



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

## John Dewey, William Wirt and the Gary Schools Plan

**Citation for published version:**

Thorburn, M 2017, 'John Dewey, William Wirt and the Gary Schools Plan: A centennial reappraisal', *Journal of Educational Administration and History*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2017.1284770>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1080/00220620.2017.1284770](https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2017.1284770)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Journal of Educational Administration and History

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Journal of Educational Administration and History on 1 February 2017, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00220620.2017.1284770>

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



# **John Dewey, William Wirt and the Gary Schools Plan: A centennial reappraisal**

## **Abstract**

A century on from the height of John Dewey's educational writings and the reputation of the Gary Schools Plan as a model of progressive education, the paper reappraises two key matters: the relationship between John Dewey and William Wirt, the first superintendent of the Gary Schools in Gary Indiana, and the coherence between John Dewey's progressive pedagogies and the early years of the Gary Schools Plan. Through drawing on a range of primary and secondary sources of information, the paper analyses the connections between John Dewey, William Wirt and the Gary Schools Plan in their shared quest to extend progressive education into new urban and industrial schooling contexts. The paper highlights areas where existing assumptions require review and the extent to which the relationship and connections between Dewey and Wirt's work were mutually beneficial. The paper ends by calling for further related research based on the archival material available.

Key words: John Dewey, William Wirt, Gary Schools Plan, Progressive education, United States of America

## **Introduction**

Straddling the twentieth century was a twenty-year period between the mid-1890s and mid-1910s when the emphasis in schooling in the United States of America (USA) moved from serving and sustaining rural and largely agricultural communities to invigorating education within new urban industrial towns and cities (Cohen, 2002). Underpinning this expansion was a desire by progressive educators to criticise traditional teaching methods, promise greater freedom for children and professionalise teaching (Reese, 2013). In building momentum for innovative schools which challenged conventional practices, *Schools of Tomorrow* (Dewey & Dewey, 1915/1980) collated amongst others examples the Junius Meriam's experimental school at the University of Missouri and Mrs. Johnson of Fairhope. A further example, the Francis W. Parker School in Chicago is of particular interest, as Parker towards the end of his long career in teaching was writing on *Democracy and Education* (Parker, 1894/2013). This was more than two decades before a text of the same title was published by John Dewey; a text 'often pointed to as the best overall expression of his general philosophy' (Fesmire, 2015, p. 21). Parker founded and

was the first Principal (1899-1901) of a private experimental school that later merged with the Chicago Institute, which in itself merged with the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago in 1904. For Parker (1894/2013, p. 111) ‘democracy is the shortest line of resistance to human development’ and the goal of humanity and human development is freedom, as possession of freedom comes with the capacity to be happy and an upstanding citizen capable of sound ethical actions. And, the way to acquire freedom is ‘in one word – education’ (Parker, 1894/2013, p. 111). Thus, while Dewey may well have been the leading figurehead of progressive education at this time he was nevertheless part of a broader reconstruction of progressive education practices taking place. However, a concern with the examples mentioned and the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, which John Dewey (1859-1952) and his wife Alice started in 1896 with 16 pupils and two teachers (Cremin, 1961), was that they relied on private funding, favourable staff/pupil numbers and generous facilities. For example, by 1902, the Laboratory School had 140 pupils, 23 instructors and ten assistants. However, there was one school project that stood out as being different both in terms of size and through being part of public education. It was the Gary Schools Plan, which had over 1000 pupils by 1908 and 3000 pupils in 1911 (Cohen & Mohl, 1979). And, as Cremin (1961) notes, the further one reads in *Schools of Tomorrow* (Dewey & Dewey, 1915/1980) the more comprehensive the examples become with the schools of Gary, Indiana coming last and elaborated on in most detail.

Gary in Indiana was a new and rapidly expanding steel making city on the southern shores of Lake Michigan, where public schools were ‘becoming world famous by providing more balanced attention to work, play and study’ (Reese, 2013, p. 328). The Gary Schools Plan aimed to instil the idea of education as engaging with an embryonic community which reflected the

occupations of life with children experiencing extended opportunities to learn in playgrounds, gardens, libraries as well as machine shops, laboratories and assembly halls (Cremin, 1961). These intentions were managed through a departmentalised system which involved children alternating between class-room based subjects and those requiring more specialist facilities (the platoon system). By running classroom and work/play programmes concurrently the Gary schools could be efficient with twice the number of pupils in attendance relative to the norm in other schools. In addition the combination of intellectual and practical teaching extended into the evening with further time available for extra work and leisure in areas of interest (Cohen, 2002). A further key feature of the expansion of the curriculum was the introduction of manual training classes for the younger children and vocational programmes for older pupils.

