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## Toward a Theory of Interpretation in Dewey’s Educational Philosophy

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**Abstract:** John Dewey’s lifelong quest for a worthy education was characterized by a fervor for collapsing false dualisms. One such dualism—that between traditional and progressive education—led him to embrace a vision of the teacher as interpreter and guide of the student. Notwithstanding Dewey’s emphasis on the salient role of interpretation, there are no comprehensive accounts that explain how Dewey envisioned this very interpretive task that teachers are expected to undertake. In response to this lack, the author draws from the corpus of Dewey’s work to reconstruct a Deweyan ‘theory of interpretation.’ This theory brings together hermeneutic elements in Dewey’s work—akin to those of Hans-Georg Gadamer—and his commitment to scientific experimentalism. In doing so, it presents a new perspective on the way we think of Dewey’s relation to continental philosophy, extending similar contemporary scholarship like Paul Fairfield’s. Moreover, it provides important insights on Dewey’s pedagogy as this relates to classroom practices, curriculum development, and more.

**Keywords:** Interpretation, judgment, reflective thinking, John Dewey, philosophical hermeneutics, curriculum

A being that cannot understand at all is at least protected from *mis*-understandings. But beings that get knowledge by means of inferring and interpreting, by judging what things signify in relation to one another, are constantly exposed to the danger of *mis*-apprehension, *mis*-understanding, *mis*-taking—taking of a thing amiss. A constant source of misunderstanding and mistake is indefiniteness of meaning . . . Totally to eliminate indefiniteness is impossible; to reduce it in extent and in force requires sincerity and vigor.

— John Dewey, *How We Think*

John Dewey's lifelong quest for "what anything whatever must be to be worthy of the name *education*" (LW.13.62<sup>1</sup>) prompted him to undertake the task of collapsing false dualisms as these pertain to education, though he did not limit himself to the educational arena. The dualism between traditional (curriculum-centered) and progressive (student-centered) education was one of his main targets. In his book *Education After Dewey*, Paul Fairfield outlines Dewey's objections to both of these extremities and the dualistic mentality that begets them.<sup>2</sup> Instead, Fairfield argues that student experience should be at the center of "the educative process" and provides a detailed account of, what could be called, Dewey's "experience-centered" education. Fairfield's account makes interesting nuanced connections between Dewey's philosophy and the hermeneutic tradition—as represented by Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer—and persuasively demonstrates the great similarities between Dewey's thought and philosophical hermeneutics as well as the limitations of Dewey's experimentalism as these are revealed in the works of Heidegger and Gadamer.

Notwithstanding Fairfield's insightful comparison, I argue that there is another, equally fundamental, notion in Dewey's educational philosophy which resembles, and in many ways anticipates, the educational insights of philosophical hermeneutics and Gadamer in particular. This is the very notion of *interpretation*. The importance of this notion for Deweyan education, becomes apparent when we shift the focus of attention from the process that the student must undergo within education to the role that the teacher must play in this educative process.

The role of the teacher as this relates to interpretation becomes most clear in one of Dewey's first and most famous critiques of the dichotomy between progressive and traditional

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<sup>1</sup> All Dewey citations are from the standard Collected Works edition and will appear in-text. John Dewey, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Fairfield, *Education After Dewey* (London: Continuum, 2009).

education. In his 1902 essay “The Child and the Curriculum,” Dewey purports to resolve the false dualism of “the child vs. the curriculum” by introducing the notions of *interpretation* and *guidance* (MW.2.279). The child’s experience, Dewey maintains, is transitional; it points toward an end that the child could achieve should proper guidance allow her to do so. For proper guidance to occur, however, proper interpretation of the child’s present experience must take place—interpretation that will determine the possible outcome of such an experience. “To see the outcome,” Dewey states, “is to know in what direction the present experience is moving,” and, therefore, the outcome presents the teacher with a “guiding method in dealing with the present” (MW.2.279). Interpretation is, thus, prerequisite to guidance and guidance an outgrowth of interpretation.<sup>3</sup> While these considerations are implicit in Fairfield’s account and notwithstanding his hermeneutic emphasis, Fairfield does not dwell on Dewey’s notion of interpretation. Given Dewey’s unsystematic, commonsensical, and ambiguous use of the term, Fairfield’s lack of attention is unsurprising. However, examining this very notion is important for gaining further insight into Dewey’s thought and illuminating problems in our current educational practices.

The aim of this paper is to take on this very task: to examine the notion of interpretation in Dewey’s work in an effort to reconstruct a Deweyan theory of interpretation. There are multiple reasons why this is a worthwhile endeavor. First of all, while Dewey gives guidance substantial consideration in the corpus of his work, he does not do so with equal clarity for interpretation. Nevertheless, he discusses the necessity of interpretation in multiple places—particularly in his early works.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it seems that the importance of interpretation for

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<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of interpretation in “The Child and the Curriculum” see: D. C. Phillips, “John Dewey’s The Child and the Curriculum: A Century Later,” *The Elementary School Journal* 98, no. 5 (1998): 409–410.

<sup>4</sup> Some famous examples include “Interest in Relation to the Training of the Will” (EW.5.111–150), “My Pedagogical Creed” (EW.5.84–95), and “The Psychological Aspect of the School Curriculum” (EW.5.164–176).

Dewey is evident to many scholars, yet Dewey's use of the term in an often intuitive and sometimes seemingly inconsistent manner renders rather unclear what he is actually referring to when he speaks of interpretation. For this reason, Dewey scholars have presented multiple and diverse accounts.<sup>5</sup> A comprehensive account of Deweyan interpretation seems warranted to address this lack of clarity. Finally, given the weight that Dewey places on the role of teachers as interpreters (and guides) of their students, understanding what this process entails has practical bearing. Dewey's theory of interpretation could inform educational endeavors such as pedagogical practices, teacher education, or curriculum design and implementation. Recent trends of hyper-standardization reveal the urgency of this task, as scripted curricula and data analytics associated with digital learning platforms—which sidestep student interpretation and (intend to) render student guidance a fully predictable, controllable, and centralized process—are increasingly becoming the norm.

My argument is divided into four main sections. The first section (“Interpretation and Guidance”) sets up the problem at hand. There I briefly present the need for and role of interpretation—and, by extension, guidance. In the second section (“Dewey's Theory of Interpretation”) I draw from the corpus of Dewey's work to present what I believe to be the most relevant references to interpretation. Furthermore, I synthesize these references to develop a coherent theory of Deweyan interpretation, one that I argue is hermeneutic in character and embraces the scientific attitude championed by Dewey. This section extends Fairfield's insights and provides much of the analytic work necessary for clarifying and assessing practical implications of the theory. The third section (“Two Important Distinctions”) addresses potential questions/concerns that could be raised as a result of ambiguities in Dewey's use of

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<sup>5</sup> For a brief exposé see A. C. Nikolaidis, “Interpretation and Student Agency,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 49 (2018): 36–37.

interpretation. These ambiguities, I argue, suggest that Dewey's understanding of interpretation is more capacious than perhaps initially considered. The fourth and final section ("Conclusion: The Teacher as Interpreter") builds on the analysis of previous sections to draw out potential consequences that Dewey's theory of interpretation holds for education. This section encapsulates the role of the teacher as interpreter and discusses how it is undermined by current modes of standardization.

