The Life and Works of Alice Chipman Dewey from 1909-1919

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Abstract:

Much of what has been written about the life and works of Alice Chipman Dewey (1858-1927) involved her relationship to her husband, John Dewey, and her work as one of the founders of the University of Chicago Laboratory School where she served as a teacher, the developer of curriculum, and the principal (Durst, 2010; Wolfe, 2000). Much less is known about Alice Chipman Dewey during the years 1909-1919. In the second decade of the 20th century, Alice was involved in political, social, and educational endeavors. The purpose of this case study is to describe Alice Chipman Dewey's life and works during this period, which have been hidden or, at least, underreported in the literature. This article is dedicated to Harriet K. Cuffaro on the occasion of her 85th birthday. **Key Words:** Harriet Alice (née Chipman) Dewey (1858-1927), John Dewey (1859-1952), learning by doing.

INTRODUCTION

John Dewey's biographer, Jay Martin (2002) specified the educator, Colonel Francis Parker appended the phrase "learning to do by doing" (p. 100) to education. Parker (1883) pointed out that it represented old European educational idealism represented by Czech educator John Amos Comenius (1592-1670) who introduced learning to do by doing teaching approaches. Parker (1883) quoted Comenius famous words, "Let things that have to be done be learned by doing them" (p. 22). In contrast to Jay Martin, Martin Stormzand (1924) found a parallel phrase and method was part and parcel of Pestalozzi's teaching schemes. Indeed, Pestalozzi (1827) indicated that his very first educational rule was "to teach always by Things rather than by Words" (p. 122). Samuel Burr (1935), however, ascribed another very similar phrase implicating alike teaching methods to philosopher and Parker devotee John Dewey (1859-1952). He and his daughter Evelyn Dewey (1889-1965) used the slogan learning by doing and explicated its meaning in their Schools of To-Morrow (1915):

Abstract ideas are hard to understand; the child is never quite sure whether he really understands or not. Allow him to act out the idea and it becomes real to him, or the lack of understanding is shown in what is done. Action is the test of comprehension. This is simply another way of saying that learning by doing is a better way to learn than by listening (p. 120).

Burr (1935) more or less dated the start of *learning by* doing teaching methods in the United States as 1896, when Harriet Alice (née Chipman) Dewey (1858-1927) and her husband John founded University Elementary School at the University of Chicago better known as Laboratory School, or Dewey School, or just Lab School. Alice directed the school until 1904 when the Dewey family moved from Chicago to New York where John began work at Columbia University. Alice Chipman Dewey biographer, Sam Stack Jr. (2009) described Alice's work at the Lab School, and also reported that she and daughter Evelyn met Maria Montessori in Rome, Italy in 1914. Stack explained, "Dewey biographers have tended to Alice...until [Alice and John's] trip to Japan and China, from 1919-1921. This tends to imply Alice was less than active; more of a recluse but that is far from the case" (p. 31). However, he failed to report a fiveyear gap between 1914 and 1919 concerning Alice's life and works. The purpose of this article is to answer the question, "What exactly was Alice's place in the history of education during the second decade in the 20th century?"

This article addresses new light on the 1909-1919 work and accomplishments of Alice Chipman Dewey.

Gaps in the Life and Works of Harriet Alice (*née* Chipman) Dewey

Burr (1935) distinguished three 'learning by doing' educational corner stones. First, progressive educators expect to find purposeful physical and mental *activity* on the part of students. Second, they recognize the value of vivid educative *experiences*, for instance through field trips. Third, schools exist for

