

# **Civic Conscience, the True Educational Ideal in John Dewey and Jean Piaget**

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## Abstract

### Keywords:

civic conscience, democracy, educational ideal

In a world heavily challenged by new historical and technological developments, the civic conscience of the individual must regain a defining importance in the education process. As the culmination of efforts to shape the new generations, it reinstates democratic values in schools, so that we can find them later in society. Here, I will illustrate that two great philosophers of education, John Dewey and Jean Piaget, have already shown that educational systems should primarily aim towards civic conscience, even though neither of them uses the term explicitly. New solutions must be sought to reintegrate society into schools as an educational material, to foster the development of the skills that the citizen of tomorrow will need, a citizen who will not only have the mission to restore balance but also to ensure the progress of society.

## Zusammenfassung

### Schlüsselworte:

bürgerliches Gewissen, Demokratie, Bildungsideal

In einer Welt, die stark von neuen historischen und technologischen Entwicklungen herausgefordert wird, muss das bürgerliche Gewissen des Einzelnen eine entscheidende Bedeutung im Bildungsprozess wiedererlangen. Als Höhepunkt der Bemühungen um die Gestaltung neuer Generationen stellt es demokratische Werte in Schulen wieder her, damit wir sie später in der Gesellschaft finden können. Hier werde ich zeigen, dass zwei große Erziehungswissenschaftler, John Dewey und Jean Piaget, bereits gezeigt haben, dass Bildungssysteme in erster Linie auf das bürgerliche Gewissen abzielen sollten, obwohl keiner von ihnen den Begriff explizit verwendet. Neue Lösungen müssen gefunden werden, um die Gesellschaft wieder in Schulen als Bildungsmaterial zu integrieren, um die Entwicklung der Fähigkeiten zu fördern, die der Bürger von morgen benötigen wird, ein Bürger, der nicht nur die Mission hat, das Gleichgewicht wiederherzustellen, sondern auch den Fortschritt der Gesellschaft zu gewährleisten.

## 1. Introduction - Civic conscience and the aims of education

Defined as a component structure of the human psyche that connects oneself to human society, civic conscience is a part of the human personality, akin to thinking and memory. It should be understood with the same ontological consistency as self-awareness or moral conscience, psychic structures with an essential necessity demonstrated, if not otherwise, through the gravity of the consequences of their alienation. An impaired self-awareness leads to significant functional problems, and a tainted moral conscience is a danger both to oneself and to others. Similarly, when civic conscience is insufficiently formed or altered by internal or external factors, the individual lacks the necessary connections to identify with human society, doesn't understand their role, doesn't take a stance, doesn't engage, and doesn't contribute to the progress of the social organism. It functions in an autistic manner, thereby reducing its chances of development and it contributes to a social alienation.

Civic conscience is the third layer of human conscience. It cannot gain substance without the

preceding layers. It requires continuous self-knowledge to the same extent as it requires awareness and assimilation of moral principles. Therefore, the education of a human being must go through these steps, but the process of forming the human personality should not stop here. The knowledge and ability to act within the social sphere are skills without which one cannot achieve fulfillment as a human being. One must cover the informational level implied by the social sphere, develop the emotional capacities required for it, and form a motivational system, as well as the ability and promptness to act as a citizen. Human society, with its democratic values, depends therefore on the civic conscience of each citizen, and its formation primarily falls within the responsibility of the education system. The reality and concept of civic conscience, its development and stability for each new citizen, should be the backbone of the educational aims pursued throughout the entirety of the pedagogical process.



Two of the most influential theories of education to date demonstrate precisely the importance of civic conscience as an educational aim (Bhetuwal, 2022). Beginning with the definition of education and its entire theoretical and practical construction, Jean Piaget and John Dewey explain and demonstrate the symbiosis between democracy and education, pointing to the necessity of civic conscience, even though neither of them explicitly uses the term. The responsibility of education to look towards the future is emphasized, as well as using the past and the present to form a conscience that embraces common values. This perspective corrects the historical educational ideals that focused on an important yet limiting integration of the individual into society. Both Dewey and Piaget decontextualize the educational ideal by relating it not to a specific society, but to the universal values of democracy: progress and mutual respect, freedom, action and social harmony. Concrete reality becomes the teaching material, not the aim of education. The perspective of a future to which the individual must relate critically, autonomously, and creatively is taken into account, also highlighting the necessity of relating to the other, one seen as a conscious, not contextual, society.