### **Interpretation and Guidance**

The necessity of interpretation for Dewey lies in the transitiveness of the child's experiences. The present experience of the child "is nothing complete in itself, but just a *sign or index* of certain growth tendencies" (MW.2.279; emphasis added<sup>6</sup>). Being part of her growth and indications of her potentiality, these experiences must be interpreted so as to guide the child toward the actualization of said potentiality.<sup>7</sup> Complications arise, however, because the indications of these transitive experiences are not always clear. Being signs or indexes experiences involve a degree of obscurity, since a sign can indicate many different things, regardless of whether we are referring to artificial signs (e.g., language or symbols) or natural signs (e.g., clouds indicating upcoming rain). Experiences that children have at a young age fall under the latter category and "not being originally intended to be signs, are cumbrous, bulky, inconvenient, unmanageable" (LW.8.302); unlike artificial symbols which are intended to convey meaning, they emerge naturally, thus ascribing meaning to them constitutes a human imposition (LW.8.302). This characteristic renders these experiences even more obscure and "unmanageable" than language, and if language requires interpretation then it is evident that

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<sup>6</sup> When not indicated, emphasis is part of the original text.

<sup>7</sup> Guiding the child toward actualization entails fostering an environment that allows the child's potentialities to proceed naturally toward the development of certain faculties or traits. These faculties or traits are, of course, always subject to change and further growth.

understanding a child's experiences requires interpretation even more so. Without understanding what these experiences or signs signify—i.e., some future experience—we cannot see where they lead, which, in turn, endangers their transitiveness (MW.2.279).

Once the child's experience has been correctly interpreted the next step follows—guidance. Guidance, Dewey tells us, is merely an extension of interpretation; “to interpret the fact is to see it in its vital movement, to see it in its relation to growth” (MW.2.281). Essentially, the moment one successfully interprets a child's experience as ‘x’ potentiality, she has viewed the process of its actualization from within; put differently, she has recognized that said experience or exhibition of potentiality represents merely one step in the process of actualization which is already underway, even though it may only be at the very beginning. By regarding an experience as part of a movement toward a particular direction, the teacher is capable of guiding the child to continue moving in that direction so as to eventually reach the desired end—the actualization of the potentiality. Guidance, thus, directly follows from interpretation or, more accurately, is an outgrowth or byproduct of interpretation.

Interpretation and guidance provide the means for implementing a more holistic education, one that does not sacrifice the child in favor of curriculum or vice versa. The teacher is to interpret the experiences, interests, impulses, powers, habits, instincts, tendencies, needs, etc. of the child and by doing so guide her toward the subject-matter necessary for these *particularities* to grow into something of future relevance.<sup>8</sup> Notwithstanding the intuitive validity of Dewey's suggestions, a question arises: if we are to guide the child appropriately, what is the

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout his work, Dewey refers to the necessity of interpreting all of these attributes of the child and translating them into their social equivalents. For the purpose of economy, I will avoid repeating all of them throughout the paper and instead use the term *particularities* as a stand in.

“*something that will enable us to interpret*” (MW.2.279; emphasis added) and understand the true significance of a *particularity*?

### **Dewey’s Theory of Interpretation**

To answer this question and arrive at a comprehensive understanding of Deweyan interpretation a close examination of what it involves within the context of his overall work is necessary. Although guidance is equally important for Dewey in “*The Child and the Curriculum*,” as mentioned, interpretation is the main element around which the educational process Dewey describes concentrates. Without interpretation there can be no guidance, other than perhaps a misdirected or capricious guidance, and accurate interpretation renders proper guidance a more or less straightforward process; viz., a process that can be brought to fulfillment relatively easily, though not effortlessly. In this section I, therefore, investigate the notion of interpretation and address guidance only in its relation to the interpretative process. By focusing on relevant works, I trace Dewey’s position and reconstruct it into a coherent whole that elucidates the role of the teacher as interpreter (and guide). Even though interpretation receives less attention than guidance in Dewey’s educational work, Dewey has extensively referred to many other concepts that either are used interchangeably with interpretation or can be understood in terms of interpretation based on their contextual position.<sup>9</sup> It is to such references that I will now turn my attention.

I begin with what I consider to be the most significant and explicit references to interpretation in Dewey’s work: *How We Think* (1910) and its revised edition (1933). The first important reference is found in chapter eight of the original edition (1910) titled “*Judgment: The Interpretation of Facts*” (MW.6.259-270). In the revised edition (1933) this chapter was renamed

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<sup>9</sup> Examples include appraisal, judgment, inference, signification, evaluation, and estimation.

“The Place of Judgment in Reflective Activity” (LW.8.210-220). An apparent connection exists between these three terms—judgment, interpretation, reflection—a connection I make more explicit as this section unfolds. Furthermore, a connection exists between ideas and interpretation, since ideas, for Dewey, are “elements in judgments, tools of interpretation” (LW.8.221). I first focus on this latter point, by exploring the relation between interpretation and understanding for Dewey. Next, I explore the relation between interpretation and judgment and, finally, I explore the relation between interpretation and reflective thinking.

### *Interpretation as Understanding*

Dewey starts his account of understanding in *How We Think* by explicitly connecting understanding to signification—which is directly connected to interpretation. When confronted with an uncertain or incomprehensible experience “we say that we *understand*” only once “we have found out what it signifies.” “To understand is to grasp meaning” Dewey says, and “until we understand, we are, if we have curiosity, troubled, baffled, and hence moved to inquire” (LW.8.221). Interpretation thus yields understanding, and successful interpretation *is* understanding since it resolves bafflement or perplexity. To reach a successful interpretation—i.e., understanding—one needs to commence an interpretive process which involves identifying a suggested meaning that has not yet proven its validity. When a meaning is merely suggested, its validity is uncertain, and decision-making is held in suspense, then this meaning constitutes an *idea* (LW.8.221). Ideas, Dewey tells us, are possible “modes of interpretation” which, though uncertain in terms of their validity, direct “inquiry and examination” (LW.8.222). Ideas, therefore, are tools of interpretation in that they open up pathways for interpretation. When one does not know what an object or situation signifies, ideas may arise regarding its meaning—what it may signify—that, in essence, allow her to interpret this object or situation. Not all ideas can

be correct but all of them can direct one's attention to further indications necessary to verify that an idea is valid and provides meaning—i.e., understanding (LW.8.225).