William Wirt (1874-1938) began his thirty-year tenure as the first superintendent of schools in Gary in 1907 and is credited as being able to show how low cost efficient timetabling, innovative curriculum and methods and inventive school building design could improve the relationship between schools and other community resources (Levine & Levine, 1970). Wirt ideas were predicated on only two fixed principles - 'all children should be busy all day long at work, study and play under right conditions' (Bourne, 1916/1970, p. lxxv) and the facilities of the entire community should be properly coordinated so they supplement on another. Wirt was fortunate in the control he had from the outset in developing his plans. For example, Wirt chose William B. Ittner to be the architect for the proposed four elementary schools and two high schools planned. This was 'a prophetic choice' (Cohen, 2002, p. 5) as Ittner had far reaching ideas on how school architecture and layout could better meet a broader range of educational outcomes. In other respects the 'Gary curriculum, in spite of its many special features, is neither eccentric or

overcrowded. It follows the regular course of study laid down for Indiana schools by the State Department of Public Instruction' (Bourne, 1916/1970, p. 113). Overall, as Cohen (2002, p. 21) notes, while Wirt was not a particularly original thinker he did have his finger on the progressive pulse and was 'adept at borrowing a program here, a concept there, and fitting them together into a coherent whole that captured both pedagogical innovations and the latest administrative developments set within the most modern physical plant.'

The scope of Wirt's vision meant that by 1911 many teachers and social reformers, both nationally and internationally (and including Evelyn Dewey) were interested in visiting the Gary Schools with visitor numbers capped at times and access restricted (Levine & Levine, 1970). Earlier, Wirt had attended De Pauw University intermittently between 1892 and 1899 and during this period attended additional summer classes at the University of Chicago which 'exposed Wirt to John Dewey's school innovations ...' (Cohen, 2002, p. 2). Wirt moved in 1899 to become superintendent of schools at Bluffton where the intention was that children should find it natural to want to go to school and that schools should meet their responsibilities with regard to broadening the curriculum, showing flexibility within the school day and improving facilities (Cohen, 2002). During his eight years at Bluffton, Wirt extended the school day use of school facilities and expanded the curriculum by increasing vocationally-related manual training classes and integrating these with academic subjects in order to draw upon the latest curriculum theories. Wirt was later to recall the pleasure of Francis W. Parker's endorsing manual training and other practical subjects being part of the curriculum (Cohen, 2002). As Bourne (1916/1970, p. 10) notes, 'Wirt came to Gary with his educational ideas matured after this long testing' (at Bluffton)

with the Gary Schools representing ‘the fruit of a very unusual combination of education philosophy, economic engineering, and political sagacity’ (Bourne, 1916/1970, p. 10).

Cohen (2002, p. 5) does report however that after Wirt’s departure ‘the Bluffton schools quickly reverted to a traditional organisation and curriculum.’ Therefore, as a backdrop to the Dewey/Wirt focus under review it benefits noting that there was a wider tension evident between administrative progressives and pedagogical progressives in American education at this time.

Cohen and Mohl (1979, p. 173) consider that administrative progressivism was ‘as a conservative-orientated movement - one which sought to reassert the dominance of elites in society and politics, one which sought to restore the freedom of the individual which was fast disappearing before the forces of immigration, industrialization and urbanization’ whereas, pedagogical progressivism was more focused on improving the conditions of the poor through the efforts of those working directly in schools and through the implementation of programmes which benefitted the disadvantaged.

In 1894 John Dewey became Head of Department of Philosophy, Psychology and Education at the University of Chicago. Two years later, the university-based Laboratory School which trialled Dewey’s educational ideas began. The school ran successfully from the start with its educational results being ‘entirely satisfactory, as everyone from the most to the least committed agreed’ (Ryan, 1995, p. 136). However in 1903 plans to install Alice Dewey as Principal following a merger with another elementary school (the Chicago Institute) ran into difficulties as Alice had been publicly critical of this school. Some staff threatened to resign when learning of the school merger plans. The University Principal investigated this matter and refused to confirm

Alice's appointment. This led to both Dewey's renouncing all of their University of Chicago appointments (Fesmire, 2015).<sup>1</sup> It was during the Chicago years (1894-1905) that we get a fair idea from Dewey of how his curriculum would work in practice (Kliebard, 1986) as Dewey produced many important writings of pedagogical interest e.g., *Interest in Relation to the Training of the Will* (Dewey, 1896/1973); *My Pedagogic Creed* (Dewey, 1897/1973) and *The Child and the Curriculum and the School and Society* (Dewey, 1899/2008). Thereafter, in his first decade at Columbia University, Dewey's produced important but more wide ranging writings e.g., *How We Think* (Dewey, 1901/2007), *Schools of Tomorrow* (Dewey & Dewey, 1915/1980) and *Democracy and Education* (Dewey, 1916/1980).