At Dewey (1972) education involves restructuring or rearranging past experiences to enhance their significance and to improve the ability to influence subsequent developments. On the other hand, in Piaget's view (1972) education involves altering an individual's awareness and mentality, as *the transformation of conscience* regarding societal values, as *collective conscience* by aiding and expediting adjustment, along with its component processes of *accommodation and assimilation*.

Democratic values described through collaboration, mutual respect, non-violent solutions, participation, and assuming responsibility have a place not only in the educational ideal but also in the way the educational process is organized. Society must be reintegrated into the classroom, and a reevaluation of the educational process is essential for schools in order to support the transformation of society and facilitate the shift from patriarchy to democracy.

## 2. John Dewey - social reality, teaching material

Theorist, as well as a craftsman of such an educational revolution, is John Dewey, the American thinker who explains that any educational ideal that does not include the symbiotic relationship between the individual and society "is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy" (Dewey, 1977,

p. 87). A school that only seeks physical, cognitive, cultural and moral development has a narrow perspective, these are viewpoints that require expansion. The *individual-society* relationship must open this perspective, bringing the necessity and universality of democratic values. Dewey compares this relationship to the one between a parent and their child. They are mutually dependent and show an equal interest in progress. Similarly, by making available to future citizens all that it has gained for itself, society creates opportunities for its own future. However, it is not the individual who must adapt to a given society by ticking off the milestones set by the educational ideal society established; it is society that depends on its individuals and the direction it manages to impart to children's activities. Since the youth of today will eventually form the society of tomorrow, the characteristics of that future society will greatly depend on the guidance provided to children's activities in the past (Dewey, 1972).

In this equation, democracy appears both as an attribute of society and as a didactic principle. An essential element of the timeless ideal of society, and by extension, of education, democracy is also one of the means by which the educational ideal can be attained. That *methodos* (in greek: metha= after, odos= road, path ) must bring democratic society into schools, and transform schools into the first society where young people understand and practice democracy. Dewey's pragmatism thus highlights the symbiotic relationship between *education* and *democracy*, with the primary aim of education being to prepare for life in a democratic society, to shape not only the individual but also the citizen. In other words, Dewey talks about democracy in terms of connected life and shared experience. This kind of democracy involves relating the individual's actions to those of others and maintaining a constant dialogue among community members. In a democratic context, it is important not only the autonomy of the individual, but also the inevitable existence of the other, through co-citizenship. The existential condition of the individual is inherently fragile and precarious, but it can be overcome by an individual that uses their full potential. It is not a matter of eliminating confrontation from one's life, but rather facing it by using one's own intelligence and creativity. If all of this is accomplished, social and cultural constraints and all types of obstacles can be removed, and one's horizons can be expanded through emancipation and empowerment. Only from the diversity and multitude of stimuli and interests can a real liberation from all

types of constraints be achieved. This can facilitate individual growth, serving as the starting point for the advancement of human progress as a whole. This latter aspect of pragmatism is extremely important for Dewey. Therefore, only in a democratic context can appropriate education be achieved, which, in turn, is the primary tool through which the values and ideals of democracy can be affirmed and consolidated. The role of the school is to shape individuals as protagonists of social life, as people capable of dialogue and collaboration towards achieving common goals. While not explicitly stated, the concept of civic conscience is implicit in John Dewey's endeavors, elucidating the correlation between the individual and society, as well as between education and democracy. By establishing democratic values as the aim of education, it is acknowledged that human development remains incomplete until individuals cultivate the capacities that link them with the broader social community. This enables them to identify communal issues, actively participate in resolving them, and comprehend their role in shaping the course of societal advancement.

Philosophy itself is a "theory of education as conscious practical activity" that enables the assimilation of democratic principles. Given the conflicts between the established social interests and the aspirations on the institutional front, philosophy is the way to harmonize contradictory tendencies, a source of viewpoints and approaches through which a more equitable distribution of interests can be attained (Dewey, 1972, p. 282).

