is the condition through which a human being may be "fully alive" (*AE*, 18).

I have also argued that by means of a Deweyan understanding of the relationship between possibility, intelligence, and education, we may challenge educational neoliberalism on the basis of more than its narrowness and lack of democracy. When analyzed through a Deweyan lens, neoliberalism shows, above all, professional weakness, narrowness, and a lack of intelligence. This is true for "unattained" (*EN*, 182) and "wonderful possibilities"<sup>57</sup> and the expansion of meanings that is essential for the exercise of intelligence and for education to happen. If we understand education according to the role that possibility may play in it, we find a continuous expansion of meanings, activities, knowledge, perceptions, environments, and relationships.

In this regard, it is meaningful that in his masterpiece *Democracy and Education*, when he speaks of education and growth, Dewey does not give a definition of what growth and education are except to say that they work to reinforce, fulfill, and enlarge one another. In fact, we are told that "[s]ince in reality there is nothing to which growth is relative save more growth, there is nothing to which education is subordinate save more education" and that "[s]ince growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself" (*DE*, 60, 62). We learn that "[g]rowing is ... a continuous leading into the future" and that "the result of the educative process is capacity for further education" (*DE*, 65, 79). Finally, we learn that "the aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education or that the object of future possibilities and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth" (*DE*, 117). In a sense, when reading Dewey's statements about education, we find ourselves chasing the ever-expanding circle of education–growth–more education.<sup>58</sup>

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57. Dewey, *Interest and Effort in Education*, 94.

58. I am indebted to Michael Glassman for the reference to "circle" and "chasing" as connected to Dewey's writings; see Michael Glassman, "Running in Circles: Chasing Dewey," *Educational Theory* 54, no. 3 (2004): 314–341. Both the circling movement and the helical nature of Deweyan accounts of experience have also been noted by Chris Higgins in his article "A Question of Experience: Dewey and Gadamer on Practical Wisdom." There, he states that Dewey displays "a conception of human experience

Dewey, then, left the question of what education is and entails radically open by locating it in the space of radical, pure possibility. The Deweyan endeavor, in a sense, is not just concerned with specifying what education, growth, and freedom are and entail, but also with *not* specifying what education, growth, and freedom are and entail. "Widen[ing] the meaning-horizon" and thus "add[ing] to the meaning of experience, and ... increas[ing] ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" is, in fact, the radically open definition of education that Dewey left us (*DE*, 89–91). In challenging a long-standing tradition that views education as a means of achieving something already determined — a conception reiterated by neoliberal ideology — Dewey conceived of education as an end in itself, something that stands on its own terrain. Additionally, education is something embedded in the unpredictable space of pure possibility. Education, in this sense, addresses the activity of producing ends, with the view that "Ends are, in fact, literally endless, forever coming into existence as new activities occasion new consequences."<sup>59</sup> Realizing such "endless ends" outside of any "fixed, self-enclosed finalities"<sup>60</sup> may tentatively be considered our current educational task.

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as running in circles, both vicious and productive. Experience may spiral outward in breadth or become routinised and pinched." Chris Higgins, "A Question of Experience: Dewey and Gadamer on Practical Wisdom," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 44, no. 2–3 (2010): 310–333.

59. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 231.

60. *Ibid.*

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