Given these various influences, the paper focuses on a critical reappraisal of John Dewey's thoughts on educational futures and William Wirt's development of the Gary Schools Plan. It pursues these ambitions through researching two specific questions, namely:

- The extent of the relationship between John Dewey and William Wirt during the early years of the Gary Schools Plan
- The coherence between John Dewey's progressive pedagogies and William Wirt's school organisational procedures

### **The relationship between John Dewey and William Wirt during the early years of the Gary Schools Plan**

---

<sup>1</sup> Despite the Dewey's departure the Laboratory Schools in Chicago remain to this day. Around one-half of students are 'the children of University of Chicago faculty, including at one time the children of Barack and Michelle Obama' Fesmire (2015, p. 20).

Researching the relationship between John Dewey and William Wirt's is aided by the extensive writings of Dewey and by Wirt having 'kept almost everything that crossed his desk, including correspondence, reports and publications' (Cohen, 2012, p. 245). Furthermore, Bourne (1916/1970) and Flexner, and Bachman (1918/1970) following their respective observations in 1915 and 1916 completed extended evaluations of the Gary Schools Plan. In addition, Cohen and Mohl (1979) and Cohen (2002) have authored more recent texts on the Gary Schools Plan and its connections with progressive education and schooling and society. In investigating the links between John Dewey's writings and the early years of the Gary Schools Plan, it might be anticipated given the personal endorsement John Dewey provided for the Gary Schools Plan (Dewey & Dewey, 1915/1980) and Dewey and Wirt's University of Chicago connections that there would be a rich array of primary data for historians of education to draw upon in understanding better the relationship between the two men. However, this is not the case in terms of personal correspondence, with the William Wirt manuscripts held at the Lilly Library at Indiana University containing only four letters between John Dewey and William Wirt from 1914 and 1919 and two brief letters with Evelyn Dewey (daughter of John Dewey). Furthermore, some of the letters are quite perfunctory e.g., one from John Dewey in May 1914 enquires about possible visiting times for Evelyn Dewey, and notes in advance that the visit should be helpful with regard to her collecting some material for me 'regarding modern illustrations of educational principles in which I'm sure from what I've heard Gary is very rich.'<sup>2</sup> Wirt replied within a few days and four weeks later in June 1914, Evelyn Dewey spent two days at Gary as Dutton (Dewey's publishers) were eager to complete the publication of *Schools of Tomorrow* (Dewey & Dewey, 1915/1980). In January, 1915, Evelyn Dewey wrote to Wirt with proofs of one of two

---

<sup>2</sup> Letter from John Dewey to William Wirt, May 10, 1914, William A Wirt Manuscripts, Lilly library, Indiana University, Bloomington.

chapters she wrote for *Schools of Tomorrow* in the ‘hope it represents the sort of explanation that you like to have given of the schools.’<sup>3</sup> As Westbrook (1991) notes, observation by John Dewey himself might have led to a more critical perspective on Wirt’s accomplishments.

The letter from Evelyn Dewey in January, 1915 has more interest as it contains a dinner invitation to Wirt when he is next in New York. The handwritten letter expresses the intention ‘to meet Mr. Franklin H. Giddings the new member of the Board of Education. He is sure to be very sympathetically interested in your work here.’<sup>4</sup> Six months earlier in June 1914, the Mayor of New York (John Purroy Mitchell) visited the Gary Schools with others including the President of the New York Board of Education (T.W. Churchill) with the embryonic plan being that the vocational education programme pioneered at the Gary Schools would be rolled out across New York State with Wirt ‘hired as a consultant on a one-week-a-month basis at a fee of \$10,000 a year’ (Levine & Levine, 1970, p. xxxv). At the time, Franklin H. Giddings was Professor of Sociology at Columbia University and a new colleague of Dewey. The letter signals that John Dewey was keen to support the expansion of the Gary Schools Plan even though in New York in 1917 the support of the Mayor, the Board of Education ‘and a favourable press were insufficient to ensure that far-reaching changes in the schools could be implemented’ (Levine & Levine, 1970, p. xliii). There is no primary evidence that the Dinner went ahead.

