

MY BAR PAPER: JOHN DEWEY, BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN, AND I WALK INTO THE TAVERN

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“To find out what one is fitted to do, and to secure an opportunity to do it, is the key to happiness.”

—JD (1916)

This paper began as an informal look into the reduction of the Career Based Intervention Programs at a high school in Southwest Ohio, as well as the families and students affected. This high school is located in a small college town, home to a prestigious, public university. At first glance, it seems to be a rather homogenous K-12 student population: the district’s students are 92% white. However, when looking at social class instead of race, we are more diverse, which contributes the school’s overall free and discounted lunch rate of 33%¹. Using Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell’s (2009) definition of culture as “everything you believe and everything you do that enables you to identify with people who are like you and that distinguishes you from people who differ from you” (pp. 24-25), it is easy to identify the lower socio-economic group of students in this school as their own culture, with a working class identity that has been developed and held for several generations.

I say that this paper “began” looking into Career Based (and Vocational) training reduction, because by its so-called completion I had created a lot of pages that ultimately claim, “I have no idea what to do about this.” Initially, I gathered data through interviews with current and former students and educators. I refer to it as my “bar paper” due to the fact that I sat with members of my community and just talked about school with them. In the past few years there have been a great number of changes occurring in education federally and locally, including diploma requirements. These changes, many felt, are moving students toward college readiness, rather than career preparation, and have threatened the programs that typically benefit lower-income, future wage-earners in pursuit of careers such as farming, construction, factory work, and general labor. Most of these students come from families that have generations of people working such jobs and small communities that encourage their children to take up the family job. A standardized education or Common Core curriculum can seem irrelevant to these students, as they have career paths they report to feel as predetermined. “I never needed any of that school stuff, I knew that. I knew I was going to work in construction,” said one of my friends. Another said, “I just did what they wanted me to do and scraped by [in school].” When asked what he remembers learning in high school, he responded, “I figured out which side of the tracks I was going to be from.”

As I began my doctorate, I was introduced to John Dewey. As an educated person who has been an educator for 15 years, I became aware that Dewey was a name I should obviously recognize. However, this *learning about learning* was something that had escaped me, for whatever reason, until now. And so I began to read Dewey the way one would read a cookbook, or Emily Post, or even the Bible for the first time. Here, in print, were laid out basic principles and ideas to which I’d adhered since Day One. And I’d never even known Dewey existed. The world of higher education, like the world of K-12 public education, often forgets that not everyone is schooled in the tenets that drive

our lives' work. So, as a student again for the first time in a long time, I sat and read. And learned. I took Dewey with me into the bars, asking myself WWDD... What would Dewey do? On my second visit, the jukebox played "The River" by Bruce Springsteen (1980), and I had one of those rare and glorious moments in which I understood. A chorus erupted from a table of men: "Then I got Mary pregnant, and man, that was all she wrote. And, for my nineteenth birthday, I got a union card and a wedding coat." This experience allowed me the privilege of hearing both Springsteen's and Dewey's voices, each wildly popular in his own circle, blended with the voices around me who have yet to be truly heard.

"Time and memory are true artists; they remould reality nearer to the heart's desire."

—JD (1920)

In my first four years with this district, I taught a group of students whose lives have deeply affected me, both in those years and in the years since. At the time, I believed that it was most important to simply keep these "at risk" boys in school and that their diploma was the ultimate goal. Given the challenges they faced at home, showing up and playing the role of student was as much as we could ask from them, I felt. Reflecting on their lives since high school, however, I have often questioned myself and the system in which I work. Their stories, and the hardships they've encountered, have been the catalyst for many of my endeavors since, including this paper.