In the concept of understanding we see the first link between Dewey and hermeneutics. Fairfield demonstrates that, notwithstanding differences between Dewey and hermeneuticians like Heidegger and Gadamer, understanding for Dewey has a uniquely hermeneutic character as depicted by Dewey's emphasis on context and language.<sup>10</sup> We see this emphasis where Dewey says that “to grasp the meaning of a thing, an event, or a situation is to see it in its *relations* to other things” (LW.8.225) and speaks of the need to take “the thing inquired into out of its isolation” and continue searching “until the thing is discovered to be a related part in some larger whole” (LW.8.226). Fairfield notes that Dewey's discussion of understanding also refers to the idea of the hermeneutic circle, “the constant spiral movement of knowledge” (LW.8.227), without Dewey ever using the exact term. We even see Dewey reference the need to already have a store of meanings, things that are already understood, to be able to understand new things. “*Something* must be already understood, the mind must be in possession of some meaning that it has mastered, or else thinking is impossible” (LW.8.227). This reference resembles Gadamer's discussion about the need to situate “the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings” whenever we “want to understand the meaning of another.”<sup>11</sup> Similar to Gadamer then, Dewey acknowledges that preexisting meanings are a necessary precondition for understanding something new. Dewey's proximity to Gadamer here provides the first clue for discerning the hermeneutic character of Deweyan interpretation.

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<sup>10</sup> Fairfield, *Education After Dewey*, 115–117.

<sup>11</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinsheimer, & D. G. Marshall (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 281.

### *Interpretation as Judgment*

Having established a link between interpretation and understanding, I now examine the role of judgment in Dewey's philosophy and its semantic proximity to interpretation. Fairfield discusses Deweyan judgment in relation to Dewey's moral and political philosophy. In these contexts, Dewey's main educational concern is for students to develop a sense of *good judgment*, namely, "the ability to determine the relative value of things, to estimate degrees of worth and importance without being inflexible or slave to convention."<sup>12</sup> Judgment in this sense is evaluative in character. Yet Dewey's use of judgment also reveals another sense of the term, one that parallels his use of interpretation and is hermeneutic in character. It is this latter type that concerns Dewey's theory of interpretation and to which I will dedicate this subsection.

As suggested from the chapter title in the original version of *How We Think*, mentioned above, judgment can be defined as "the interpretation of facts." The superfluousness of the "of facts" clause is something that can be easily deduced; when we judge, we judge *something*—i.e., we judge a fact since judgment is the interpretation of *facts*. Hence, for Dewey, *judgment* and *interpretation* are, if not synonymous, very close in terms of meaning and are often used interchangeably. Yet, more in-depth investigation is necessary before one can, with high probability, confirm the semantic proximity of these two terms. I start by examining judgment and its role in the process of understanding. Dewey defines judgment as,

The act of selecting and weighing the bearing of facts and suggestions as they present themselves, as well as of deciding whether the alleged facts are really facts and whether the idea used is a sound idea or merely a fancy. (LW.8.210)

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<sup>12</sup> Fairfield, *Education After Dewey*, 241.

This definition reveals three important aspects of judging: the individual who judges must select the grounds for judging, evaluate those grounds, and conclude whether the idea (suggested meaning or mode of interpretation) is indeed valid—viz., if it begets understanding. Accordingly, when one interprets something, for example a literary text, she comes up with an interpretation based on (stylistic or linguistic) elements found in the text and compares these to other elements to see if they are consistent or contradictory based on her proposed interpretation. This allows her to see if she has selected relevant elements, if she has interpreted them correctly, and, finally, if her overall interpretation is correct—i.e., if she has understood the text. Similarly, at this moment that I am writing, I have chosen certain elements that I consider most relevant and important in Dewey's text based on my suggested interpretation and am trying to provide myself and my reader with a justification for the accuracy of my interpretation of Dewey and how it yields understanding. I am, therefore, engaging in what Dewey calls judgment.

The proximity of judgment to interpretation becomes more apparent through closer examination of the three aspects of judging, as those pertain to the functions that a judge performs. These include:

- (1) a controversy, consisting of opposite claims regarding the same objective situation;
- (2) a process of defining and elaborating these claims and of sifting the facts adduced to support them;<sup>13</sup> (3) a final decision, or sentence, closing the particular matter in dispute while also serving as a rule or principle for deciding future cases. (LW.8.211)

To begin with, one faces conflicting meanings in a given situation. This prompts the individual to search for evidence in support of all the possible meanings she is entertaining, so as to determine which of the conflicting interpretations is the most accurate. Finally, a process of

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<sup>13</sup> This aspect of judgment is the most essential for interpretation. The two questions it seeks to answer are “(a) What portions or aspects of the situation are significant in controlling the formation of the interpretation? (b) Just what is the full meaning and bearing of the idea used as a method of interpretation?” (LW.8.212).

decision-making takes place where the interpreter must decide which meaning she will ascribe to the situation. One important aspect that Dewey's example of judging reveals is that meaning is not simply *ascribed* but also *applied*. This application becomes evident from the accompaniment of the judge's verdict by a sentence—the application of the newly acquired meaning. Meaning can be applied either in a tangible everyday situation (e.g., I interpret a pause in conversation as awkward, which prompts me to speak hastily to end the awkward silence) or in a less obvious more theoretical situation (e.g., I interpret a poem as having a particular meaning, and this meaning will inform all my future thoughts about this poem and the poet who wrote it, all my future actions regarding the poem and poet as for instance in my conversations with others on this topic, and potentially even my conduct in life if the poem speaks to me profoundly and changes my way of thinking or living). This is what Dewey has in mind when he claims that “the act of judging involves both the *growth* and the *application* of meanings” (MW.6.271; emphasis added). Judging engenders understanding which entails perceiving more meaning and making more connections (hence the growth in meaning), but it also engenders application of said meaning.

