Dewey's work in education was designed to explore the theoretical implications of his philosophy for pedagogy and also to put this philosophy to an experimental test. As he said, his theory of knowledge emphasized the "necessity of testing thought by action if thought was to pass over into knowledge," and this proviso extended to his theory of knowledge itself. Education, he felt, was an ideal area of experience in which to test a philosophy because "the school is the one form of social life which is abstracted and under control—which is directly experimental, and if philosophy is ever to be an experimental science, the construction of a school is its starting point." Dewey arrived at Chicago with a pretty good idea of the sort of laboratory school he wanted to start. In the same letter in which he decried the deplorable condition of Chicago's public schools he told Alice:

There is an image of a school growing up in my mind all the time; a school where some actual and literal constructive activity shall be the centre and source of the whole thing, and from which the work should be always growing out in two directions—one the social bearings of that constructive industry, the other the contact with nature which supplies it with its materials. I can see, theoretically, how the carpentry, etc., in building a model house shall be the centre of a social training on the one side and a scientific on the other, all held within the grasp of a positive concrete physical habit of eye and hand.

Dewey made a pitch to university officials for a school that would keep "theoretical work in touch with the demands of practice" as the most essential component of a department of pedagogy—"the nerve of the whole scheme"—and he received the support of Harper, who was himself an important activist in the campaign for educational reform in Chicago. A little over a year later, in January 1896, the Laboratory School of the University of Chicago opened its doors. The school began with sixteen children and two teachers, but by 1903 it was providing instruction to 140 students and was staffed by twenty-three teachers and ten graduate assistants. Most of the students were from professional families, many of them the children of Dewey's colleagues. The enterprise quickly became known as the "Dewey School," for the hypotheses tested in this laboratory were strictly those of Dewey's functional psychology and democratic ethics.21

Dewey was convinced that many of the problems of prevailing educational practice grew out of its foundations in the faulty dualistic epistemology he was attacking in his writings on psychology and logic in the 1890s, and he set out to design a pedagogy grounded in his own functionalism and instrumentalism. Having spent a good deal of time observing the growth of his own children, particularly his infant son Morris (who, tragically, had died of diphtheria on the family's trip to Europe in 1895), Dewey was certain that there was no difference in the dynamics of the experience of children and adults. Both were active beings who learned by confronting the problematic situations that arose in the course of the activities engaging their interests. For both, thinking was an instrument for solving the problems of experience, and knowledge was the accumulation of wisdom that such problem-solving generated. Unfortunately, the theoretical insights of functionalism had had little impact on pedagogy, and the identity between the experience of children and that of adults was ignored in the schools. As Dewey said:

With the adult we unquestioningly assume that an attitude of personal inquiry, based upon the possession of a problem which interests and absorbs, is a necessary precondition of mental growth. With the child we assume that the precondition is rather the willingness disposition which makes him ready to submit to any problem and material presented


21. JD to Alice Dewey, 1 November 1894, Dewey Papers; "A Pedagogical Experiment" (1896), Early Works 5:244; "Pedagogy as a University Discipline" (1896), Early Works 281–286; "The Need for a Laboratory School" (nd), Early Works 5:433–435; Katherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards, The Dewey School (New York: Atherton Press, 1966), pp. 8–57, 464; McCaul, "Dewey's Chicago," p. 275. The school was the "Dewey School" in another sense as well: Alice worked there as a teacher and later as principal and four of the Dewey children were among its pupils. This family connection would, as we shall see, become a source of difficulties.
from without. Alertness is our ideal in one case; docility in the other. With one, we assume that power of attention develops in dealing with problems which make a personal appeal, and through personal responsibility for determining what is relevant. With the other we provide next to no opportunities for the evolution of problems out of immediate experience, and allow next to no free mental play for selecting, assorting and adapting the experiences and ideas that make for their solution. How profound a revolution in the position and service of text-book and teacher, and in methods of instruction depending therefrom, would be effected by a sincere recognition of the psychological identity of child and adult in these respects can with difficulty be realized.22

It was precisely this revolution that Dewey aimed to effect. Children did not, he said, arrive at school as passive blank slates on which teachers might write the lessons of civilization; by the time a child entered the classroom, he was “already intensely active, and the question of education is the question of taking hold of his activities, of giving them direction.” The child they brought with him four basic “native impulses”—the “impulse to communicate, to construct, to inquire, and to express in finer form”—which were the “natural resources, the uninvested capital, upon the exercise of which depends the active growth of the child.” The child also brought interests and activities from the home and neighborhood in which he lived, and it was the task of the teacher to make use of this raw material by guiding the activities of the child toward valuable results.23