With these students in mind, I ventured out and sat for hours chatting with people. I explored what programs are available to students, as well as informally interviewed more than 25 former students of this and a neighboring Southeastern Indiana high school, ages ranging 19-67. While my husband was convinced this was all a ruse and that my real goal was to escape home and chat up the locals over multiple beverages, I actually learned more than I could have imagined. My initial question was this: Is my school district providing a meaningful education to *all* students? The answer, I assumed, would have been that such a task is improbable when we apply a common curriculum to a diverse range of learners. But it is possible, as we are told repeatedly, and educators, thus, strive daily to accomplish this task in our classrooms. Ultimately, I discovered I was truly asking much deeper questions: What constitutes a meaningful education for this section of the population? Is it ethically appropriate to dictate students' career options from the young age of 14 by limiting their curricula (i.e., providing only technical training), or should schools expose them to the broader college prep or liberal arts coursework, regardless of what they assume their careers will be? What are the social and political constructs that keep three to four generations in the same cycles of academic and financial "success," and how do we define such success? Last, and most important to my own personal work, I asked myself whether we are doing more harm than good in a system that appears to separate students into social classes and assign social roles at very young ages. While I feel unqualified and uncertain of my own ability to answer such questions in this brief analysis, I have attempted to look more deeply into the future of my community's working class and to shed a little light on how we can prepare these students for an ever-changing academic and cultural landscape. I will warn the reader that I did not answer any of these questions; I simply explored them locally. It was, as it turns out, a life-changing experience.

“I come from down in the valley where, Mister, when you’re young, they bring you up to do like your daddy done”

—BS (1980)

McDermott and Gospodinoff (1979) once echoed a number of my questions, and I have drawn heavily from their observation:

...the children achieve the same adaptational skills of their parents, and a new generation of the so-called disadvantaged takes its place in the world. If we wanted a mechanism for sorting each new generation of citizens into the advantaged and the disadvantaged, into the achieving and the under achieving, we could have done no better than to have invented the school system we have. Not only is it efficient in assigning many generations of the same people to the top and bottom slots, but, and this is one of the ironies of contemporary life, it does so in ways that make sense to the hard working, caring and talented people who are trying to help break the cycle of the disadvantaged becoming more disadvantaged and the advantaged becoming more advantaged. (p. 192)

Mr. Johnson, recently retired CBIP (Career Based Intervention Program, a program in which students take half a day of online instruction and maintain employment that is managed through a local technology and career center) instructor of many years, sat down to lunch with me to discuss his experiences teaching hundreds of such students. He said:

When I first began teaching these kids, you could work hard and get a good job. Now it’s a generational thing where the poor stay poor, and our educational system just reinforces this. The kids know they don’t have hope, and what is the point of continuing to try to fit into a place they don’t belong? By the time they are 16, they know that all this "State Standardized" nonsense is not right for them. They also are starting to figure out that a [regular, non-specialized] high school diploma is not what it used to be. Working hard in school won’t get you anywhere, unless you’ve got the money to continue your education, which these kids don’t. They know it, and we know it, but we all have to play the game.

In Johnson’s final year teaching, his program graduated 45 students in a class of 225. This 20% of the graduating population greatly contributed to the school’s receiving an A for graduation rate on the state report card. Unfortunately, upon Johnson’s retirement, his position was not replaced, and the program was cut in half. In the following years, it is speculated by educators close to the school board that the program will be cut altogether, due to more rigorous graduation requirements. A former administrator in the district responded to this speculation, saying, “We want our diploma to mean something. If the degree of difficulty is notoriously lower in one program, why wouldn’t all students enter that program and take the easy way out?” This administrator was referencing the widely held opinion that CBIP was for students with academic, behavioral, and social problems who had struggled in the typical full-day, seven-period, high school setting. The underlying belief is that online classes are easier, as students are less accountable for demonstrating their knowledge, and that leaving school early to attend a “real job” is not as academically meaningful as other elective credits such as technology-based classes or academic interventions that offer basic reading/writing skills.