At this point we see another connection between Dewey's thought and the hermeneutic tradition—namely, that his conception of judgment resembles the hermeneutic process. A brief detour in hermeneutics is in order to explain why this is so. Though usually associated with interpretation alone, the early hermeneutic tradition divided hermeneutics into three distinct aspects—interpretation, understanding, application.<sup>14</sup> The interpretive process does not end with successful interpretation. Successful interpretation yields understanding which in turn yields application of the newly acquired meaning. In Romanticism, this tripartite distinction changed,

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<sup>14</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 318.

as Schleiermacher postulated that “every problem of interpretation is, in fact, a problem of understanding.”<sup>15</sup> Interpretation and understanding became unified, justifying the development of a method of interpretation to produce understanding and avoid misunderstanding.<sup>16</sup> This unification, however, led to the neglect of the third hermeneutic component—application. In response to this exclusion, Gadamer emphasizes the very centrality of application in the hermeneutic process.<sup>17</sup> Not only that, but for Gadamer application should not be perceived as a distinct component of the hermeneutic process (as was the case before Romanticism) but as part of the unified whole that was posited by Schleiermacher.<sup>18</sup>

In explaining the centrality of application, Gadamer shows that “understanding always involves something like applying the text to be understood to the interpreter’s present situation.”<sup>19</sup> As the meaning of the present situation of the interpreter is applied to the text or

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>16</sup> This position, Gadamer explains, is distinguishable from the previous positions of Spinoza and Chladenius in that, for them, understanding is a natural process (happens automatically) which requires no interpretation. Interpretation is prompted only where there is lack of (automatic) understanding. Its role is to help understand those elements that cannot be understood automatically. Schleiermacher, on the other hand, views interpretation and understanding as “closely interwoven.” For him, misunderstanding is more natural (i.e., what comes automatically) than understanding and so understanding is inextricably linked with an interpretative process or method that must be pursued to reach understanding. Ibid., 187–192.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 318–319. Gadamer’s account follows the ontological shift in hermeneutics instigated by Heidegger. Interpretation for Gadamer is not merely a matter of epistemological significance (using interpretation as a method to ensure that our understanding of something is accurate) but rather of ontological significance (interpretation is an existential characteristic of human beings who are introduced after birth to a particular tradition and through it come to understand the world around them). Given our historicity as beings, we are always embedded in a tradition and it is this tradition and the prejudices (i.e., pre-judgments) it bequeaths to us that makes understanding possible in the first place. It is what affords us (while simultaneously limiting) our “horizon” of understanding. It is because of this familiar horizon that we can venture into the unknown. Awareness of our own historicity and its influence in our understanding, is a result of what Gadamer calls “historically effected consciousness.” It allows us to recognize that we are shaped by history, which influences the questions that we ask of a text and thus our textual interpretations. Furthermore, awareness of our historicity alerts us to the fact that our prejudices shape our understanding. As such, when these prejudices are challenged by a text or interlocutor, we are capable of testing them to confirm their validity or lack of and thus preserve or replace them. This process involves the constant expansion or movement of our present horizon to fuse with the historical horizon of the text. The need to bring about this “fusion of horizons” for the purpose of reaching understanding renders application “the fundamental hermeneutical problem.” We must *apply* ourselves and our present conditions (our horizons and prejudices) to the text to understand it. Understanding is therefore inextricable from application. Ibid., 302–350.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 318–319.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

object of interpretation to beget new meaning and understanding, so is the meaning of the text or object applied to the interpreter's present situation infusing it with new meaning. Such application occurs in all hermeneutic disciplines. The cleric or judge apply their current situation to their understanding of the text which renders their interpretation relevant and further applicable (as divine edict or legal mandate) to their situation. In religion, law, and literature a text is interpreted to add or verify meaning which will be applied to one's understanding, as well as potentially her conduct, way of living, and decisions.<sup>20</sup>

Returning to Dewey's notion of judgment and its hermeneutic character, when judgment takes place in education it initiates a hermeneutic process whereby interpretation begets understanding and application. We already saw that, for Dewey, successful interpretation is understanding. That application is also part of this unified hermeneutic process becomes apparent in Dewey's emphasis on guidance—the application of the meaning of a child's *particularities* which manifests in overt reactions and behaviors that somehow direct the child. Guidance may manifest in multiple and often unforeseen ways; even as unintentional direction of one's behavior. Guidance need not involve telling a child what to do. Any behavior or reaction that a teacher displays may somehow guide a child. When a teacher reacts scornfully to a student's comment or dismisses a student for asking a question that the teacher interpreted as self-explanatory, pointless, or time-wasting, the teacher essentially guides the child to stop asking questions of this sort or any questions for that matter.<sup>21</sup> Even the subtlest reaction of the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> For Dewey, any such expression that a teacher employs presupposes an interpretation, as it expresses a value-judgment. "Judgments of value are not confined to matters which are explicitly moral in significance . . . When we judge the statements of others . . . and pronounce them 'true' or 'false' we are making judgments of value" (LW.7.263–264). Since it is implied that truth is more desirable than falsity, and hence a true statement is better than a false one, we are not just stating a fact. Any characterization that a teacher ascribes to a student's question, even one seemingly neutral such as being off-topic, implies desirability or undesirability and, hence, that the question is a good or bad one. "In its popular sense," Dewey goes on to say, "*all* judgment is estimation, appraisal, assigning value to something; a discrimination as to advantage, serviceability, fitness for a purpose, enjoyability, and so on"

teacher, such as momentary distress, provides some sort of guidance. Dewey is aware of this possibility and has referred to it as “collateral learning” (LW.13.29). Notwithstanding the natural and often unintentional occurrence of guidance, when one is mindful of the ways her interpretations influence her understanding and conduct she can become more intentional and mindful about her guidance practices. Expressed in Gadamerian terms, when she is aware about her prejudices (i.e., prejudgments) and how these inform her interpretations and guidance of the student, she may be on the lookout for how her prejudices manifest and reject them when they distort her understanding and lead to problematic guidance practices. This contribution of Dewey anticipated the hermeneutic insights of Heidegger and Gadamer and demonstrated that application is not merely an extrinsic hermeneutic component that is only applicable to traditional hermeneutic disciplines, but rather an essential component of understanding that affects human interactions and, as such, must be heeded by educators.

At this point I must address two potential objections. The first one is that, even if what Dewey calls *judgment* is hermeneutic in character, one cannot assume that this also applies to his use of *interpretation*. This is a valid concern, yet, this assumption is warranted on the ground that it is hard to believe that Dewey’s reference to interpretation only entails a narrow understanding of the term—i.e., one that refers to the act of interpretation exclusively and not to the selection of relevant facts to be interpreted. If this were the case, he would not have been employing the term interpretation but rather judgment or reflection, which incorporate the processes of selecting, emphasizing, and interpreting facts.<sup>22</sup> Dewey tells us that the teacher must interpret the child’s

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(LW.7.264). Consequently, all judgments may potentially guide a student toward some direction. For example, a negative judgment about a student’s question may communicate the message “stop asking questions because your questions are off-topic, time-consuming, wasteful—in a word bad!”

<sup>22</sup> Regarding reflection Dewey says: “This intimate interaction between *selective emphasis* and *interpretation* through a context of what is selected is found wherever *reflection* proceeds normally” (LW.8.220; emphasis added). Hence, reflection is a combination of selective emphasis and interpretation, which renders interpretation an intimate part of reflection. However, “selective emphasis” that Dewey separates from “interpretation” can be considered a

*particularities*, but this cannot mean that the teacher is to interpret all *particularities* indiscriminately. This would be both impossible and useless. As Dewey mentions, “all parts of an experience are equally present, but they are very far from being of equal value as signs or as evidences” (MW.6.260). Not only this, but sometimes what we perceive as evidently important might only deceive us and distract us from important evidence.