students. Burr found these corner stones mirrored John Dewey's philosophy that was developed by Alice and John Dewey at the Laboratory School of the University of Chicago. Even though Alice was the school's principal, 1901-1904, she never published a history of the school and/or its curriculum. And although she wrote "The Place of the Kindergarten" (1903) for The Elementary School Teacher, the article did not in any way address her work at, or the history of the school. Between 1896 and 1900, John Dewey on the other hand issued numerous small texts in The *University Record* from which the school's developing curriculum — and to a certain extent also its history can be inferred. In 1899, he published The School and Society examining the school. Finally, in 1900, he brought out texts on the school in the nine volumes of The Elementary School Record, booklets edited by him and Lab School teacher of history Laura L. Runyon (Primary Education, 1900). (Note that Dewey's The Child and the Curriculum (1902) does not in a strict sense address Lab School and its history.) Runyon (1900) separately issued an article on the school. At that time, however, interest from the educational community was negligible. Few independent reports appeared in the media (e.g., American Kitchen Magazine, 1900; School Education, 1901; Tough, 1900). The general anticipation was that Lab School "would [not] last long, or that it would [not] teach any important lessons" (Hinsdale & Whitney, 1900, p. 98).

Stack Jr.'s (2009) biographical article presented scant knowledge of Alice Chipman Dewey's work and accomplishments throughout the period 1904-1919. He explained that she was depressed for several years after the death of her son Gordon in September 1904. Nonetheless, she began work again in 1907, teaching "a course in elementary education at Teachers College" (p. 31). Hall (1998) clarified that she actually taught at the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences for Non-Residents. "She encouraged teachers to become astute observers of children and then use what they learned about children's ways of thinking to create new ways of teaching" (p. 131). Martin (2002) further explained that she taught the course only once.

Next, Stack Jr. referred to Alice's interest in Montessori education. She especially valued the work of Margaret Naumburg, friend of the family, who had roomed with Evelyn during her study at Barnard College, and who in 1913 attended the first International Montessori Teacher Training Course in Rome, Italy. Subsequent to her return from Europe, Naumburg and a friend began offering a Montessori class at Lillian Wald's Henry Street Settlement in Manhattan's Lower East Side (Staring, Bouchard, & Aldridge, 2014). Stack Jr. (2009) revealed that Alice and Evelyn vacationed in Europe in 1913-1914, observing instruction given in various Montessori schools and meeting Maria Montessori in person on

January 31, 1914. They did not, however, seem impressed by Dr. Montessori. Stack Jr. remained silent about Alice's activities during the next five years.

Hall (1998) explained that Alice was a campaigner *suffragette* in 1910-1911 and was Vice President of the National College Equal Suffrage League of New York. As Vice President, Alice Chipman Dewey invited African American women to her NYC apartment to learn about woman suffrage. She also wrote a letter to the editor of *New York Times* defending college education for women (see: A. C. Dewey, 1915). Similar to Stack Jr., Hall remained silent about Alice's life and works until 1919.

New light on Alice Chipman Dewey's Life and Works

Contrary to popular belief, Alice was *exceptionally* active, politically, socially as well as educationally, during the second decade of the 20th century. Further investigations of Alice Chipman Dewey revealed new light on her activities during this decade.

First, it is worthy of note that both biographies of Alice Chipman Dewey cited above (Hall, 1998; Stack Jr., 2009) failed to mention that before the start of Alice and Evelyn's voyage to Europe in 1913, Alice, from 1909-1913, worked as Manager of the State Hospital for the Care of Crippled and Deformed Children at Haverstraw, NY (New York Tribune, 1910c; New York Times, 1913; Sun, 1927). Governor Charles E. Hughes (1910, p. 204) originally appointed her on April 15, 1909. Since Alice had been reappointed by Governor William Sulzer (1914, p. 523) in March 1913 for a term to expire February 1920, she began working again as the hospital's Manager after her return from her European holiday, in 1914. In 1919, when Alice and John embarked on their two-year trip to Japan and China, Governor Alfred E. Smith (1920) reported that Anastatia P. B. Redmond succeeded Alice as the hospital's Manager because Alice's "office vacated pursuant to law" (p. 308).

As early as 1909, Alice Chipman Dewey was also a member of the Collegiate Equal Suffrage League of New York State. She was their Corresponding Secretary (*Evening Post*, 1909). In 1910, she became Vice President (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1910; *New York Tribune*, 1910b). Interestingly, her husband John was a frequent speaker at their conferences. Over the years, the media regularly reported Alice's contributions to female suffrage (see, for instance: *New York Tribune*, 1910a; *Sun*, 1909; *New York Tribune*, 1915; *Washington Herald*, 1915a-b; *Washington Times*, 1915). Apart from the fact that the work ought to be characterized as civil education, schooling African American women about woman suffrage (see above, and: *New York Times*, 1911)

undoubtedly was well-respected, edifying work outside school, college, and university's walls.