It is important to highlight, however, that without a clear formulation of the concept of *civic conscience*, Dewey's discourse tends to become inconsistent at times. The moral aspects of education are included in the natural goals of schooling, in the form of "perfecting behavior, forming habits of punctuality, order, and work," but at the same time, they are considered insufficient for the goals formulated by a desirable educational ideal (Dewey, 1977, p. 87). In this context, the moral considerations of human decision-making are equated with social competence, or in other words, civic competence. Ultimately, the moral and social dimensions of behavior are one and the same, Dewey acknowledges (Dewey, 1972).

We can find an explanation for Dewey's established identity relationship between the moral and civic conscience levels here if we analyze the reason for this similarity. This relationship serves to accentuate the common principle underlying the

formation of both types of conscience. This precisely concerns Dewey's pragmatic perspective on education—the need to bring society into schools, with its problems and specifics. This is the main way in which one could develop both moral and civic competences, if we can name them as such, since Dewey does not use these exact terms. Both levels of conscience therefore need an analysis of social reality, in order to be formed.

Social perceptions and interests can only evolve in an authentic social environment – an environment in which, through common constitution, you give and receive. The advocacy for education through continuous instructive activities is based on the fact that they offer the possibility of creating a social atmosphere. Instead of a school isolated from life, a school that is a place where knowledge is passed on, we will have a miniature social group in which learning and development are features of shared experience in the present (Dewey, 1972).

When examined closely within the school environment, society imparts meaning to theories and explanations, enables the understanding of moral good and evil, as well as social good and evil. It provides examples, problems and solutions, along with a comprehensive portrayal of life with all its values and manifestations of alienation. This approach aims to facilitate the comprehension of moral issues, while providing the environment in which young people can understand and actively engage in their roles as citizens.

Contemporary pedagogy also underscores the necessity of aligning schools more closely with reality. The teaching principle of merging theory and practice exemplifies this viewpoint (Cucuș, 2014). Unfortunately, however, 123 years after Dewey's demonstrations, many schools around the world have great difficulty in applying the theory for the formation of moral and civic conscience. The social environment and moral dimensions of everyday life remain largely excluded from schools. This holds true in the case of Romania as well, where a subject like "moral education" cannot be found within the school curriculum, the steps taken to shape Romanian citizens being small and cautious, the concept of *civic conscience* being absent from both theory and practical implementation.

To dispel any doubt regarding the fact that Dewey's education actually aims at civic conscience

rather than just moral conscience, let's analyze the educational principles the great thinker recognizes and adopts. He acknowledges Friedrich Froebel's merit for being the first to introduce the educational principles that education should strive to implement throughout its entirety (Dewey, 1977).

The first principle defines the primary task of education as the cultivation of young individuals' ability to coexist harmoniously for the benefit of each, thereby fostering an awareness of mutual interdependence. The second principle directs attention to the child's instinctive and impulsive attitudes and activities as the foundation of the educational process, rather than the mere presentation and application of external material. In other words, it underscores the very hunger for knowledge, as Dewey describes, which the educator must trigger in the child to ensure that education unfolds as naturally as possible, with maximum involvement from the learner. The third principle speaks to the integration of the first two, allowing the spontaneity and natural inclinations of individual interests to be harnessed for the practice and learning of social coexistence. It does so by recreating, at the child's level, the contexts and dilemmas of the larger society, enabling the educated individual to comprehend the causes, consequences, and potential solutions involved. The founder of the kindergarten recognized the necessity of human interdependence and even used toys he crafted to help the child understand this essential aspect of human society and nature itself. However, it is civic conscience the one that ensures human interconnectedness the two great educators refer to, and the formation of this conscience is, in reality, the goal of education, as is evident from the Froebelian principles that have become essential values in Dewey's philosophy of education.

### 3. Jean Piaget – Democracy, the path and destination of education

The developments made by Jean Piaget delve into the intimate mechanisms of shaping moral conscience, highlighting the necessity of democratic values both in the educational process and in the social environment. The concept of *mutual respect* becomes pivotal, and the autonomous moral success of a human being is necessarily determined by collaboration and mutual respect between the educator and the learner. Furthermore, Piaget transposes the stages of moral development of the individual to the social level, thus showing that different stages of democratic progress are achieved through the education of individuals.