Intensity, or vividness or conspicuousness, [is not] a safe measure of indicative and proving value. The glaring thing may be totally insignificant in this particular situation, and the key to the understanding of the whole matter may be modest or hidden. (MW.6.261)

Therefore, it is safe to assume that if the interpretive process Dewey talks of in “The Child and the Curriculum” is to be of any value, it must encompass a broader, richer understanding of interpretation, one that includes the attributes Dewey assigns to judgment and reflection.

Dewey’s interchangeable use of *interpretation* and *appraisal* attests to this claim (MW.2.279), since Dewey’s definition of appraisal involves all those elements inherent in judgment: “whenever we appraise, we both *select* and *emphasize* a particular quality or feature, and *we link together* things that, from an intellectual point of view, were previously separate” (LW.8.220; emphasis added). Not only, then, does interpretation involve examining evidence, selecting what is considered important, and making apparent previously concealed connections that elucidate the *particularity* the teacher is trying to interpret, but it also yields understanding and application of meaning through guidance. After all, Dewey is too meticulous and painstaking to have hastily equated judgment to “the interpretation of facts” if he did not consider them mutually inclusive terms.

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part of the interpretive process itself. Selecting what is relevant to interpret is part of the interpretive process overall which is one reason why people so often arrive at different interpretations—the other being ascribing different meaning to the same facts.

The second objection is that, even if one accepts that Deweyan judgment (and thus interpretation) is hermeneutic in character, one might object to the force or primacy of this character given that within Dewey's hermeneutic description of the term is lurking another evaluative sense akin to the one discussed by Fairfield. Judgment in this latter sense refers not to the process of deciphering the end that a student's *particularity* indicates or the direction a student must take to fulfill it, but rather to the process of determining the worthiness of that end and, hence, whether it should be pursued. We can refer to these two senses of judgment as hermeneutic and evaluative judgment respectively. Dewey's criterion of growth strongly suggests the presence of evaluative judgment in the hermeneutic process described above. When Dewey speaks of the importance of guiding students toward ends that increase growth in the long run, he indicates that only such ends are worthy of pursuit.<sup>23</sup> Based on this, one could argue that evaluative judgment is what lies at the heart of Dewey's interpretive theory, not hermeneutic. While it is certainly true that in Dewey's work hermeneutic judgment often appears alongside evaluative judgment and that evaluative judgment is crucial for proper guidance, this does not reduce the force or primacy of hermeneutic judgment. The very presence and implementation of evaluative judgment is contingent on hermeneutic judgment, at least with regard to student interpretation. Interpreting a student's *particularity* for the purpose of deciphering the end toward which this *particularity* points is antecedent to any evaluation of the end's worthiness. One cannot evaluate what one does not know, and good evaluation is contingent on proper selection of what to evaluate. Moreover, to be of any value, determination of the worthiness of

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<sup>23</sup> Increasing growth *in the long run* requires ensuring that the student "acquires a habit of learning" (MW.9.50) and that the direction of her education increases her interests and interactions, as implied by a truly democratic education (MW.9.88–89). The idea of continuous growth precludes certain ends (e.g., criminal activity) that would likely isolate the student from others in the long run and, as a result of this isolation, minimize their interests (e.g., to whatever can be shared with other criminals). Ends that decrease overall growth fail to fulfill the criterion of growth, notwithstanding any short-term growth they engender in particular skillsets (MW.9.88–89; LW.13.19–20). Moreover, such ends violate the principles of continuity and interaction (LW.13.17–30).

an end must be followed by application—i.e., guidance. If an end is found to be worthy, application takes the form of guiding the student toward that direction. If not, application takes the form of refusing to do so.<sup>24</sup>

### *Interpretation as Reflective Thinking*

Having deciphered what the Deweyan interpretive process consists of, I now turn to another, more practical, dimension of Dewey's theory of interpretation. For this purpose, I broaden the scope of my analysis from the narrower concept of judgment to the broader concept of reflective thinking. Reflective thinking is a mode of thinking that incorporates judgment, and which, like judgment, is closely related to interpretation. Indeed, as Fairfield argues, "Dewey's conception of reflective thought . . . anticipates developments in the phenomenological hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger and . . . thinkers working under his influence."<sup>25</sup> Dewey defines reflective thinking as the "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (LW.8.118). Reflective thinking requires taking command of one's thought rather than leaving it to chance. The transformation of passive to active thought entails adopting a conscious attitude of doubt along with an experimental attitude.<sup>26</sup> In reflective thinking one must consciously reconsider all knowledge and understanding she holds so as to validate or reject it and act similarly with new knowledge she comes across. This can happen

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<sup>24</sup> Refusal to guide a student toward some direction is still a manifestation of application. As Gadamer puts it, "a person who refuses to obey an order has understood it, and because he applies it to the situation and knows what obedience would mean in that situation, he refuses." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 343.

<sup>25</sup> Fairfield, *Education After Dewey*, 115.

<sup>26</sup> Sharon Feiman-Nemser argues that Dewey envisions a teacher education based on experimentalist principles. Preservice teachers need to learn how to be students themselves, to not be satisfied with their acquired knowledge of teaching techniques and actively seek to learn more about and from their students, to seek to constantly grow as teachers. Such an attitude, Feiman-Nemser argues, is closely linked to the role of teacher as interpreter. Sharon Feiman-Nemser, "A Teacher Educator Looks at *Democracy and Education*," in *John Dewey and Our Educational Prospect: A Critical Engagement with Dewey's Democracy and Education*, ed. David T. Hansen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 137–140.

through investigation and careful examination of the reasons one believes ‘x’ rather than ‘not x’ or ‘y’ and the implications that these reasons and beliefs carry. Any apparent inconsistency should lead to re-consideration or re-examination of one’s beliefs. The proximity of reflective thinking to interpretation can be easily deduced by its function; namely, “to transform a situation in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort, into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled, harmonious” (LW.8.195). Turning an ambiguous or obscure situation that escapes understanding into a clear and meaningful one is the task of interpretation.<sup>27</sup>

Aside from the semantic proximity of reflective thinking to interpretation, there is another connection between the two terms. Reflective thinking consists of three essential processes, the first of which is *signification*. Consideration of what something “signifies or indicates” allows one to determine whether it is a good enough ground to base one’s thinking on. It provides a starting point for determining whether one thing is a good enough indicator for another, before one devotes more time and investigates in greater depth a specific hypothesis (LW.8.120). The place of signification in reflective thinking emphasizes the salience of interpretation and its irreducibility to scientific proceduralism. One with a well-developed scientific attitude or disposition cannot avoid the uncertainty of interpretation, yet, at the same time, this uncertainty necessitates the scientific attitude embodied in reflective thinking (LW.8.121).