“You’ve got to learn to live with what you can’t rise above”

—BS (1987)

I would ask those holding such opinions to closely consider some of these students, specifically including two boys whose father passed away when they were in middle and elementary school. When they reached high school, their mother was diagnosed with cancer and was eventually fed through a tube. The boys not only worked full time in the local university’s dining hall, but also worked in landscaping when possible. They took turns sitting with their mother during the nights and provided for her until her death. I question that they would have graduated high school were it not for the CBIP program and its flexibility in allowing them to work during the school day for both credit and income. Both boys, now young men, continue to work hard nearly seven years later. As Mr. Johnson noted, “They would not have had a chance if they’d had to deal with Common Core and End-of-Year Assessments or WorkKEYS or ACT testing.” Currently, both of them make roughly \$12.00 an hour in manual labor jobs at the local university, considered “good jobs” by all accounts in the area. This amounts to less than \$25,000 per year. Did we give these boys an “easy way out,” as some of our teachers and administrators have implied? The university requires a high school diploma or GED to be considered for full time employment. Thus, the diploma was the sole desired outcome for their schooling. Would a more rigorous curriculum or typical school day have provided a more lucrative career for such students? Are there many days more rigorous for a teenager than nursing a dying single mother, working two jobs, and still attending high school? And do these students’ diplomas “mean less” than an honors student’s diploma, as if less work went into its acquisition for one than for the other?

Another such student, one I loved dearly, suffered the death of his brother and father in his sophomore and junior years. Teachers openly disliked him, and his behavior was always topic for discussion in the teachers’ lounge. One paper he wrote for his English II class included profanity and a gangster-murder storyline, and while his ELA teacher failed him and mocked him in front of the class, those who knew him were thrilled he had spent the time creating and typing a paper (which he never did again, incidentally). His senior year, he found a modicum of success in the CBIP program, in that he found a supportive instructor and a community of students like himself. He established an identity for himself, though his time in this nurturing environment was entirely too short. He was able to achieve a diploma at the end of his long struggle with high school, and I’ll never forget when he left my room for the final time. He had finished his last exam and was running out the door when I called out to him and said “Hey, aren’t there two little words you’d like to say to me??” He stopped with his hand on the doorknob and turned to face me. He took a deep breath, winked, and said “Later, Motherf***er!” and ran out the double doors into the parking lot. I laughed aloud and sat down to pat myself on the back for all the work I had poured into his four years there. Sadly, he passed away a few years later, victim of an allegedly accidental, self-inflicted gunshot wound. Many days I think of him and question what was the one lesson he needed the most to have learned from the adults charged with his education. I’ve often wondered what good it did him to learn about Shakespeare or the factoring of trinomials, other than to introduce yet another aspect of life in which he was sure to fail. Perhaps we could have spent those hours helping him recognize and regulate his impulsivity, teaching him how to cope with grief, letting him find things he loved, appreciating rather than condemning his wit and energy.

“Well, we busted out of class, had to get away from those fools. We learned more from a three-minute record than we ever did in school.”

—BS (1984)

It is a difficult thing to address, this would/could/should-have that makes teachers question themselves years after the diplomas have gone out. However, self-control, or any positive personal attribute for that matter, can be taught in the curriculum. Good teachers know this already, but the daily chores of pacing our lessons to meet standardized testing requirements often leave us without the time to indulge in such seemingly low priority learning targets. When interviewing several local employers in the construction, farming, and grounds-keeping fields, I posed the question, “What does it take to do well in a job with your company? Please list the education and skills you would look for in a new hire.” Out of 12 replies, the only academic answers were “Able to do basic math: angles, decimals, fractions, etc.” and “Read manuals, write notes.” Otherwise, every answer was a more amorphous list of basic personal skills:

Be on time; willingness to work hard; a handshake, eye contact, people skills, general politeness; working as a team, respect for your teammates, respect for your elders; problem solving skills and being able to trouble-shoot to get the answer when you’re out on the job; know how to find the answers if you don’t know it off the top of your head; show respect for the people around you; good manners and punctuality; be on time and present, be able to interpret instructions and make some minor judgment calls.