A further letter in the Dewey/Wirt archive is a reply by John Dewey on December 21, 1917 to what is presumed to have been an earlier general invitation from Wirt to support plans for the

---

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Evelyn Dewey to William Wirt, January 12, 1915, William A Wirt Manuscripts, Lilly library, Indiana University, Bloomington.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

formation of an organisation of progressive school superintendents. Reflecting Lagemann's (1989) view that Dewey increasingly became interested in broader educational concerns after leaving the University of Chicago in 1905, Dewey declined the invitation to join the scheme as 'I do not feel that a person like myself who is not in school administrative work can be of any particular use in such a directly practical undertaking.'<sup>5</sup> Dewey then took the opportunity to move on to extend his commiserations that the Gary Schools Plan was not to be taken up in New York, noting that:

I need not tell you that I was disappointed at the outcome here, but I cannot say that I was in anyway surprised. The authorities continued their old system of imposition from above to such an extent that the teachers would be irritated by and antagonistic to the best conceived scheme in the world.<sup>6</sup>

As 'John Dewey was not a man to choose sides easily' (Kliebard, 1986, p. 30) this affirmation of the Gary Plan is a considerable one. Dewey then moves onto state that:

I have advised the people who have consulted me to drop agitation for the Gary system entirely, on the ground that the last election eliminated it from further consideration, and then to make every effort to cooperate with the new Administration so far as the latter shows any disposition to be progressive.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Letter from John Dewey to William Wirt, December 21, 1917, William A Wirt Manuscripts, Lilly library, Indiana University, Bloomington.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

The last dated letter in the Dewey/Wirt archive was sent from Peking (Beijing) China on November 12, 1919 by John Dewey seeking to arrange a visit by a Chinese delegation to the Gary Schools. There is no evidence of a reply.

In the Preface to *Schools of Tomorrow* there is no explicit mention of William Wirt or the Gary schools, even though two other teachers (Mrs. Johnson of Fairhope and Miss Georgia Alexander of Indianapolis) are individually thanked. Thus, while much has been made of Wirt being a ‘disciple of Dewey’ (Levine & Levine, p. xi) the extent to which this is the case is not noticeably discernible from a review of the correspondence between the two men. In fact, there is no evidence that the two men ever met in person (although it is possible that Wirt was tutored by Dewey when in class at the University of Chicago). In summary, what the brief correspondence between Dewey and Wirt reveals is two men relating to each other in ways which match accounts of their personalities: Dewey as slightly reticent and someone whose ‘personal papers reveal no very passionate *vie intérieure*’ (Ryan, 1995, p. 38) and Wirt who was ‘aloof and rigorous’ (Cohen, 2012, p. 7) in his wider personal/professional role.

### **The extent of the coherence between John Dewey’s progressive pedagogies and William Wirt’s school organisational procedures**

Unlike Francis W. Parker who ‘began in the realm of practice and only later moved to theory’ (Cremin, 1961, p. 136) Dewey, during the Laboratory School years was trying to reconcile child-centered views of the benefit of interest in education with views more concerned with the training of the will through engagement with mental disciplines (Dewey, 1896/1973). Dewey was attracted to neither prospect and sought to reconstruct the terms of the debate. He did this

through outlining a more uplifting and optimistic account of how learning could take place in areas which did not fall within children's immediate areas of interest and by reducing in subject terms the developmental distance between the child and the object of teaching (Ryan, 1995). As Dewey notes, when expanding on how interest is connected with attention, the 'pedagogical problem is to direct the child's power of observation, to nurture his sympathetic interest in character traits of the world in which he lives' (Dewey, 1899/2008, p. 141). Progress on this basis could lead to the development of reflective attention where the child becomes 'absorbed in what he is doing; the occupation in which he is engaged lays complete hold upon him' (Dewey, 1899/2008, p. 145). As such, there is a transition to voluntary attention between the ages of eight to twelve with children increasing their powers to understand problems in terms of their intellectual abstraction in addition to their practical challenges. And so a 'person who has gained the power of reflective attention, the power to hold problems, questions, before the mind *is* (original emphasis retained) in so far, intellectually speaking, educated' (Dewey, 1899/2008, p. 147). Thus, reflective attention involves reasoning and deliberation, asking questions and registering a 'power of control; that is, a *habit* (original emphasis retained) of considering problems' (Dewey, 1899/2008, p. 147).