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<sup>27</sup> A similar function to reflective thought is that played by inquiry. Dewey defines inquiry as “the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole” (LW.12.108). Relatedly, he describes judgment as “the settled outcome of inquiry” (LW.12.123). Dewey bridges judgment and reflective thinking by presenting them as two aspects of the same process.

The second process is *systematization*. Systematization adds a distinctly scientific dimension to reflective thinking, one that judgment lacks. It implies the use of method, and method protects from rash judgments (LW.8.249). Without it one is prone to jump to conclusions without adequate testing or adequate interpretation of facts and findings to see whether they apply to a particular case (LW.8.249). Two subprocesses come into play here: *observation* and *hypothesizing*. Observation needs to be active, careful, and mindful otherwise one might miss something important. Hypothesizing, the principle that guides inquiry, refers to the idea that guides one's search for certain things that are necessary in establishing the idea's correctness—for verifying it (LW.8.251–252). A hypothesis can be correct or incorrect, better or worse, justified or unjustified, explaining the entirety of a situation or just parts of it, or even be one among many correct hypotheses which all elucidate different aspects of a situation. Without an active hypothesis the evidence sought might not become apparent and observation may be reduced to “recognition or perception of what is familiar” (LW.8.319). Hypothesizing about the unfamiliar activates and opens one to better observation of facts, which in turn allows her to verify or falsify the hypothesis. This then might instigate better observation and so on.

The final process is the testing of the hypothesis or *experimentation*. When hearing experimentation, one's mind might immediately go to laboratories or fieldwork. Such conditions, nonetheless, are not necessary for experimentation to occur, as is the case with deliberation. Deliberation, for Dewey, is like a thought experiment. It is an “imaginative rehearsal of various courses of conduct” (LW.7.275), or, put differently, “an experiment in finding out what the various lines of possible action are really like” (MW.14.132). This entails thinking about the possible consequences of one's action before acting. To give an example from education, a teacher who considers whether and how to punish a student for misbehavior can first mentally

rehearse the possible outcomes of the intended punishment and compare them to the desired outcomes to see whether the particular punishment is indeed appropriate. In situations where the environment cannot be controlled and the consequences of our actions cannot be empirically predicted, mental experimentation that is driven by imagination—i.e., deliberation—may enable better decision-making. Imagination, thus, becomes a reality-driven component of scientific thinking rather than a remote faculty associated with otherworldly objects.

Imagination and thought are processes of estimating observed objects in the light of their possible future consequences. They are forecasts, tentative predictions or conjectures as to what conditions indicate or prophesy regarding future developments . . . forecasts employed moreover to guide and direct activities so that if possible the desirable conditions will be realized. (MW.4.185)

Imagination is what affords us the experimental attitude so essential to Dewey philosophy in settings where alternative interpretations cannot be practically assessed. In such settings where errors hold consequences of moral significance (e.g., classrooms), utilizing one's imagination as a guiding faculty of interpretation is the best way to proceed. "An act overtly tried out is irrevocable, its consequences cannot be blotted out. An act tried out in imagination is not final or fatal. It is retrievable" (MW.14.133). This is the advantage of experimentation, or deliberation in this case. It allows the teacher to choose responsibly, mindfully, and reflectively the most appropriate course of action.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jim Garrison discusses the importance of imagination for successful interpretation, or "moral perception," to occur in the classroom. By appealing to Mark Johnson's account of moral imagination he argues that imagination allows the interpreter to open up her mind to diverse possibilities or perspectives and see the student for who they are. Imagination safeguards sympathetic teachers from projecting their own prejudices on students and, in doing so, lessening their students' experiences. Finally, imagination allows teachers to deliberate and foresee the consequences of various modes of action and to act intelligently. Jim Garrison, *Dewey and Eros: Wisdom and Desire in the Art of Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 174–178.

For Dewey, the scientific method is the best means of ensuring the validity, or warranted assertibility, of one's interpretation and the appropriateness of her reaction. The value of scientific method, and of developing a scientific attitude for interpretation more generally, is best described by Dewey in the following extract:

In general, the scientific man is one who knows that he is likely to be hurried to a conclusion and that part of this precipitancy is due to certain habits that tend to make him "read" certain meanings into the situation that confronts him, so that he must be on the lookout against errors arising from his interests, habits, and current preconceptions.

(LW.8.254)

The place of reflective thinking in Deweyan interpretation does not imply that developing a scientific attitude makes everything *objective*. When it comes to interpreting students, this is not only problematic and highly improbable but can also prove perilous. Dewey wants teachers to simply be aware of their prejudices, their dispositions and habits, their own partiality. He wants them to develop habits or dispositions that incline them to be alert to the unfamiliar. He wants them to develop "a scientific habit of mind" (MW.6.77) which enables them to feel most comfortable when in doubt. "The scientific attitude," Dewey says, "may almost be defined as that which is capable of enjoying the doubtful" (LW.4.182). This is the attitude of the reflective thinker, which disposes one to be open, speculative, and mindful. Teachers with such habits, when confronted by the unfamiliar would not rush to draw conclusions but rather, would take a break, suspend judgment, examine all the facts, consider conflicting hypotheses, test them through deliberation, make informed decisions, and act provisionally. When confronted with the familiar they would still be on the lookout for new information that might force them to re-consider, re-interpret, re-examine, re-vote their previous course of action, and decide what works best given new evidence. Such *active* habits can mitigate the force of routine or *fixed*

habits that incline teachers to misread situations on the basis of what is already familiar (MW.9.51–54). This, it seems to me, is a healthy attitude for teachers to develop when it comes to interpretation in the classroom.<sup>29</sup>

## Two Important Distinctions

At this point we have a complete picture of Dewey's theory of interpretation. We established that interpretation is closely tied to ideas (key elements of understanding), judgment, and reflective thinking. We also established that understanding is intimately related to interpretation and that judgment is hermeneutic in character. Reflective thinking, while scientifically oriented, remains proximal to and presupposes some degree of interpretation. Given these broad relations one might ask, how is it that interpretation can have such a broad range of meanings that at times conflict with each other? Moreover, given fundamental differences in the character of judgment and reflective thinking, how is a teacher supposed to apply Dewey's interpretive theory? Are they supposed to embrace a hermeneutic or a scientific mode of action? In response to these well-grounded questions/concerns, in this section, I will provide two distinctions that hopefully help resolve some of the inherent ambiguity in Dewey's thought and clarify how these conflicting elements fit together.