These skills are what we introduce in the world of work-study or even project-based learning. And while it might seem that such separate courses of study would pigeon-hole a student and perpetuate a cycle, I have to question who will teach these values if we do not? And when?

During another visit, I asked, “What do you remember learning in high school?” and “What was your biggest struggle in high school?” All who answered would identify themselves as white, all were born and raised in the same county as they attended high school, and all still live and work in the same area, though some had traveled intermittently or moved away for short periods of time. Not all are currently employed at this time, but a range of jobs in the general and skilled labor fields were prominent, specifically construction work (with specialized and skilled labor such as heating and air conditioning or carpentry), farming, and general labor (such as janitorial/maintenance and grounds work). In answer to my questions, I received some of the following comments:

“I just always hated math.”

“I never really learned how to read good. And all the teachers hated me.”

“I learned that no one is going to do anything for you. If you want something you’ve got to do it for yourself.”

“Nod your head and pretend like you know what is going on.”

“Don’t come to school drunk or you’ll get kicked out!” (Laughing)

“I learned that I am not good at math. But I’m good at the math I do in my job. I just wasn’t good at the math I had to do in school. I don’t even remember anything I learned in there.”

“They stuck me in all the classes with all the losers.”

There was a sense of regret and anger mixed into our conversations and a sense of fear as they discussed their children's futures. There was solidarity in their distrust of the school system, of which they do not feel a part. While I live in the community, I still represent that system, and simply bringing up questions about experiences in school sparked some heated, and at times quite emotional, conversations. Many of the people with whom I spoke felt very strongly that the school is not a place in which they belong. They did not belong as students, and they do not belong as parents or community members. They do not feel like stakeholders, nor is there an invitation from the school to become part of the group, with the exception of parent-teacher conferences or board meetings. Parent-teacher conferences are typically times when these tax-payers (as parents) receive brief and disheartening news about their children's failures; and board meetings are often wordy, finance-based discussions for the portion of our community who appear to hold the most capital. The school's doors feel closed to most of our working class families and have for years. Their own academic failures in the past or present have led them to draw boundaries to define themselves as outsiders, while the school system does little to convince them otherwise; rather, we reinforce the boundaries with our message that test scores and grades define success in school. Likewise, we send the unspoken message that college and lucrative careers define success after school. To people who do not fit our definition of success, our message is clear.

As I have taught high school and elementary school, I know some of these men as parents within our district, and I knew some of them as students. It is amazing to see the lively conversations and the passion with which they speak on the topic of the school district, its teachers and administrators, and its policies. What strikes me most is that, within the walls of the school, I did not and do not hear these men speak much at all. Their presence is rarely felt, physically or otherwise, and they feel powerless in a place controlled by the "others" who hold more educational or financial capital. Within the comfort of their own spaces, however, they have strong voices and opinions. They take pride in their identity, joking about coming to a "red neck" bar. The word "hick" is sometimes thrown around and was used in an article written years ago by, then, high school students from the same school entitled, "The Great Game of High School" (Nathan Dutton, R. Quantz, & Nolan Dutton, 2000). These authors drew distinctions between the social groups within the high school and acknowledged that the group known as "Preps" held the official power in this school, an observation with which most in the school would still agree. "The fact is that teachers and administrators... unconsciously encourage and sustain the game through school policy and informal interactions with students" (p. 71). The district's "adult-Preps" continue to hold the power, while the "adult-Hicks" maintain their roles as well.

"...the working, the working, just the working life..."