One way of achieving such a reconstruction was to make the 'school a miniature community, where the child lived, participated and contributed - where, in effect, the child's emerging individuality was at one and the same time used to enrich the social community and tested against the dictates of social reality' (Kliebrard, 1986, p. 63). Dewey articulated this unifying concept through what he called *occupations*. This rather cumbersome term was designed to mean a 'mode of activity on the part of the child which reproduces, or runs parallel to some form of

work carried out in social life' (Dewey, 1899/2008, p. 132). This experiential process would enable children to gain control of their world through their intelligence. Therefore, a curriculum built around social occupations would merge individual and social ends and in so doing resolve the central tension within education theory (i.e., between child centered and subject centered learning imperatives) *and* address the industrial changes happening in American society at the turn of the twentieth century. In so doing, Dewey 'was hoping not only to educate but to restore to modern life the role that he believed knowledge once played in pre-industrial society' (Kliebard, 1986, p. 85). Both Dewey and Wirt identified strongly with homespun rural beliefs and were concerned that the new urban age might undermine the contribution rural family living can make in terms of 'character building, physical development and vocational training' (Cohen & Mohl, 1979, p. 11).

One reason for their similar views may have been their similar upbringings. Dewey was born and raised in Burlington, Vermont and worked in the lumber yards during his youth and lived among a relatively diverse working class community where modest houses and 'distant mountains shorn of trees bore witness to the social and environmental costs of the rise of industrial capitalism' (Fesmire, 2015, p. 11). Wirt was a country boy who enjoyed nature walks and discovering the outdoors. Both men found traditional aspects of schooling dull, detached and repetitive and found relief through the spontaneity of self-discovery, engaging in work and from the atypical examples of more inspired and flexible teaching they experienced. For Dewey, his upbringing contributed to 'anxieties about the collapse of religious faith, the horrors of inner-city destitution, the ineducability of the poor, and the instability of working-class employment' (Ryan, 1995, p. 36). For Wirt, indolent time spent on the streets was a severe hindrance to children's education,

and as Cohen and Mohl (1979, p. 12) note, schools should ‘supply the virtues of country life missing in the city because the traditional bastions of morality and control - family, church, work - had declined in importance.’

Unsurprisingly, therefore Dewey had a great interest in democracy and education and the part schools could play as an agent of social progress (Dewey, 1916/1980) while Wirt had an interest in how teachers at the Gary Schools could blend vocationally-related manual training with subject learning in a way which did not regard vocational learning as less important and more restrictive than academic learning. Similarly Dewey considered that practical methods associated with living and learning, where the child is ‘given, wherever possible, intellectual responsibility for selecting the materials and instruments ... (and) an opportunity to think out his own model and plan of work ... within the range of his capacities’ (Dewey, 1899/2008, p. 133-134) were vital in experiencing activity and showing children the complexities of the modern world (Ryan, 1995). This form of integrated learning was preferable to conceiving of methods of living and learning as distinct studies. Likewise, as Bourne (1916/1970) noted, Wirt believed that you cannot know when a child is learning and that it is ‘the constant impingement of impressions that really educates him, and it is this that the intellectual side of the Wirt school is skilfully designed to cultivate’ (p. 28). The impingement of impressions was aided by application work/lessons; a distinctive feature of the Gary Schools designed to give expression through activity. In this way, subject specialist teachers (a hallmark of the Gary Schools) used in science ‘the application period for the care of the lawns, trees, shrubbery, the conservatories, the gardens, the animal pets’ (Bourne, 1916/1970, p. 72). Such an approach was consistent with Deweyan thoughts on the importance of getting children to think coherently and intelligently and with a clear end in

view about what the benefits of applied learning were, both for them and for their social community more widely (Dewey, 1910/2007).

During the time when the Gary Schools Plan was taking shape, Dewey was encouraging teachers to support children to live more emotionally engaged and imaginative lives amidst the changing times and conflicts which were an everyday feature of life. Dewey's pedagogical intentions were informed by the part the teacher plays in prompting enquiry and constructing group dialogue, so that children can be supported to take on greater responsibility for their learning as well as engaging in choice-related decision-making that helps them to enhance their skills in exercising agency. For this to happen, teachers should be occupied not with subject matter but with its interaction with children's needs and capacities (Dewey, 1916); especially when problem-based activities are part of shared learning, and where there is a willingness to communicate experiences and findings. Dewey considered that teachers should help children to think scientifically, as without 'the scientific spirit one is not in possession of the best tools which humanity has so far devised for effectively directed reflection' (Dewey, 1916, p. 197). Thus, even though Dewey modified and clarified his pedagogical ideas e.g., with regard to how teachers would benefit from comprehending gradations of interest in order to seek out new ways of engaging with pupils i.e., as evident by the type of questions asked, the ways tasks are described and the connections which are made between areas of shared interest among pupils (Jonas, 2011), the challenges of making these improvements in practice without professional learning support should not be underestimated.