To begin with, he recognizes Pierre Bovet's mastery in explaining the mechanism of forming duty as a moral obligation to certain values. Thus, the sense of duty is possible through the acceptance of an external command or order. Bovet explains that merely adopting the habits of others or imitating them does not result in the development of a sense of duty. Additionally, the affective component is essential: in order to accept a command, it is strictly necessary for there to be *a feeling of emotional dependence between the subject and the person or people who convey the order which will be perceived as a duty* (Bovet, 1911, p. 100).

Piaget considers this the most realistic explanation for the formation of *moral feelings and judgments*, or what we might call moral conscience. He indicates that emotional dependence is the engine that sets the mechanism of accepting duty into motion (Piaget, 2006). Regarding the conscience of rules, Piaget follows in Bovet's footsteps, stating that the feeling of responsibility emerges solely when the child embraces a directive from individuals they respect. The sense of respect takes on a central value in this *educator-educated* relationship. Piaget distinguishes between unilateral respect – that of the child towards the adult – and mutual respect – which is formed as the child matures, with the development of their reasoning and their abilities to comprehend and process information, a respect between equals. Awareness and acceptance of duty subsequently emerge from the combination of knowledge and respect, as an effect of fulfilling both conditions. *The other* is the provider of commands, of information, and also the source that generates the necessary respect for accepting duty. *The others* become the authority that conveys moral norms, and these norms are accepted as duties only when there is a sense of mutual respect between these two social actors. The adults in a child's life are the first ones who, through their emotional-cognitive dependence, transmit moral values that become accepted. Over time, these adults are replaced by society as a whole. The affective co-dependency is strengthened by a co-dependency of respect, and now the focus is on the relationship between the *individual* and the *social*. Thus, society - and civic conscience - conditions moral conscience, because respect for the society in which one lives can only emerge within a formed and functional civic conscience.

Piaget compares Bovet's vision with those put forth by Kant and Durkheim that reverse the relationship between *respect* and *obligation*. In both Kant's and Durkheim's perspectives, respect arises as

a consequence of obligation, with obligation stemming from the recognition of the universal moral law in Kant's case and from the acknowledgment of societal power and *social facts*, in Durkheim's case (Durkheim, 2002; Kant, 2006).

Piaget (2006) dissociates himself from both approaches, explaining that they depart from the psychological mechanisms he previously presented, which showed that commands are not accepted without the mutual respect between the learner and the source of the command. His research, which demonstrates the logic of his approach, started with analyzing how children accept the rules of games – activities that reveal the child's nature with the utmost sincerity. At different stages of childhood, morality takes the form of managing the rules of games. The following relationships are the primary focus: between *children and adults*, *children and children*, and *children and rules*. During this research, several stages of the child's relationship with the game rules were identified: "1) simple individual regularities; 2) imitation of adults with egocentrism; 3) cooperation; 4) interest in the rule itself" (Piaget 2006, p 52).

Around the age of 7-8, the child experiences a *moral realism* which involves valuing the command itself, so it gradually detaches from the moral authority of *others* until it ends up perceiving its own role in modifying those commands that lead to social injustices. This is where the socio-political implications of accepting duty arise, with responsibility over the decision and the ability to modify commands/rules/laws, the command becoming necessarily democratic. This is the point at which Piaget is no longer discussing moral conscience but rather civic conscience. By transitioning from moral commands to social commands, Piaget demonstrates the con-substantiality of morality and civic-mindedness. He shows that his theory actually aims beyond moral conscience, and the related concepts of democracy that he considers *sine qua non* in his pedagogy support this idea once again.

Piaget introduces the necessity of a democratic education to shape the moral structure of human beings. Distinguishing between the two types of morality – constraint-based and cooperation-based – which are specific to different stages of moral development, Piaget reveals that heteronomy is a step towards autonomy, and the acceptance of externally imposed rules gradually transforms into the acceptance of rules based on rational justifications. Responsibility shifts from being objective initially to

becoming subjective in maturity, where individuals understand consequences and causality, with an awareness of connections and a complete vision of the social realm. The morality of cooperation is founded on solidarity, focusing entirely on the autonomy of conscience and intentionality. Respect, which in the first stage was unidirectional, becomes mutual in a moral-educational relationship where both poles recognize each other's dignity and authority. For adults, rules are viewed as *a product of agreement between contemporaries, acknowledged to be modifiable, provided there is a democratically established consensus* (Piaget & Inhelder 2005).