—BS (1978)

As Quantz and Magolda (1977) wrote,

When we realize the ritual creates solidarity only when the participants in the rituals come to believe in the symbols which mark the rituals, then we can begin to understand why so many, particularly poor children, reject school knowledge before it even occurs. (p. 16)

With a lack of trust for the schools, these community members rely on themselves and each other. The principal is not your friend...your teacher is out to get you. Some

spoke of the Four F's of life: "Faith, Family, Farming, Friends." Ironically, many of these people have nothing to do with farming and do not live on farms but in trailer parks or apartments. Nonetheless, they have grown to feel most connected to this farm-based community. Due to the presence of the university, many local families keep education as a focus, but most of the working class families here have had other experiences and expectations for the future. I saw this most when I asked the same group of men to answer, "Why did/do you choose the jobs you have taken since high school?"

"I've been working on my family's farm since I was 16. That's probably all I'll ever do."

"What else was I going to do?"

"My grandfather started a construction business, and my dad and his brother worked in it, and now it's me and my brother's turn."

"Because it's all I could get at the time, and then I just never have been able to afford to go back to school or anything like that."

"I needed health insurance, and if you get a foot in the door at [the local university] you're lucky, so I took it."

"It was work on the farm or join the army. That's what my dad always told all of us. And I didn't want to go to Afghanistan!"

"I knew I wasn't going to go to college or nothing like that, so I work in my uncle's auto-body shop, and if I save up enough, I'm going to go get my HVAC license."

If the career track is frequently set out for these boys before they even reach puberty, what coursework is meaningful for them to take in school? Ten years ago, the high school's Industrial Tech and Woodshop programs were cut. Recently, the school board voted to cut similar programs at the middle school as well. With the pending elimination of CBIP, this will leave very limited options for students who are not college bound. One option is a local career and technical school for juniors and seniors that serves several nearby districts. However, it is widely understood (though rarely advertised) that many factors in a student's portfolio are considered before acceptance into the programs. Some factors that can negatively impact a student's ability to join the programs include: poor attendance, low grades, negative behavior records, and whether the student has an IEP (Individualized Education Program, designed for each student identified by the school as eligible for special education services) or 504 plan (a plan that accommodates students with disabilities, such as ADHD, who may not be eligible for an IEP). This drastically narrows the list of acceptable applicants and gives little chance to students who have struggled with such issues through elementary, middle, and early high school.

This again raises the question of whether such vocational training is even appropriate. Dewey's (1916) arguments against it were that school should be more than just a training ground for the work force. He wrote:

It is a conventional and arbitrary view which assumes that discovery of the work to be chosen for adult life is made once and for all at some particular date....Put in concrete terms, there is danger that vocational education will be interpreted in theory and practice as trade education... (p. 363 & p. 369)

In essence, he feared that students would be trained for a career in which they'd be trapped for their entire lives. I add to his my similar fear that they are being trained for a social class and role in which they'll be trapped for their entire lives.

“When the promise is broken you go on living, but it steals something from down in your soul”

—BS (2010)

It is my opinion that there are deep and lasting repercussions to labeling a child as something negative, be it “disabled” or “at risk” or even “below average.” The reality of living with such issues—years of struggle in the classroom and an undeniable social stigma—can change a person’s self-image, reaction to the world, and the world’s response. Calling on the Social Role Valorization concept, it is safe to say, “the more a service practice diverges from valued cultural practices, the more likely that negative expectations and impressions will be conveyed about people, especially if they are already suspected of being devalued” (Armstrong, 2010, pp. 4-5). The resounding message I received from my local pub friends was that, when they think about school, they feel unworthy, incapable, and that they have failed. The 12 to 13 years they spent in our schools’ halls and classrooms have defined, for many, the next 30 or more years, not based upon a diploma or skill set, but based on a mindset that they are inferior to the school system and that, by proxy, their children are as well. Many also noted that they felt cheated when they became independent and realized that they had no concept of how to file taxes or apply for a mortgage, get a driver’s license or a used car, raise children, navigate the health care system, or look for jobs. No one taught them these things.