Relative to American educational thought and practice at this time, Dewey's focus on problem solving enquiry was designed to highlight how interest in education could be achieved without requiring set curriculum arrangements to exist at the same time as arguing that through problem solving enquiry children would wish to make the effort required to succeed without becoming unduly passive or excessively disinterested. This attempt to find a balance between the influences of neo-Herbartianism (a focus on concentration and developmental interest) and W.T. Harris (the development of the intellect) also overtook advocates of Froebel's endorsement for play which Dewey considered slightly detached from the central purposes of school life, especially with regard to school's preparation of children for adult life (Ryan, 1995). The theorising of Dewey on these matters appears to have a good deal in common with the practice of the Gary Schools where Wirt considered that workshops were vital as a learning environment as pupils can do interesting things with their minds as well as their hands. In this way, pupils' curiosity is aroused in activities in which older pupils engage in and which form part of adult life (Bourne, 1916/1970).

Dewey recognised that to make changes in schools required curriculum planning and pedagogical adjustments allied to a transformation in the way schools were organised and managed. In this respect, Wirt was fortunate as noted earlier, 'in being able to organize the schools without hindrance from tradition or powerful entrenched interests' (Cohen & Mohl, 1979, p. 14). Wirt came to increasingly believe that the school principal or superintendent should be a business manager or administrative officer, while the educational policies of schools should be the responsibility of subject teachers' who are unburdened by excessive administration. This

contrasts with Dewey's position that educational administrators should be teachers, who carried out temporary administrative responsibilities (Lagemann, 1989).

In reviewing the interface between Dewey's progressive pedagogies and Wirt's school organisational procedures, the analysis of Bourne (1916/1970) is useful as Dewey was 'Bourne's intellectual and philosophical hero' (Levine & Levine, 1970, p. xxxvi) as well as being 'a cultural radical, interested in the modern world, and ... in the schools of his time' (Levine & Levine, 1970, p. xvi). Indeed, Bourne's enthusiasm for the Gary Schools Plan needed constrained editorially by his publisher (Houghton Mifflin), who cautioned Bourne to be less eulogistic as the findings of the Gary Plan have yet to be sufficiently tested (Levine & Levine, 1970). And, despite being dejected by the need to produce a less impressionistic and more neutral account of events, Bourne nevertheless reports on the potential of social reform through education and of how the Gary Schools curriculum broke down the distinction between the utilitarian and the cultural and subjected them to the social: this 'is the key note of Gary education' (Bourne 1916/1970, p. 130). The aforementioned 'application' periods are evidence of this approach, as freedom of movement and conversation are essential in producing a natural and to an extent self-governing learning climate which reflects a workshop rather than a classroom. Bourne (1916/1970, p. 116) describes history rooms being 'smothered in maps and charts, most of them made by the children themselves in their effort to learn by doing' and in science 'pupils and teachers meet on common ground to exchange ideas about their experiences in dealing with natural phenomena' (p. 123). Again, Bourne (1916/1970, p. 127) notes:

... a boy brings to the chemistry class a bag of low-grade iron ore which he has found in the vicinity. The class, under the direction of the teacher, construct a simple electric furnace and

reduce the ore. This experiment is then used as the basis for a study of the great steel industry upon which the city of Gary is founded.

This is similar to Dewey's Laboratory School where children 'learned about metal smelting and built their own furnace' (Ryan, 1995, p. 138) and highlights Dewey and Wirt's belief that 'the individual who is to be educated is a social individual and that society is an organic union of individuals' (Dewey, 1897/1973, p. 445).

Flexner and Bachman (1918/1970) provide a contrasting perspective to Bourne (1916/1970) based on their extended field observations between February and June 1916. Their criticisms centre on the extent to which Wirt was consumed by his business management rather than educational role (Lagemann, 1989). Within these arrangements educational supervision was often lax with teachers largely left to realise educational aims and as best possible be innovative in their attempts for able and older pupils to help out through their various school wide roles and responsibilities. What generally pervades Flexner and Bachman's (1918/1970) analysis is a sense of scepticism over the possibilities for pedagogical progressivist reform, as the teaching observed rarely progressed from a central integrated task with much of the primary teaching being rather staid with subject departmentalization increasing rather than lessening difficulties. This is a long way from Bourne's description of 'self-activity, self or cooperative instruction, freedom of movement, camaraderie with teachers, interesting and varied, study and play ... (combining) ... to produce those desirable intellectual and moral qualities that the world most needs today' (Bourne, 1916/1970, pp. 142-143). Thus, while Flexner and Bachman believed that the Gary Schools provided facilities which 'attempted to practice democratic theory in school conduct and discipline' (1918/1970, p. 301), defective school organisation and poor educational supervision

