

**In the Work, by the Work and for the Work:
Village Institutes as a Revolutionary Practice of
Dewey's Philosophy**

**Evrin Baran
Ph.D. Student
Iowa State University**

**Mehmet Sahin
Ph.D.
Iowa State University**

In the Work, by the Work and for the Work: Village Institutes as a Revolutionary Practice of Dewey's Philosophy

The Historical and Intellectual Context of Village Institutes

In Turkey, with the foundation of Republic, the most immediate problem was education. According to the census in 1927, only 4.7 % of the general population was able to read. The percentage of the ones who were able to write was lower. The young republic launched a “literacy mobilisation” programme under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in order to remove this big problem. There was also an educational attempt to transform Turkey into a modern country in all levels of the society. This transformation could only be possible with particular attention to rural areas of Turkey where majority of the population resided during 1930s. Moreover, the need for disseminating the ideologies of new regime to the rural areas and reaching the countryside was accurate which made intelligentsia shift their minds from elitist to more peasant side. The rise of the idea of Village Institutes strongly paved under the social and intellectual climate in 1930s when many reforms were being implemented in all societal levels transforming from an Ottoman infrastructure to a modern democratic Turkish Republic. Karaömeroğlu (1998) states the aims of founding Village Institutes as follows:

- To spread Kemalist ideologies to rural and reach the mind and hearts of the countryside.
- To teach peasants contemporary techniques of production and thus develop rural Turkey
- To improve the quality of life in the villages
- To modernize the social relations
- To bring an end to poverty

Above all, one of the most significant goals was to educate young people in countryside “in technical matters necessary to benefit the agricultural economy” (Karaömeroğlu, 1998, p. 54). Thus, the students who were educated in Village Institutes would ultimately become teachers in villages in rural areas to be sent back to villages as teachers who would be missionary of revolutions of the Republic and could understand the needs of

peasants better than the teachers who were educated in urban areas. Sabahattin Eyüboğlu (1979) indicated:

Another idea was to combine teaching and education with the work and to allow students to gain the knowledge in life struggle. The lesson was going to be house construction, planting, fighting against illnesses, exploration of the earth, commanding the livestock and machines, managing the cooperative itself and life; and culture was going to be gained together (p. 24).

The idea of Village Institutes was actually mentioned by an eminent philosopher, John Dewey, who came to Turkey in 1924. In his report he clearly states the way how Turkey can be transformed into a modern and democratic society:

There is a need for village schools, schools that will respond to the needs of farmers who are the base of Turkish men's life, some kinds of schools that will bring up teachers... To render education general and obligatory in schools without attaching any special importance to the interests and needs of villagers and farmers constitutes a danger that can create social problems. An educational system that is created without considering the needs of farmers would become theoretical and scholastic (Dewey, 1983).

This paper aims at combining Dewey's educational and philosophical ideas that were stated in his book *Democracy in Education* with the functions of Village Institutes which operated between the years of 1940 and 1947. After this brief introduction to the social, political and cultural aims behind the foundation of Village Institutes, the focus will now turn to Dewey's visit to Turkey.

Dewey's Visit to Turkey

In summer 1924 famous educational philosopher of his time Dewey visited Turkey as part of his several educational missions in China, Japan, the Soviet Union and Mexico. The visit was not an unplanned action but rather an important attempt for young Turkish Republic's newly established educational system. Atatürk and his friends, without any doubt, were highly aware of Dewey's worldwide recognition particularly with his progressive attempts in Chicago School. Dewey's transformation of classical curriculum with a progressive approach gained the attention of the young Turkish Republic whose

educational system would also be built on new and modern principles with the reformation of Ottoman Empire's educational system. This historical commonality between Dewey's and Ataturk's educational transformation attempts resulted in this visit which later influenced the formation of Village Institutes in Turkey. "Dewey was, no doubt, the right man, at the right time, at the right place to give advice" (Wolf-Gazo, 1996).