Piaget extrapolates his analysis from the realm of children's relationships to that of adults, clearly illustrating the correlation between the rules of games and social rules. Differences in their manifestations in the two relational fields arise from differences in attitudes, beliefs, intellectual development, and reasoning. These components of civic conscience indicate, once again, that the ultimate aim of education is to form this layer of conscience. What is essential, however, is how Piaget translates this theory to the social scale. *The morality of mutual respect opposes the morality of unilateral respect – in terms of values, but causally they stem from each other* (Piaget & Inhelder, 2005).

Childish individualism, in the form of "egocentrism", which refers to the child's state of closure, of natural focus on one's own interests, is seen as pre-social, as a stage prior to socialization and is associated with moral constraint. Adults hold authority, and children acknowledge it. This is the formula for managing authority that takes the form of gerontocracy. Childlike morality can persist into adulthood, especially in societies that prioritize conformity and adhere to traditional hierarchies, often labeled as primitive. Democratization or association with moral cooperation is the next stage, where we could say the formation of civic conscience begins. (Piaget & Inhelder, 2005)

In primitive or less developed societies, gerontocracy dominates, with younger generations accepting the structure of moral rules out of obedience to the previous generations and the wisdom bequeathed about the achievement of well-being. An *emancipation of societies* has led to generational equalization, so individuals are no longer as constrained by the legacy of previous generations. There is a consequent opening up and detachment leading to spiritual independence. How can this

change take place? Through the knowledge and understanding of various influences and through cooperation between equal individuals.

The more complex society is, the more autonomous the personality becomes, and the more important the relations of cooperation among equal individuals are. (...) Cooperation naturally takes the place of coercion, and consequently, the morality of mutual respect replaces the morality of authority (Piaget & Inhelder, 2005, p 374).

Hence, the necessity of social evolution from conformism and gerontocracy towards democracy becomes evident. This transition leads from a citizen insufficiently formed or alienated to one who, possessing civic conscience, understands societal interests and continuously relates to them to achieve personal ideals and improve social balance. Critical thinking, rationality, and the capacity to rationally filter and potentially modify the sets of rules established by authority become essential in evolved societies.

The transition from heteronomy to moral autonomy necessitates cooperation, which may initially lead to criticism and individualism, but it is essential for understanding diversity and comparing unique individuals within it. This marks the decline of unilateral respect. As the capacity for individual rational judgment develops, the conscience of what is good arises – a conscience whose autonomy stems from understanding and applying the rules of reciprocity and mutual respect. Instead of obedience, concepts such as justice and mutual assistance are emphasized, serving as the foundation for obligations that were previously enforced as incomprehensible commands (Piaget, 2006).

Why is democracy a desideratum? Because "mutual information and convictions formed through persuasion make for a higher quality of experience than what can otherwise be achieved on any wide scale" (Dewey, 1977, p 186). The chances for human life to be lived at its highest parameters are much greater in a democratic context, where values such as individual freedom, assuming responsibilities, cooperation, and mutual respect as the foundation of human relationships are genuinely put into practice. Mutual information and convictions formed through persuasion foster an open social environment built on trust, quite the opposite of one constructed through repression and coercion. Similar to a child subjected to constraint and force as educational methods, a citizen

raised in a totalitarian social context becomes duplicitous, at least. The values displayed in the official space differ from those governing the private space, and existential decisions deviate from official coordinates.

#### 4. Civic conscience, the solution to present challenges

Ideas from these two great philosophers of education have been incorporated into subsequent writings, underscoring the essential importance of civic conscience formation in various forms for future social equilibrium. In 1988, for instance, six competencies were identified as strictly necessary for the 21st-century citizen (Newell & Davis, 1988).

These include civic literacy, critical thinking, social conscience, tolerance and respect for diversity, global citizenship, and political action. Civic literacy involves the ability to understand, analyze, and think of potential solutions for major societal issues. Critical thinking involves questioning everything coming from authority. Tolerance and respect for diversity are essential due to the heightened multiculturalism of societies on nearly every continent. Global citizenship involves identifying with humanity as a whole, addressing problems and solutions on a global scale. Political action is the behavior that embodies all the other requirements, including informed and rational voting, participating in public authority activities and involvement in politics, organizing elections, protesting against authority misalignment, or opposing unjust laws.