led to the vision of the plan falling short in its execution. This finding deeply affected Flexner as it marked the 'evolution of his own position from moderate progressivism ... to unrelenting antiprogressivism' (Cremin, 1961, p. 160). Flexner's position was thus markedly different to Bourne's (1916/1970, p. 176) belief that the Gary Schools marked 'a distinct advance in democratic education' and one which was capable of imitation and adaptation across the USA.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has reappraised two key questions: the nature of the relationship between John Dewey and William Wirt and the coherence between John Dewey's progressive pedagogies and the early years of the Gary Schools Plan. These questions have been raised at a time when there has been a resurgence of interest in the writings of Dewey (Fesmire, 2015). With regard to the first question, there is a need for caution in suggesting that John Dewey and William Wirt had anything approaching a close working relationship until a more nuanced and extended review of the Wirt archive is completed. A review of the Wirt archive, as well as the Bourne archive held at the Butler Library at Columbia University, could provide interesting insights from a wider range of primary sources e.g., from correspondence between Bourne and Wirt, Flexner and Wirt as well as related policy reports and newspaper materials.

Next the paper reviewed the extent of the coherence between John Dewey's progressive pedagogies and William Wirt's school organisational procedures and found some theoretical and practical evidence of coherence. For example, Bourne (1916/1970) noted signs of social reform through education, as most evident by children being interested in self and shared experiential-led activity which was capable of fostering intellectual and moral qualities. However, these seeds

of optimism need to merge with Flexner and Bachman's (1918/1970) less flattering evidence of poor supervision and teachers floundering due to high workload and being unprepared in subject terms for their complex pedagogical role. This latter view is closer to Ryan's (1995, p. 146) interpretation that 'the one example of a school system supposedly devoted to running all its schools on Deweyan lines, the school system at Gary, Indiana ... evaporates on closer inspection.' Furthermore, Ryan (1995, p. 146) posits that 'Dewey himself never seemed to be quite sure of which of his ideas were capable of large-scale implementation in the American public school system' before highlighting three reasons (expense, high teacher workload and unclear vision) why Dewey's influence on education in schools is less than expected. With regard to the first reason (expense), Wirt's inventive management and administration system was widely admired and financed within 'a normal tax-rate and at a per-capita cost of both construction and management no greater than that in the city of Chicago and the city of New York' (Bourne, 1916/1970, p. 8). This happened at the same time as teachers' salaries were the highest in the state. Thus, in terms of efficiency, Wirt's efforts are applauded even among his sternest critiques e.g., Flexner and Bachman (1918/1970, p. 299) consider that 'one the credit side of the ledger must be placed the fact that Gary has adopted, and taken effective steps towards providing facilities for, a large and generous conception of public education.'

By high teacher workload (second reason) Ryan (1995) was not citing concerns over large class sizes and long teaching hours but rather the pedagogical demands of project-based (workshop-led) enquiry with its constant demand to assimilate knowledge with practical experience and to continually recast learning tasks to foster intellectual and moral development. The evidence on this matter is more contested, for while Flexner and Bachman (1918/1970) cite evidence of poor

supervision, teacher inexperience and modest professional support there was according to some authors, notably Bourne (1916/1970), examples of inspirational learning and teaching, and of effective execution of the Gary Plan. That said Bourne (1916/1970, p. 149) recognised that ‘for the burden upon the teacher, much has been said to the effect that the Gary plan is unpopular among teachers because of the extra work it entails.’ However, Bourne (1916/1970, p. 149) moves onto assert that over time most teachers come to prefer the Gary system once they adjust to a system ‘which repeatedly calls upon them for initiative, alters their relations to their pupils, and requires a more practical attitude of application toward the subject-matter of instruction.’ And, as Cohen (2002) notes, with regard to teachers ‘Wirt had an uncanny ability to generate a fierce loyalty to himself and his programs.’