This argument, advanced in The School and Society (1899) and The Child and the Curriculum (1902), placed Dewey at odds with both the proponents of a traditional, “curriculum-centered” education and romantic reformers who advocated a “child-centered” pedagogy. The traditionalists, led by William Torrey Harris, now U.S. commissioner of education, favored disciplined, step-by-step instruction in the accumulated wisdom of civilization. It was the subject matter that furnished the end and determined the methods of education. The child was expected simply “to receive, to accept. His part is fulfilled when he is ductile and docile.” On the other hand, the advocates of child-centered education, such as G. Stanley Hall and prominent members of the National Herbart Society argued that instruction in subject matter should be subordinated to the natural, uninhibited growth of the child. For them the expression of the child’s native impulses were “the starting point, the center, the end.” These schools of thought waged a fierce battle with one another in the 1890s. Traditionalists defended the hard-won knowledge of centuries of intellectual struggle and viewed child-centered education as a chaotic, anarchistic surrender of adult authority, while romantics celebrated spontaneity and change and charged their opponents with suppressing the individuality of children by means of a boring, routinized, despotic pedagogy.24

To Dewey, this debate was evidence that yet another pernicious dualism was afflicting American culture. The dispute could be resolved, he said, if both sides would get rid of the prejudicial notion that there is some gap in kind (as distinct from degree) between the child’s experience and the various forms of subject-matter that make up the course of study. From the side of the child, it is a question of seeing how his experience already contains within itself elements—facts and truths—of just the same sort as those entering into the formulated study; and, what is of more importance, of how it contains within itself the attitudes, the motives, and the interests which have operated in developing and organizing the subject-matter to the plane which it now occupies. From the side of the studies, it is a question of interpreting them as outgrowths of forces operating in the child’s life, and of discovering the steps that intervene between the child’s present experience and their richer maturity. (CC, 277–278)

23. The School and Society (1899), Middle Works 1:95, 30. Page numbers for further references (SS) appear in the text.
former as something to be got away from as soon as possible and as much as possible; so it is the danger of the 'new education' that it regard the child's present powers and interests as something finally significant in themselves" (CC, 280). It would be wrong, he argued, to cultivate the purposes and interests of children "just as they stand." Effective education required that the teacher use these purposes and interests to guide the child toward their culmination in the subject matter of science and history and art. "Interests in reality are but attitudes toward possible experiences; they are not achievements; their worth is in the leverage they afford, not in the accomplishment they represent" (CC, 280). The subject matter of the curriculum was the embodied experience of the human race, and, as such, it was that toward which the immature experience of the child pointed. "The facts and truths that enter into the child's present experience, and those contained in the subject-matter of studies, are the initial and final terms of one reality," he concluded. "To oppose one to the other is to oppose the infancy and maturity of the same growing life; it is to set the moving tendency and the final result of the same process over against each other; it is to hold that the nature and the destiny of the child war with each other" (CC, 278).

Deweyan pedagogy called upon teachers to perform the extremely difficult task of "reinstating into experience" the subject matter of the curriculum (CC, 285). This subject matter, like all human knowledge, was the product of man's efforts to solve the problems that confronted him in experience, but, as a formal body of knowledge, it had been abstracted from the problematic situations that originally occasioned its development. Traditionalists argued that this knowledge should simply be imposed on the child in a sequence of steps determined by the logic of this abstracted body of truth, but presented in this fashion the material was of little interest to children and, moreover, failed to instruct them in the methods of experimental inquiry which had produced this knowledge in the first place. As a consequence, teachers had to resort to an appeal to interests unrelated to the subject matter such as the child's fear of pain and humiliation to produce the appearance of learning. Rather than impose the subject matter on children in this fashion (or simply leave them to their own devices as romantics advised), Dewey called upon teachers to "psychologize" the curriculum by constructing an environment in which the present activities of the child would be confronted with problematic situations in which the knowledge and skills of science, history, and art would be required to resolve these difficulties. "If the subject-matter of the lessons be such as to have an appropriate place within the expanding consciousness of the child, if it grows out of his own past doings, workings, and sufferings, and grows into application in further achievements and receptivities," he said, "then no device or trick of method has to be resorted to in order to enlist 'interest'" (CC, 288). The curriculum was, in effect, saying to the teacher "such and such are the capacities, the fulfillments, in truth and beauty and behavior, open to these children. Now see to it that day by day the conditions are such that their own activities move inevitably in this direction, toward such culmination of themselves" (CC, 291).

If teachers were to teach in this fashion, to direct a child's development by indirection, they would, Dewey acknowledged, have to be highly skilled professionals, thoroughly knowledgeable in the subject matter they were teaching, trained in child psychology, and skilled in the techniques of providing the stimulus necessary to make the subject matter part of a child's growing experience. As two of the teachers in the Dewey School remarked, such a teacher had to be capable of seeing the world as both a child and an adult saw it. "Like Alice, she must step with her children behind the looking glass and in this imaginative land she must see all things with their eyes and limited by their experience; but, in time of need, she must be able to recover her trained vision and from the realistic point of view of an adult supply the guide posts of knowledge and the skills of method." Dewey admitted that most teachers did not possess the knowledge and skills necessary to teach in this fashion, but he contended that they could learn to do so, and by the end of the decade he could cite evidence from his own school to prove his point.

