The Lost Vision of 1920s Personalists

At the end of the 1920s, around the same time as he was fighting for popular democracy against administrative progressives like Lippmann, Dewey began to push back against another wing of the progressive movement that I term “personalism.” In some ways, the personalist vision was even more antibureaucratic than Dewey’s. As a result, to some extent Dewey was in a struggle against both more conservative and more radical progressives. As I show in this chapter and the next, however, this way of framing his position obscures the fact that Dewey was much closer to the personalists than he would ever admit. Dewey tended to describe the positions of the personalists as simply atheoretical caricatures of his model of collaborative democracy, but in fact the personalists developed authentic and sophisticated alternative visions of democracy and freedom that drew deeply from Dewey’s own philosophy.

In terms of education, during the 1920s most schools, especially public schools, continued to be ruled by the social-control approaches of the administrative progressives. Beginning before World War I, however, a burst of activity began to coalesce around the creation of new private and more holistic “progressive” schools. While smaller than the 1960s free schools movement discussed in the next chapter—never extending beyond a relatively small number of radical pedagogues—this was still the first time that a significant group of nonadministrative progressives began to try their hand at education. Early in the decade, in the 1910s, this blooming of progressive pedagogy seemed promising to Dewey, who wrote a supportive book about some of these schools with his daughter Evelyn in 1915. However, his discomfort grew with what he increasingly perceived as a diversion from his own vision of democratic progressivism. Finally, in 1929 he wrote the first of a series of stern critiques of these “progressive” schools. Part of his discomfort arose from that fact that, as Robert
Westbrook noted, “responsibility for ‘progressive education’ was often laid at his doorstep” whether it actually followed Dewey’s recommendations or not. In fact, at least some of these new progressives seemed to think they were actually following Dewey’s lead. Thus, he worried that they were distorting his own pedagogical vision in the public mind.

This chapter lays out key arguments of personalist intellectuals and educators in the 1910s and 1920s. (For reasons of brevity I generally refer to this entire period as the 1920s.) I argue that many of Dewey’s complaints about the personalists were unfair to the rich sophistication of their ideas and practices. I acknowledge, however, that the multiplicity of voices during the 1920s made it challenging to discern any overarching personalist theoretical framework. For that, in the next chapter, I look to the free schools movement during the 1960s and 1970s, when a more coherent framework to support a very similar personalist educational movement emerged. Overall, this chapter seeks to map out the central differences between Dewey and the personalist educators of the 1920s, at the same time seeking to establish personalism as an authentic and fully coherent alternative vision of progressive education.

Like other forms of progressivism, the personalist vision emerged out of middle-class cultural commitments. In fact, schools working in this tradition almost singularly served the children of middle-class professionals. Three key characteristics distinguished personalist from Deweyan democratic education. First, while both Dewey and the personalists emphasized individual uniqueness and egalitarian communities, the personalists were not very interested in initiating children into sophisticated models of collaboration. Second, the personalists tended to focus their energy on social development, on the emergence of healthy, happy, emotionally stable people, often assuming that cognitive development would mostly take care of itself. Dewey, in contrast, constructed sophisticated theories of individual learning meant to initiate children into a process of “scientific” problem solving. Finally, while both Dewey and the personalists held democracy up as a central value, the personalists tended to assume that a democratic society would naturally emerge if individuals were simply allowed to develop in “authentic” ways. In a general sense, then, teachers in the personalist vision looked more like therapists, while in Dewey’s collaborative progressive vision they looked more like social and cognitive engineers.

Education scholars have tended to see personalist and collaborative perspectives as radically opposed to each other. In large part this is the result of Dewey’s attack on personalists in *Experience and Education* (*E & E*). In *E & E*, Dewey contrasted what he declared was his authentic vision of progressive education with what he felt were the misreadings of