Long-Islander (1912) and Brooklyn Daily Eagle (1912a) reported Alice Chipman Dewey, resident of Huntington, New York was eligible for School Board service in the Huntington School District. It appears that in 1912, Alice also worked for the Columbia University Extension Board, since both newspapers quoted a letter written by the Huntington Political Equality League, stating, "Mrs. Dewey...is specially qualified for this position, being an enthusiastic and experienced educator as well as the mother of several children. She and her husband are identified with the work of Columbia College, he as Professor of Philosophy, and she as a member of the University Extension Board." Although Alice, "herself a writer and an expert in pedagogy," received 56 votes out of 588, mainly from "suffragettes" she was, obviously, not elected (Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 1912b).

In 1914, after she had been added to the Advisory Council of the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage (*Washington Herald*, 1914a), Alice Chipman Dewey as member of the Union's New York Board attended the August 29-30 Newport national conference (*Evening News*, 1914; *Washington Herald*, 1914b; *Washington Times*, 1914). In 1916, however, she resigned from all Board duties to join the Woodrow Wilson Independent League (*Eugene Daily Guard*, 1916). As a consequence the Women's Bureau of the National Democratic Committee invited her to speak at the October 12, 1916, Wilson Dinner at the New York City McAlpin Hotel (*Evening Telegram*, 1916).

Even though Alice's political work was not specifically related to education, other activities during 1916 and 1917 did involve educational endeavors. Specifically, it is not widely known that Alice Chipman Dewey promoted the so-called Gary Plan to address public school overcrowding by class reorganization implemented by William Wirt of Gary, Indiana, which school reformers proposed implementing in New York City public schools. In March 1916, Alice became a member of a committee of one hundred women who in April 1916 would organize into the Gary School League propagandizing restructuring of overcrowded public schools (Tanenbaum, 1916). Among the League's officers were Public Education Association of the City of New York worker Lucy Sprague Mitchell (married to Columbia University scholar Wesley Mitchell) and Alice Chipman Dewey. While Alice was elected Chairman of the Legislative Committee, Sprague Mitchell became Chairman of the enlarged scope of the organization (Dobbs Ferry Register, 1916; New York Times, 1916).

Two months later, in May 1916, on the heels of receiving a substantial inheritance, Sprague Mitchell

and others founded the Bureau of Educational independent Experiments, educational an clearinghouse and research organization. The Bureau almost immediately launched an exhibition on Wirt's Gary Plan. The Bureau firmly supported Gary Plan principles and the Gary School League. And John Dewey promoted Wirt's Gary Plan; his former student William Wirt headed the reorganizing of inner-city public schools according to his Gary Plan, also known as the Wirt Plan. Dewey and Wirt served as Bureau's honorary members. Evelyn Dewey was one of the Bureau's twelve charter members. It is apparent: mother, father, and daughter Dewey were seriously involved advising the reorganization of congested New York City public schools through Wirt's Gary Plan. Friends of the Dewey family, like Randolph Bourne and Agnes de Lima, joined the crusade (Staring 2013).

By the end of 1916, Head of the Public Education Association Howard W. Nudd issued *The Status of the Kindergarten in the New York Public Schools*, a report compiled by him in cooperation with a committee of representative members of civic organizations highly critical of the comings and goings of the public school Kindergartens as organized a year before by the New York City Board of Education (*Evening Post*, 1916). The committee included a member of the Committee on Education of the Woman's City Club, Alice Chipman Dewey (see also: *Sun*, 1915b). Regrettably, this report is missing.