### *Interpretation: Broad and Narrow*

The first distinction pertains to the scope of interpretation. A passage that discusses the relationship between ideas, judgment, and reflection—the three main terms connected to interpretation—can help clarify: “We may compare complete reflection to a paragraph; then the judgment is like a sentence in the structure of the paragraph, and an idea is like a word in a sentence” (LW.8.221). According to this description, for Dewey, a series of ideas is necessary

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<sup>29</sup> The connection between interpretation and a scientific attitude is one that Dewey has made explicit: “science is of value because it gives the ability to interpret and control the experience already had” (EW.5.90).

for judgment to occur and a series of judgments for reflection to occur. These three components are related to understanding and connected to interpretation. This suggests that Dewey, throughout his work, talks of interpretation in both a broad and narrow sense. That is, an interpretation can be both composed by multiple other interpretations and combined with other interpretations to produce a broader large-scale interpretation. We speak of interpreting a word, a sentence, a passage, or a novel, and the broader interpretations are contingent on the narrower ones and vice versa. One's interpretation of a novel, for example, is contingent on one's interpretation of each of the constituent parts of the novel, whether these be sentences, paragraphs, or chapters.

Dewey's breakdown of judgment into two categories—final and partial—attests to this aspect of Dewey's thought. Final judgment constitutes a “warranted judgment or assertion” such as a final verdict of a court, while partial constitutes simple “estimates, appraisals, evaluations” such as opinions which are considered before a final decision is made (LW.12.125). If my account of Deweyan interpretation is accurate, this provides further evidence that Dewey's use of interpretation fits within a continuum. On the one side interpretation is employed in a narrow and commonsensical way; on the other side interpretation is employed broadly, in a more inclusive sense that is indicative of the interpretive (or hermeneutic) process in its totality.

#### *Interpretation: Habit and Method*

The second distinction is more substantive and pertains to the quality of interpretation. This distinction is based on differences between the two (seemingly conflicting) conceptions of interpretation addressed above: as judgment and as reflective thinking. *Interpretation as judgment* holds a hermeneutic quality which manifests in Dewey's three-dimensional description of judgment and is akin to the hermeneutic process described by Gadamer. Dewey's emphasis on

application takes seriously the link between interpretation/understanding and its—theoretical and practical—consequences, an aspect that no doubt reflects his pragmatist outlook. It, moreover, underscores that we must become mindful of our interpretive limitations and how our interpretations influence our conduct. On the other hand, *interpretation as reflective thinking* is more scientific than hermeneutic. Signification, as this pertains to reflective thinking, is accompanied by systematization and experimentation, two characteristics that foreground the prominence of method in Dewey's philosophy. Through the use of method, we are able to exercise some control over our interpretations and minimize the degree to which our prejudices distort our understanding.

Here we see an important divergence between Dewey's and Gadamer's interpretive theories. Dewey's continuous references to method can be understood as the overreliance on method that Gadamer worried about. Yet, it appears that Dewey's understanding of method is, at least to some degree, qualitatively different from method as critiqued by Gadamer. Gadamer's critique of method resembles Dewey's critique of positivism, while Dewey's description of method resembles Gadamer's description of the hermeneutic process. Method is another name for “intelligence in operation” (LW.4.163),<sup>30</sup> Dewey proclaimed, while repeatedly stating that “thinking is method” (MW.9.159).<sup>31</sup> Method is not something extrinsic or arbitrary but rather reflects how humans naturally operate, only in a less-sophisticated manner. Applying method is tantamount to thinking yet doing so consciously and systematically rather than passively or accidentally. Method exemplifies the “scientific habit of mind” that is associated with the

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<sup>30</sup> For Dewey, intelligence is directly connected to judgment and interpretation. “A man is intelligent,” he claims, “in virtue of his capacity to estimate the possibilities of a situation and to act in accordance with his estimate . . . Wherever intelligence operates, things are judged in their capacity of signs of other things” (LW.4.170).

<sup>31</sup> He also said that “scientific method . . . is thinking so far as thought has become conscious of its proper ends and of the equipment indispensable for success in their pursuit (MW.6.78).

cultivation of intellectual virtues such as curiosity, patience, and flexibility (MW.6.77), virtues that are also central for Gadamer.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, notwithstanding his skepticism about method, Gadamer emphasizes that “all correct interpretation must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought.”<sup>33</sup> Similar to Dewey, Gadamer explains that not all of our prejudices are equally legitimate and thus the fact that we rely on tradition to understand does not mean that we must accept it wholesale:

Understanding realizes its full potential only when the fore-meanings that it begins with are not arbitrary. Thus it is quite right for the interpreter not to approach the text directly, relying solely on the fore-meaning already available to him, but rather explicitly to examine the legitimacy—i.e., the origin and validity—of the fore-meanings dwelling within him.<sup>34</sup>

These similarities demonstrate the proximity between Dewey’s scientific attitude and Gadamer’s hermeneutic experience and that, in the words of Richard Bernstein, “many of the characteristics that Gadamer took to be distinctive of hermeneutic experience have been shown by the pragmatists to be characteristics of experimental science.”<sup>35</sup> This is, of course, not do downplay the differences between the two thinkers nor to equate Dewey’s method to the Gadamer’s hermeneutic process. Rather it is to show that Dewey’s understanding of *interpretation* may have more of a hermeneutic character than we tend to believe. Given the proximity of Dewey’s and Gadamer’s philosophy, it is fair to conclude that Deweyan interpretation—a blend of hermeneutic and scientific traits—is less like a science-based

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<sup>32</sup> Fairfield, *Education After Dewey*, 87.

<sup>33</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 279.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>35</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, “Pragmatism and Hermeneutics,” in *John Dewey and Continental Philosophy*, ed. Paul Fairfield (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 157.

procedural approach and more like a scientific habit of mind that teachers must develop to improve their interpretive capacities.

### **Conclusion: The Teacher as Interpreter**

In the course of my argument I demonstrated that Dewey places interpretation and guidance at the center of education and reestablishes the role of the teacher as interpreter and guide of the child. I argued that interpretation is the central task for the teacher while guidance is merely an extension or outgrowth of interpretation. I reconstructed a Deweyan theory of interpretation so as to uncover the—hermeneutic and scientific—characteristics of the interpretive process that teachers must undertake. For this purpose, I analyzed and synthesized Dewey’s main references to interpretation and revealed the nuance of the term that often gets lost in the nebulosity of Dewey’s language. Finally, I suggested that Deweyan interpretation has a hermeneutic character that manifests throughout his use of interpretation, but especially with regard to judgment, and that it also exhibits the scientific attitude that is characteristic of Dewey’s work.