Among these six citizen requirements, *social conscience* seems closest to civic conscience. It is defined as the ability to identify the common good. It includes empathy, without which a society would become deeply segmented and morally bankrupt.

There are offered means necessary for cultivating these competencies, involving progressive education and interdisciplinary study, specifically their combination (Newell & Davis, 1988). The methodology of traditional education is rejected, including any other form of education that returns to it. Traditional education is one in which the student and the teacher are at a considerable distance, differences in status not allowing students to be involved in curriculum development, the teaching process, or even important decisions concerning them. The teacher is an expert, a dominant, infallible authority. In the same context, scientific knowledge is carried out in very clearly delimited disciplines, and the link between school and society is seriously

flawed. Progressive education and interdisciplinary study are designed to overcome these vulnerabilities and bring the student closer to the teacher and to knowledge in general. The student is given the opportunity to teach, while the teacher engages with the students and learns from their peers who specialize in other fields, since reality is studied through phenomena and processes in an integrative manner. The phenomena or facets of reality that teachers scrutinize require the intersection of numerous sciences and disciplines. We find with precision the principles of progressive education conceived and implemented in the United States by John Dewey. However, there are some interesting concrete proposals made by the authors of the 1980s to make the development of the six competencies possible. In this way, it is considered that encouraging experiences from actual social life can be achieved through the requirement of public and political projects lasting at least one semester, aimed at addressing concrete issues of the local, national, or international community. These projects involve interdisciplinary studies of the scientific aspects related to real-life experiences. Compensating educators who actively integrate the social dimension into their teaching and promoting a higher level of teacher engagement, both institutionally and individually, in external political life to serve as role models for their students, are among the suggestions made. Strong student involvement in campus administration, choosing leadership structures, and curriculum development directions is recommended as well. It is proposed that the teaching process should combine traditional disciplinary courses with interdisciplinary courses taught in a progressive manner both at introductory levels and at advanced stages of research. In conjunction with prioritizing active citizenship as a core element of a liberal education, regarded as a crucial priority within the education system, voting registration is even proposed as a graduation requirement (Newell & Davis, 1988).

Recent predictions targeting the challenges of the year 2050 suggest that Citizenship Education can prepare, guide, and direct new generations, endowing them with the skills they need to confront what lies ahead to the maximum benefit of humanity. Civic conscience assumes a central role. While we cannot accurately predict the precise circumstances of life in 2050 and beyond, Citizenship Education, as a school subject, can already in 2020, start preparing, guiding, and steering children and young adults towards acquiring a range of skills that will likely remain

relevant under any conditions. These include fostering a consciousness and ethical sense concerning actions that benefit humanity (van der Walt, 2020).

For the formation of civic conscience, the previous stages must be taken into account. These begin with a focus on one's own well-being, aiming at self-awareness, but they expand to include the capacity to differentiate between what is morally right and wrong, and what is just and unjust, with reference here to moral conscience. Future human performance is seen as a life characterized by goodness, productivity, and significance, a meaning that undoubtedly relates to the social scale, and the qualities envisioned for shaping the desired personality are innovative, creative, capable of independent thinking, and resilient in challenging situations.

## 5. Conclusions

Unfortunately, the 21st century is marked by the hardships and calamities faced by humanity, which, in the era of globalization, have a far-reaching impact across the globe. Events like the Covid-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia seem to be the biggest so far. Solutions to mitigate the effects may, however, come from the same background of globalization, but also through the formation of civic a conscience of citizens of the new century which, if it does not remain democratic, may bring even greater disasters. Specialists' observations reveal an intense state-nation fragmentation due to global migration and inadequate integration of new groups. Dangerous populist nationalism is on the rise, with some racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious minorities refusing to identify with the values and symbols of the nation-state. We are, therefore, witnessing a phenomenon of *failed citizenship* which can only be rectified through the promotion of a *participatory and transformative citizenship*, in other words, by instilling civic conscience (Banks, 2017). In this endeavor, schools are playing a central role.

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