Dewey spent two month in Turkey during the summer 1924. His first report written in Turkey and it was about recommendations for teacher training and funding of education. In the second report ¹written in United States, he made suggestions about the "formulation and execution of an educational plan, the development of schools as community centres, the reorganization of the Ministry of Public Instruction, the training and treatment of teachers, the redefinition of the school system, the improvement of health and hygiene in schools, the improvement of discipline, and other school reforms" (Turan, 2007, p. 544).

The Turkish Republic was founded in 1923, one year before John Dewey's visit. Therefore at the time of Dewey's visit, the country had already been exposed to some changes with the efforts of transformation of all societal structures including education of the citizens. Through these big changes, without any doubt, education was considered as a critical element in the adaptation of public to new modern structures. During 1920s although some modern schools were built in urban areas, the countryside lacked the new educational missionary efforts. Hoca's (religious school teachers in villages) were teaching basically the Quran to the students and they saw the teachers who were sent from the cities as treats to their religious educational efforts. In the year when Dewey visited Turkey, an important law "Unification of Instruction" (Tevhid-i Tedrisat) unified the entire Turkish school system and all the schools were connected to Ministry of Education. This law was an attempt to secularize the educational system and thus eliminate the traditional influences and structures.

¹ Dewey's report was published in Turkish in 1939, 1952 and 1960 by the Turkish Ministry of Education.

Atatürk's pragmatic visions in education are restated in Dewey's report, *Report and Recommendation upon Turkish Education*, with his ultimate aim of raising responsible children who will serve as democratic citizens of the states. His remarks in this issue are reflected in his report:

The great weakness of almost all schools, a weakness not confined in any sense to Turkey, is the separation of school studies from the actual life of children and the conditions and opportunities of the environment. The school comes to be isolated and what is done there does not seem to the pupils to have anything to do with the real life around them, but to form a separate and artificial world (Dewey, 1983, p. 293 cited in Wolf-Gazo, 1996).

Seen in this light, it should be of no surprise that Dewey's insights influenced the formation of Village Institutes later in 1940s. After a lot of research and experience, the grand educationalist, General Director of Primary Education İsmail Hakkı Tonguç visited Bulgaria, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Austria and Germany for some exploration on educational institutions. Pestalozzi, Dewey and Kerschenstainer also inspired him about "*in the work, by the work, for the work*". At the end, on the 17th of April 1940 Village Institutes were inaugurated. Village Institutes had not only one target. There, people with different qualities were educated for different purposes. The students were expected to get used to reading, listening to music, playing national games, managing some institutions, cooperating with each other, swimming, cycling, riding motorcycles, playing saz and mandolin, doing sports, working in agricultural and artistic fields, dealing with livestock. Village Institutes were obliged to help their graduates and villagers with all their means. Students of 4th and 5th grades did some training in certain villages for at least 6 months. Candidate instructors passed their last month of course programme by working in the villages of the implementation region. According to the programmes of Village Institutes, courses were categorized into three groups: cultural courses, agriculture course and studies, technical courses and studies. It was a 5-year education in the institutes and students took cultural courses and teaching knowledge for 114 weeks, agriculture courses and studies for 58 weeks and technical courses and studies for 58 weeks.

Boys and girls were educated and worked together in boarding schools. That was a great progress in education because women had always been considered in the second plan for ages and as the ones that do not deserve any education. By co-education, students got experienced in sharing competences and responsibilities and establishing their own administration system. There was also solidarity between different institutes (21 institutes in the whole country); construction groups formed by institutes' students helped other institutes and the aim of that practice was to unite students in friendship with other regions' young people. The common life of students, instructors and directors in Village Institutes' campuses was based on division of labour, sharing and democratic system and the aim here was to be a model for the villager.

Weekly, monthly or seasonal working plans of Village Institutes were prepared according to each institute's features, intensity of work, the number and level of students, teachers' qualities, diversity of work machines, size of working areas, kinds and number of livestock. Here, it is understood that courses were designed in line with the needs and based on observation, experiment, investigation, examination and comparison.

After this brief introduction to Dewey's visit and later the foundation of Village Institutes, we will now turn our attention to how Dewey's philosophical and practical insights are reflected in the practices of Village Institutes.