At this point, we are in a position to decipher this “something” that allows us to interpret. What it all comes down to is one’s ability to be mindful of her interpretations, to realize that one can fall prey to her prejudices, and to be reflective so as to avoid misinterpretations that result from unchecked prejudices. Dewey’s experimentalist scientific attitude is conducive to this mindfulness and reflectiveness. Nonetheless, Reginald Archambault critiques Dewey for failing to provide a sufficient “criterion for determining the selection of interests which are to be nurtured and guided into more persistent patterns of behavior.”<sup>36</sup> While this may be true, this criticism is somewhat beside the point. First of all, a selection criterion would be time- and

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<sup>36</sup> Reginald D. Archambault, “The Philosophical Bases of the Experience Curriculum,” in *Dewey on Education*, ed. Reginald D. Archambault (New York: Random House, 1966), 172–173.

situation-bound, not universal. Circumstances change and, along with them, so do students' interests or *particularities* more general. Today's relevant criterion might tomorrow be irrelevant, the same way that today's valid hypothesis might tomorrow be invalid. The experimentalist scientific attitude propounded by Dewey is dynamic in character (an *active* habit) and encourages the teacher as interpreter to grow and reconsider previously held beliefs. Not only that, but Dewey's vision of democratic education depends on diversity of belief, a multiplicity of individual voices that are given trust and discretion to choose their own criteria and aims. Works such as "Democracy in Education" attest to this belief (MW.3.229–239). More importantly, though, even if we were to identify a criterion for *particularity* selection, applying it indiscriminately across the board could end up narrowing Dewey's idea of method to a technocratic recipe akin to those employed in today's flawed educational system. Any criterion narrower than increasing growth in the long run would be prone to such failure.

Reading Dewey through a hermeneutic lens illuminates this aspect of his thought. Dewey would be the first to admit that (any criterion of) *particularity* selection would inevitably be socially conditioned, as are teachers' interpretations of students' *particularities*. Social conditioning and the prejudices it begets, though limit what the teacher can understand, are what allows her to understand in the first place. They are the "something [that] must be already understood" (LW.8.227) to make thinking possible. These preliminary judgments or interpretations prompt the teacher to reflect, to come up with a guiding idea or hypothesis that engenders new and better observations. Better observations lead to revised judgments and so on. This is the hermeneutic circle in Deweyan terms, and herein lies the strength in having teachers

be interpreters.<sup>37</sup> Different teachers with different backgrounds and prejudices will note different student *particularities* and point the same student toward different directions. As long as these directions are conducive to further educative experiences and, hence, uninhibited growth, none of them is better than the other in any universal sense. Different directions might be better for different students from different ethnic backgrounds in different societies, cultures, and times, and students will prefer directions that most fit their needs, purposes, and idiosyncrasies. A more diverse teaching workforce would, therefore, be more likely to yield better interpretations. This is an important implication of Dewey's theory of interpretation that must inform educational policy choices, especially in highly diverse and pluralistic societies like the US.

The important question to ask then is not what criterion of interpretation to apply but, rather, how can a teacher avoid grossly misinterpreting students' *particularities* and misdirecting them toward externally imposed and/or unproductive ends? The answer lies in Dewey's theory of interpretation and the scientific attitude which can protect students from "the tyranny of hidden prejudices" of teachers;<sup>38</sup> viz., prejudices that surreptitiously distort understanding. A scientific attitude prompts teachers to be cautious and alert to such prejudices. It compels them to deliberate and hold their guidance practices as provisional. It disposes them to always be on the lookout and willing to revise ineffective practices.

The problem of misinterpretation and misdirection is one of great significance in today's education. One-size-fits-all curricula which eliminate interpretation and student voice and assert the prejudices of curriculum designers as the only criterion for worthwhile education, are increasingly becoming the norm. Aggressive standardization leads to increased curricular

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<sup>37</sup> Dewey says: "Increase of the store of meanings makes us conscious of new problems, while only through translation of the new perplexities into what is already familiar and plain do we understand or solve these problems. This is the constant spiral movement of knowledge" (LW.8.227).

<sup>38</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 282.

scripting in brick-and-mortar classrooms and extensive use of data analytics in virtual learning platforms. Such practices disregard the process of interpretation and scale the process of (standardized) guidance with the use of technologies that are often culturally biased and implemented wholesale. Scriptedness has reached unprecedented levels with the use of highly standardized lesson plans and technologies which in certain cases track the exact time spent on each activity to ensure uniformity across classrooms and schools.<sup>39</sup> The increasing popularity of blended learning leads to strong reliance on educational software and displaces the teacher to develop, what is ironically referred to as, more “personalized learning.”<sup>40</sup> Against this backdrop, Dewey’s emphasis on interpretation serves as an important reminder that teachers are fundamental to good education. The teacher *qua* interpreter is a role that cannot be performed by technology and outsourcing this role to educational software may potentially create more problems than it solves. Furthermore, Dewey’s account compels teachers to heed their interpretations and be mindful of human proneness to error. This is crucial for mitigating the negative effects of cultural mismatch in schools which renders marginalized students more vulnerable to misinterpretation, mistreatment, punishment, and criminalization.<sup>41</sup>

In light of these developments and enduring challenges, Dewey’s theory of interpretation suggests different directions for classroom interactions, and, indeed, teacher education itself. Dewey’s hermeneutic model suggests that instead of standardizing guidance we must help teachers become aware of and control their prejudices by helping them develop a scientific attitude toward interpretation. While developing this attitude is not a panacea or guarantee of

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<sup>39</sup> Julie Fitz & A. C. Nikolaidis, “A Democratic Critique of Scripted Curriculum,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 52, no. 2 (2020): 195–213.

<sup>40</sup> Anya Kamenetz, “High Test Scores At A Nationally Lauded Charter Network, But At What Cost?” *NPR*, June 24, 2016, nprEd, <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2016/06/24/477345746/high-test-scores-at-a-nationally-lauded-charter-network-but-at-what-cost>.

<sup>41</sup> Cheryl Staats, *Implicit Racial Bias and School Discipline Disparities: Exploring the Connection* (Columbus: Kirwan Institute, 2014), <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/ki-ib-argument-piece03.pdf>.

successful interpretation, it is the best way we have to improve teachers' interpretations and, by extension, student guidance. Ultimately, it comes down to the individual interpreter and, therefore, there are no infallible techniques or methods, as technocrats and policymakers increasingly seem to think. In Dewey's words:

No hard and fast rules for this operation of selecting and rejecting, or fixing upon significant evidential facts can be given. It all comes back, as we say, to the good judgment, the good sense, of the one judging. . . . Possession of this ability to seize what is evidential or significant and to let the rest go is the mark of the expert, the connoisseur, the *judge*, in any matter. (LW.8.213)

To the extent possible, we gain accuracy by adopting a scientific attitude based on deliberation and past experiences that have proven their value. However, this attitude can only take us so far when it comes to interpretation, as suggested by Dewey himself in the extract quoted at the beginning of this paper. Interpretation is difficult, hides many perils, and demands "sincerity and vigor" (LW.8.244). Nonetheless, it is an integral part of the educational process, one that deserves further and continued scrutiny.