The third reason (lack of clarity over Dewey’s educational vision) was often predicated on the basis that Dewey’s concern with social engagement in communities compromised the achievement of high intellectual attainment. This manifest itself in circumstances where the brightest pupils became intellectually restrained and insufficiently critical over how their lives were faring and insufficiently able to be more independent at times in distancing themselves from their immediate circumstances and working out in more national and international terms what their contribution to the world might be (Ryan, 1995). These concerns raise the associated question of measuring attainment, and certainly Dewey would have been ‘hostile to standardized tests and academic examinations’ (Ryan, 1995, p. 148). The evidence from Gary on attainment is mixed along familiar Bourne viz. Flexner and Bachman lines with Levine and Levine (1970, p. 295) finding it necessary as editors to mention that Flexner and Bachman under acknowledged

‘the foreign population when comparing Gary with other cities’ when commenting on the intellectual development and attainment standards realised in the Gary Schools.

More widely, it is arguable that there was pedagogical coherence evident in places e.g., Dewey’s emphasis on problem solving, experiential learning and vocational preparation linked to Wirt’s curriculum design imperatives for application lessons. As such, theory and practice values between Dewey and Wirt were mutually beneficial and mutually supportive to an extent at key points in their respective careers. Therefore, Wirt’s blending of administrative and educational professionalism did to some extent exemplify (through a focus on keeping pupils busy, a clear place for subject knowledge and vocational preparation) a viable practical elaboration of some of Dewey’s main pedagogical ideas. In this respect, Wirt’s Gary Schools Plan was a helpful counterpoint to the predominant criticism Dewey faced i.e., that many of his ideas were prone to excessive and misconstrued child-centred influences when put into practice (Westbrook, 1991). However, if a more extended review of the Wirt archive reveals little further findings which link Dewey’s progressive pedagogies with Wirt’s school organisational procedures then it remains a more open question about whether greater pedagogical progressivism gains could have been achieved if the two men had met and worked more closely together. For as Labaree (2005) notes, what came to characterise the development of the Gary Schools Plan in Wirt’s later years as superintendent was a predominant focus on administrative progressivism rather than sustaining and advancing pedagogical progressivism.

## **References**

- Bourne, R.S., 1916/1970. *The Gary Schools*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Cohen, R.D., and Mohl, R.A., 1979. *The Paradox of Progressive Education: The Gary Plan and Urban Schooling*. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press.

- Cohen, R.D., 2002. *Children of the Mill: Schooling and Society in Gary, Indiana, 1906-1960*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Cremin, L.A., 1961. *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1896-1957*. Knopf: New York.
- Dewey, J., 1896/1973. Interest in Relation to the Training of the Will. In: J.J. McDermott (ed.), *The Philosophy of John Dewey: The lived experience*. New York: Capricorn Books (421-441).
- Dewey, J., 1897/1973. My Pedagogical Creed. In: J.J. McDermott (ed.), *The Philosophy of John Dewey: The lived experience*. New York: Capricorn Books (442-453).
- Dewey, J., 1899/2008. *The Child and the Curriculum including The School and Society*. New York: Cosimo Classics.
- Dewey, J., 1910/2007. *How We Think*. Stilwell, KS: Digireads.
- Dewey, J., 1913/1969. *Interest and Effort in Education*. Bath, Cedric Chivers.
- Dewey, J., 1916/1980. Democracy and Education. In: J.A. Boydston (Ed.) *John Dewey: The Middle Works (1899-1924) Volume 9*. Carbondale, Southern Illinois Press.
- Dewey, J., & Dewey, E., 1915/1980. Schools of Tomorrow, In: J.A. Boydston (Ed.) *John Dewey: The Middle Works (1899-1924) Volume 8*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press.
- Fesmire, S. 2015. *Dewey*. London: Routledge.
- Flexner, A., and Bachman, F.P., 1918/1970. *The Gary Schools: A General Account*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Jonas, M.E., 2011. Dewey's conception of interest and its significance for teacher education, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 43 (2), 112-129.
- Kliebard, H.M. 1986. *The Struggle for the American Curriculum 1893-1958*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Labaree, D.F., 2005. Progressivism, Schools and Schools of Education: An American Romance, *Pedagogica Historica*, 41 (1), 275-288.
- Lagemann, E.C. 1989. The Plural Worlds of Educational Research, *History of Education Quarterly*, 29 (2), 185-214.
- Levine, A., and Levine, M., 1970. Introduction to the New Edition, in: *The Gary Schools*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Parker, F.W. 1894/2013. Democracy and Education, *Schools: Studies in Education*, 10 (1), 111-121.

Reese, W.J., 2013. In search of American progressives and teachers, *History of Education*, 42 (3), 320-334.

Ryan, A., 1995. *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Westbrook, R.B. 1991. *John Dewey and American Democracy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.