In 1917, Alice Chipman Dewey was an uncompromising advocate of the financial and other features of the Lockwood-Tallett State Kindergarten Bill. One newspaper even declared she was among "the most militant proponents in a special committee" campaigning for endorsement of the bill (*Sun*, 1917b). Furthermore, it seems, nearly 60-years-old activist *suff* Alice Chipman Dewey was still in force in 1917, serving to put in order the Sixth Annual Suffrage Convention of the Second Assembly District of Suffolk County, blending woman suffrage questions with war efforts of women (*e.g.*, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1917; *Long-Islander*, 1917).

Alice was also socially active during this decade. She was a welcome guest at New York City social gatherings — unquestionably in her own right, but also as spouse of prominent Columbia University professor John Dewey (see, for instance: *New York Press*, 1913; *New York Tribune*, 1908, 1909, 1912, 1913; *Sun*, 1912, 1913a-b, 1915a, 1917a).

Early in 1919, due to John Dewey's sabbatical leave, Alice and John left for Japan; later that year they travelled on to China. Alice and John would not return to the United States until 1921. In 1920, daughter Evelyn would edit and publish their letters from Japan and China. After her homecoming from China, while immediately resuming her active political life (*e.g.*, *New York Tribune*, 1921), Alice Chipman Dewey

(1921) wrote an article on Chinese women for the *New York Tribune*, which has not been previously referenced, except by Staring (2013).

1917 Memoirs

Throughout 1917, Alice was busy writing her memoirs of Lab School. Until today, surprisingly, no more than a few books and monographs have been written on the subject of the history of Lab School. These include more recent publications, such as *Dewey's Laboratory School: Lessons for Today*, by Laurel Tanner (1997) and *Women Educators in the Progressive Era: The Women Behind Dewey's Laboratory School*, by Anne Durst (2010). The most important source, however, is *The Dewey School*, compiled by Katherine Camp Mayhew and her sister Anna Camp Edwards. Mayhew and Edwards (1936) denoted that they had drawn upon "writings of Mr. and Mrs. Dewey, and those of alumni and friends of the school" (p. *viii*). They explicated,

The school was deeply indebted to Mrs. Alice C. Dewey for her exceptional insight in solving many of [the school's] problems. She also collected and preserved a large part of the source materials. Mrs. Dewey's death in 1927 made impossible her plan to write the history of the school in collaboration with Mrs. Mayhew. Following her death, the authors undertook the work at Mr. Dewey's request and gratefully acknowledge their debt to Mrs. Dewey (p. *viii*).

These remarks may seem at least a little awkward when positioned in the light of the fact that minutes of diverse committee meetings of the Bureau of Educational Experiments (BEE) in the New York City's Bank Street College of Education Archives suggest that Alice in 1917 was actually writing her memoirs of her Lab School period *ten years before* her death in 1927, and that she intended to publish them in 1918!

Early in 1917, the Bureau of Educational Experiments had invited her to speak before Bureau members on the work of Lab School (Minutes Executive Committee, BEE, 01-19-1917). Alice, in all probability, delivered her speech not much later, because minutes of a mid-February Bureau meeting show that the Bureau approached her to suggest writing her Lab School memoirs, adding that while a secretary during a two weeks trial period was expected to divide her time between Mrs. Dewey and other duties, "Mrs. Dewey's work to have precedence" — indicating that secretarial work was offered by the Bureau to assist Alice. In addition, "It was

recommended that Mrs. Dewey be asked if the Bureau may publish her book on the Laboratory School as a Bureau Publication" (Minutes Executive Committee, BEE, 02-13-1917). By the end of October 1917, Bureau minutes indicate that Alice's manuscript was progressing. "It was moved that [a Bureau member] discuss with Mrs. Dewey a plan for work upon her book" (Minutes Department of Teaching Experiments, BEE, 10-29-1917). Next, in spite of this, all later minutes of Bureau committee meetings remain silent on the subject of Alice's imminent book.

Thomas Dalton (2002) cited the transcript of a 1962 Lucy Sprague Mitchell oral history, indicating a probable *raison d'être* for a *cordon of silence* surrounding Alice Chipman Dewey:

Intrigued by [BEE initiatives] but sensing a lack of focus, Alice Dewey tried to assert her own leadership in 1917 by urging [Head of the BEE] Lucy [Sprague] Mitchell to adopt a more systematic approach. She recommended that the Bureau staff consult and use her records from the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago for ideas as to how to reorganize and refocus Bureau activities. But Alice underestimated Lucy's stubborn determination as Lucy abruptly declined (p. 97).