The struggle for educators is often in determining what, from a large bucket of information, should be filtered out and what should be kept. Perhaps students should be allowed to pursue a singular passion or talent, such as art, music, welding, carpentry, or auto mechanics—a targeted field of study that produces successes and a skill-base, rather than failures and information-overload. In contrast, such a narrow scope of study could steal opportunities from some of our most fragile students. Brighthouse (2006) notes in his book *On Education*: “The child who develops at school a life-long love for poetry, or a fascination with history, or enthusiasm for abstract algebra, gets something vitally important even if it never serves her (or her future employers’) economic goals” (p. 4).

Is it the educator’s job to choose for a young person what his or her future should be? How will we break cycles of poverty if we are repeatedly sorting students into socioeconomic categories without hope for upward mobility? My own family put high value on education; thus, I never had to consider if I would attend college and get a job—it seemed a given. Most of the teachers I work with in this district can say the same about their own educational experiences. To encourage students to do as we’ve done seems like common sense: try hard, get a good education, go to college, get a good job.

But as Dewey points out repeatedly, if we only see a child for a semester, or even a year, we know only a portion of who they are (have been, will be).

Individuality is something developing and to be continuously attained, not something given all at once and ready-made. It is found only in life-history, in its continuing growth; it is, so to say, a career and not just a fact discoverable at a particular cross section of life....A child’s individuality cannot be found in what he does or in what he consciously likes at a given moment; it can be found only in the connected course of his actions. (Dewey, 1928, p. 182)

To reach all students, we must be willing to step beyond the means-end mentality.

I would ask those like-minded educators in my district to review our mission statement: Empowering Every Learner, Every Day. We must make an effort to “empower the most vulnerable members of society to achieve heightened forms of self-realisation through acts of positive regard and acknowledgement” (Houston & Dolan, 2008, pp. 466-467). An understanding of our students’ pasts and futures should dictate their present educations, with an eye toward protecting and providing hope and dignity for all students, despite our own notion of the status quo. We will not be alone as we wonder how to do this. As McDermott and Gospodinoff (1979) lamented: “Many of our institutions certainly get in the way of maximizing the social and psychological potential of our children, and most of us do not have the foggiest notion of how to proceed in rectifying the situation” (p. 193).

“Saw my reflection in a window and didn’t know my own face.”

—BS (1993)

It is a rare moment when we are allowed to step back and ponder our own learning experience. Dewey would say that the learning should never end, that the reflection should always continue. But in a world that moves so quickly and in which we are so beleaguered with daily to-do’s, it is difficult to recognize our minor interactions with the world as being the bulk of our life-long education. Whether in the lyrics of a Springsteen song or the essays of John Dewey, the story is the same: Our experiences shape our lives.

The beauty of the *currere* process is that it gave me a reason to remember, to spend time reflecting on my experiences, my neighbors’ experiences, and certainly my students’ experiences. In reflecting on my experience gathering data and writing this essay, I thank my friends at the bars for their time and their honesty. I apologize to my mom, should she ever read this, that I am considered now to be a “regular” in these places. I apologize to Academia for it being a bit unpolished, if not completely rough-hewn. Above all, I hope that I have accurately represented the voices of the people who spoke so frankly with me, and I hope that we all find our paths to personal fulfillment, both in and out of our schools. And last, it is crucial for educators to remember that what a seventh grade boy hears one day in Social Studies from his teacher may construct the way he feels about himself for the rest of his life, that the ill-graded essay may haunt a person for decades, and that the labels we attach to children from the comfort of our conference rooms may cause them great pain in later years. It is our calling to consider our students’ lives, after they leave our classrooms and our buildings and as they become any of the millions of men and women waxing nostalgic at a local bar. Let us strive to give them something *good* upon which they can reflect.

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Endnotes

¹ School demographic data were collected from the Ohio Department of Education website (education.ohio.gov). However, in an attempt to protect the privacy of the students and parents discussed in this essay, further reference details are not provided. Most names of individuals have been removed from the narrative. Any that remain have been replaced with pseudonyms.