Dewey's Democracy and Democracy in Village Institutes

In *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey defines democracy as "a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (p. 87). According to Dewey democracy is not only a way of operation at government level but rather an ongoing interaction and communication in all levels of the society through the mutual share of interests. Thus, education is seen as the process that improves individuals' capacity to be a part in democracy which leads to collective learning. These democracy ideals are reflected in the practices of Village Institutes where every student acted as responsible citizens both in the school and its surrounding environment. Since the schools are based on democratic principles, every responsible or authority in the institutes was elected and criticized

periodically; every student was free to elect whoever he or she wanted. Every Saturday, all members of the institutes gathered in school place and student and department leaders read working reports. Everything was open to criticism and by this way every problem was solved together. All these underline the democratic character of these institutes.

From a Darwinist perspective, Dewey states that the transmission of “ideals, hopes, expectations, standards, and opinions” from old to young holds the society together. Therefore, through a social communication can education occur and be effective if it is directed with personal interest (p. 3). “Society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication” (p. 4). Borrowing this idea from Dewey, Village Institutes were founded based on the principles of creating ongoing interaction and communication and transmission of culture, knowledge and skills among students, teachers and villagers. Dewey’s concept of community (p. 87) is also well reflected in Village Institutes practices where democracy was viewed as a way of communication without the superiority of any class and position.

Learning by Experiencing

Experience plays an important role in Dewey’s progressive education. With our active and passive affairs, we perceive the connection between something we tried and something go through in consequence (p. 140). Dewey also considers thinking as an experience in which we continuously connect the actions we do and its consequences (p. 145). Therefore according to Dewey’s pedagogy, curricular activities should be embedded into experience of students. This is simply just because curriculum should be an extension of our life not a separate set of knowledge independent from our problem solving contexts and experiences. “Experience itself primarily consists of the active relations subsisting between a human being and his natural and social surroundings” (p. 274). This, without any doubt, found its place in Village Institutes where students dealt with real life issues, learned to solve the problems collaboratively and applied the knowledge and skills that they gained through hands-on experiences. The acquisition of

meanings regarding themselves, their environment, the society and the nature later became “instruments for further learnings” (p. 274).

Learning through Action

Atatürk’s pragmatic approach in education wakened the practical education which young Turkish Republic needed to educate its citizens especially in the countryside. Instead of teaching general and abstract knowledge, more know-how knowledge was required for citizens to be productive in their environment.

An educational programme focusing on work, therefore, became an important objective, and the Village Institutes were set up to achieve this goal. While the principle of 'education for work', or 'education for production' became the main motivation, the method of 'learning by doing' accompanied it” (Karaömeroğlu, 1998, p. 57).

In Village Institutes students learned most of things by experience and they were not educated with classical methods like teacher-centred education. The main objective was to involve students into active learning by projects, to orientate them towards their own interests, capacities and to foster them to think and criticize. There was a very little place for teaching methods that transferred fixed knowledge to students and that were based on memorizing all knowledge.

Seen in this light, we could see Dewey’s stones under the development of Village Institute attempt. Dewey rejects the perennialist approaches which favour great classics and understate the importance of practical knowledge. “An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance (p. 144). Moreover in his visit, Dewey recognized the need for immediate transfer of knowledge into action which could only be achieved through active learning of students in Turkey. This was particularly important in Village Institute case where students would be working closely with the peasants, understanding their needs, opening new perspectives of modern techniques as well as intellectual developments. This could not be achieved with passive teaching of the techniques and concepts with mechanical means, rather with progressive understanding. Dewey (1916) states: “The

schema of a curriculum must take into account of the adaptation of the studies to the needs of existing community life; it must select with the intention of improving the life we live in common so that the future shall be better than the past” (p. 101). This view clearly reflected in Village Institute movement through which Anatolian villagers were transformed into new and productive citizens in five years in Village Institutes by doing a lot of work on their own. Village Institutes showed that vocational education turned the bad into the good, the weak into the strong, boredom into entertainment, teacher into friend, friend into teacher, board into earth, earth into board.