Alice Chipman Dewey's manuscript has been missing since 1917. Did her notes survive? Is her manuscript lost forever? Did the conflict between Alice and Lucy Sprague Mitchell possibly form a motive for her and John's trip to Japan in 1919? Was it a motive in addition to the conceivably strictly guarded intention to 'create time' to save her marriage — given that John had had an affair with young émigré author Anzia Yezierska (Staring, 1994)? Was it a reason in addition to the guarded motivation to escape the United States for the fact that John had, in 1918, emotionally hurt Randolph Bourne twice — his former student and good friend of his daughter Evelyn; had he seen no option to set the record straight before Bourne died during the Spanish influenza epidemic in December 1918 (Staring, 2013)? Was it a motive in addition to undisclosed reasons why Evelyn so abruptly resigned from her Bureau work in the 1919 winter (see: Staring, Bouchard, & Aldridge, 2014)? Further research is needed to explore all of these salient questions.

In spring 1919, when Evelyn had already left the Bureau, around the time Alice and John, following their Japan sojourn, arrived in Shanghai, China, former teacher at the Chicago University Laboratory School Katherine Camp Mayhew approached the Bureau of Educational Experiments. She solicited to work under the Bureau as teacher advisor for two months at Caroline Pratt's City and Country School — at the

time being converted into the Bureau's lab school (Staring, 2013). Note that there was genuine Bureau mistrust about Mavhew's motives (Minutes Executive Committee, BEE, 05-01-1919 and 05-05-1919; Minutes Working Council, BEE, 04-28-1919). Years later, after Alice's death in 1927, Mayhew and her sister Anna Camp Edwards wrote the authorized 1896-1904 chronicle of the University Elementary School at the University of Chicago, liberally using Alice's notes and other documents relating to the school's history (see above). Regarding this Mayhew and Camp's exploit of Alice's notes and documents as source material for their 1936 book The Dewey School, Perrone (1976) prudently remarked, "Had the descriptions been available before 1910, progressive education practice might well have developed more successfully" (p. 180). How right he was!

We now know Alice Chipman Dewey in all probability completed writing her manuscript on the Chicago University Laboratory School history by the end of 1917. Is it fair to pose the following probing questions? Are Alice's notes consulted by Mayhew and Camp analogous to the notes, or to the manuscript, she wrote in 1917? Was Mayhew, in spring 1919, perhaps more interested in trying to obtain, one way or another, Alice's notes and/or her manuscript — possibly still sitting on a mantelpiece at the Bureau of Educational Experiments offices — than in working at Pratt's school?

SUMMARY

Our case study of Alice Chipman Dewey's activities during the second decade in the 20th century revealed that she most certainly did not live as a recluse or as a hermit in the shadow of her husband John. Between 1909 and 1919, she worked as Manager of a State Hospital. Furthermore, she was far more politically, culturally and educationally active than biographies have made known in the past. Her teaching work at the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences for Non-Residents, her andragogic work to female suffrage, her managerial work as Officer of the Gary School League and as member of the Committee on Education of the Woman's City Club, her activities contributing to the publication of the Public Education Association report The Status of the Kindergarten in the New York Public Schools, as well as her campaigning actions for the endorsement of the Lockwood-Tallett State Kindergarten Bill, by all means qualify as educational work and as community service, improving public education.

Alice's 1917 manuscript, had it been published in 1918 as planned by her and the Bureau of Educational Experiments, had *every* potential of changing evolving progressive education practice! In this sense, calling to mind her andragogic and other

educational activities reviewed above, Alice Chipman Dewey's place in the history of education ought to be far more prominent than still portrayed today.

Hence, our initial research results, reviewed above, are intended to motivate further research to *exactly* determine Alice's place in the history of education during the second decade in the 20th century. We consider this research as preliminary, hoping to enthuse young colleague researchers to dive into further investigations.

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