At the center of the curriculum of the Dewey School was what Dewey termed the "occupation," that is, "a mode of activity on the part of the child which reproduces, or runs parallel to, some of work carried on in social life" (SS, 92). Divided into eleven age groups, the students pursued a variety of projects centered on particular historical or contemporary occupations. The youngest children in the school, who were four and five years old, engaged in activities familiar to them from

25. In an influential critique of Dewey's philosophy of education Richard Hofstadter claimed Dewey failed to provide teachers with ends toward which to direct the child's impulses, quoting Dewey as urging teachers simply to "let the child's nature fulfill its destiny." This is, however, but half the quotation. Dewey's injunction, in full, was: "Let the child's nature fulfill its own destiny, revealed to [the teacher] in whatever of science and art and industry the world now holds as its own." (CC, 291). See Hofstadter, Anti-Intellectualism in American Life (New York: Vintage, 1963), p. 375.

their homes and neighborhood: cooking, sewing, and carpentry. The six-year-olds built a farm out of blocks, planted wheat and cotton, and processed and transported their crop to market. The seven-year-olds studied prehistoric life in caves of their own devising while their eightyear-old neighbors focused their attention on the work of the sea-faring Phoenicians and subsequent adventurers like Marco Polo, Magellan, Columbus, and Robinson Crusoe. Local history and geography occupied the attention of the nine-year-olds, while those who were ten studied colonial history, constructing a replica of a room in an early American house. The work of the older groups of children was less strictly focused on particular historical periods (though history remained an important part of their studies) and centered on scientific experiments in anatomy, electro-magnetism, political economy, and photography. The search of the debating club formed by the thirteenyear-old students for a place to meet resulted in the building of a substantial clubhouse, which enlisted children of all ages in a cooperative project that was for many the emblematic moment in the school’s history.

Because occupational activities pointed on the one hand toward the scientific study of the materials and processes involved in their practice and on the other toward their role in society and culture, the thematic focus on occupations provided the occasion not only for manual training and historical inquiry but also for work in mathematics, geology, physics, biology, chemistry reading, art, music, and languages. In the Laboratory School, Dewey reported, “the child comes to school to do; to cook, to sew, to work with wood and tools in simple constructive acts; within and about these acts cluster the studies—writing, reading, arithmetic, etc.” Skills such as reading were developed when children came to recognize their usefulness in solving the problems that confronted them in their occupational activities. “If a child realizes the motive for acquiring skill,” Dewey argued, “he is helped in large measure to secure the skill. Books and the ability to read are, therefore, regarded strictly as tools.”

Katherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards, who taught in the Laboratory School, later provided a full account of this remarkable educational experiment filled with evidence of the considerable success Dewey and his colleagues achieved in translating his theories into practice, evidence supported by the testimony of less interested observers as well. It would take us too far afield to examine in any detail how the school established an environment in which the occupational interests of the children were made to serve a wide range of curricular aims, so one example described by Mayhew and Edwards will have to suffice. The six-year-old students in the school, building on the experiences with home activities they had had in kindergarten, concentrated their work on “occupations serving the home.” They built a model farm in the sandtable in their classroom, and in the schoolyard they planted a crop of winter wheat. As with most constructive activities in the school, the building of the model farm provided an occasion for learning some mathematics:

When their sand-table farm had to be divided into several fields for wheat, corn, oats, and also for the house and the barn, the children used a one-foot ruler as a unit of measurement and came to understand what was meant by “fourths and halves”—the divisions made, though not accurate, were near enough to allow them to mark off their farm. As they became more familiar with the ruler and learned the half-foot, and the quarter-foot and inch, finer work was naturally expected of them and obtained. . . . When building the farm-house, four posts were needed for the corners and six or seven slats, all of the same height. In measuring the latter, the children frequently forgot to keep the left-hand edge of the ruler on the left-hand side of the slat, so the measurements had to be repeated two or three times before they were correct. What they did to one side of the house, they also did to the other and naturally worked more rapidly and more accurately as the work was repeated.

It is difficult to read through descriptions and accounts of the Laboratory School and understand how Dewey came to be seen by critics as a proponent of “aimless” progressive education. He explicitly stated his curricular goals, and they were readily apparent in the classroom practice of the teachers with whom he worked. He valued mankind’s accumulated knowledge as much as the most hidebound traditionalist, and he intended that the children in his elementary school be introduced to the riches of science, history, and the arts; here his goals were rather conventional, but they were clearly expressed. He also wanted them to learn to read, to write, to count, to think scientifically, and to express themselves aesthetically. Only his methods were innovative and radical. It may well be true, as Richard Hofstadter said, that much of “progressive education” was methodologically “fertile and ingenious” yet “quite unclear, often anarchic, about what these methods should be used to teach,” but this indictment does not, as Hofstadter supposed, apply to Dewey.29