Vocational Education

Dewey (1916) defines vocation as “a direction of life activities as renders them perceptibly significant to a person, because of the consequences they accomplish, and also useful to his associates” (p. 307). The students in Village Institutes were being educated to become teachers who would go to the villages and help them progress with modern techniques and Kemalist ideologies. Therefore, Dewey’s idea of vocational education -training through occupations- (p. 310) well suits with the formation of Higher Village Institutes where teachers, directors and investigators for Village Institutes were trained in line with its objectives, structures and needs. Teachers’ council nominated students that graduated from Village Institutes for Higher Village Institutes and after having an examination they were accepted to these institutes for a three-year education. During that period, they specialized in one field like fine arts, poultry and construction with scientific studies and practices on place.

Conclusion

Village Institutes, among others, with their qualities cited above, were unique educational institutions. Scientists, pedagogues and researchers of educational technology at home and abroad criticized this model positively. Opponents of this model were the ones who could not save themselves from the influence of traditional education, politicians who were against raising consciousness among the villager, retrograde landowners and anti-Kemalist fundamentalists. Eyüboğlu (1979) argued:

Do you know why Village Institutes were slandered? Because in these institutions, work principle was put forward, vocational education was carried out, students laid bricks, planted trees and they resembled workers. Working in schools? It is said that schools should train masters, not workers who smell sweat, whose hands are covered with calluses. That was the reaction of the mentality that sees the worker as a slave. It wanted school to be a consumer not a producer (p. 45).

Village Institutes operated for six years effectively. In 1946, conservatives approached the power and Hasan Ali Yücel and İsmail Hakkı Tonguç were forced to resign from their offices. Institutes were seen as a threat by the power. A lot of methods and practices like reading hours in the institutes were forbidden. In 1947, Higher Village Institute was closed and in 1948 instructor-training courses were ended. In 1950, co-education was impeded and lastly in 1954 all institutes were closed. The closure of these institutes was a real stroke to contemporary education. Their success and outcomes are incontestable: They brought a new mentality to education, enlightened the villages, brought up well-known intellectuals like Talip Apaydın, Fakir Baykurt, Adnan Binyazar, Mahmut Makal.

Even today, we Turkish educational system cannot reach the success of these institutes and they are still the subject of many debates among educationalists. Students of these institutes read more than today's students, they were more active in social activities, and they were more intellectual, critical and democratic. If Village Institutes had not been closed, today Turkey would have more modern and conscious villages and this would help the development of the whole country in many respects like economy, politics and culture. When we look at some of today's teachers, we regretfully see that they do not dispose the necessary qualifications as they are trained in a very short period of time. They do not know the villages, villagers and their needs and culture well. This creates a lack of communication between students and teachers and decreases the level and quality of education in villages.

Briefly, the aim of the Village Institutes was to bring light to the most remote part of the country and ensure the unity and development of the Turkish Republic. At that time,

villages, even some cities were deprived of educational services. This project aimed at “making the steppe green” and it succeeded in doing so. However, the ones who yearned for traditional, classical education methods and who were against the enlightenment in the villages extinguished this fire. This revolutionary step, without any doubt, was the extension of Dewey’s vision of education and democracy. Today Turkey should reconsider her current educational policies and practices and once again should turn her face towards Dewey’s progressive education and Village Institute practices. The Turkish society can only progress towards a democratic and modern Turkey by following Ataturk’s dream of enlightenment and Dewey’s visions of democracy and education with active, free and open-minded citizens.

References

Dewey, J. "Report on Turkey." *The Middle Works: Essays on Politics and Society, 1923-1924*. Vol. 15 of *Collected Works*. Ed. Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1983.

Dewey, J. (1916) *Democracy and Education. An introduction to the philosophy of education* (1966 edn.), New York: Free Press.

Eyüboğlu, S. (1979). *Köy Enstitüleri üzerine*.

Karaomerlioglu, M. A. (1998). The Village Institutes Experience in Turkey. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1. pp. 47-73.

Wolf-Gazo, E. (1996). John Dewey in Turkey: An Educational Mission. *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*, Vol. 3, pp. 15-42.