Dual Enrollment for Democracy

A Critical Pragmatist Analysis

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Abstract

In this conceptual paper, we examine the curricular reform known as dual enrollment (DE) in the United States, where high school students enroll in tertiary courses and earn credits while simultaneously earning high school credit toward graduation requirements. We situate dual enrollment within the historical and policy contexts of U.S. education reform, reinterpreting it through Dewey's theory of experience and critical pragmatism. While Deweyan educational scholarship finds fault in educational reforms based on market-based logics of choice and individual pursuit of achievement (Boyles, 2018; Knight-Abowitz & Stitzlein 2018; Duncheon & Hornbeck, 2023), we assert that reforms like DE can be understood as aligned with a critical pragmatist vision of education. While contemporary DE reforms have been largely framed in market-based, individualistic terms (Duncheon & Hornbeck, 2023), it can also be understood as a democratic and critical-pragmatist response to curricular restriction and

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inequity in contemporary education. Specifically, we argue that in secondary schools, where more flexible, interest-based choices in curriculum can be limited by political and budgetary factors—especially in politically conservative states in recent years— DE can potentially provide educational experiences and pathways for students with diverse identities to pursue meaningful learning advancing critical perspectives and pedagogies.

Introduction

Dual enrollment (DE) has emerged as a pervasive educational policy in all US states and territories, offering students the opportunity to earn college credit while in high school (Shivji & Wilson, 2019; Velasco et al., 2024). DE is one of many terms applied to accelerated programs where students simultaneously earn college and secondary school credit. Dual credit and concurrent enrollment are also titles used to describe college-credit earning programs and are largely synonymous with DE but vary from state to state, depending on the individual policy (Tobolowsky & Allen, 2016; An & Taylor, 2019). We use the term DE because it encompasses dual credit and concurrent enrollment, and is the term used by the U.S. Department of Education in its reporting of statistics related to earning college in high school. In 2018, 82% of public schools offered DE to students in some capacity, and of such, 78% were funded by the local school district or state. One nationally representative study found that from 2009 to 2013, about 34% of students earned college credit while in high school (Shivji & Wilson, 2019).

In this conceptual paper, we explore the possibilities of DE that enable students to choose courses that align with their interests and open up new educational experiences. We use the lens of critical pragmatism (Deegan, 1988; Kadlec, 2006) to explore the potential benefits of DE looking to John Dewey and his experiential continuum (Dewey, 1913; Dewey, 1917; Dewey, 1938) where all learning builds on experiences and interactions that can be educative or miseducative. One research question guides our paper: How does dual enrollment in the U.S. align with and contribute to the ideals of critical pragmatism? We argue that Dewey's experiential continuum and conceptions of democratic education provide a justification for DE based in a critical pragmatist conception of education, where experiences and interactions can help lead students to better opportunities for alignment of their educative experiences with their interests and identities.

In what follows, we broadly outline the development, growth, and implementation of DE in the U.S.. We examine the original intent behind DE and ways that it has been used to frame a market-based ad-

vantage for students and how it may be viewed as an educational policy of choice. We next describe social and political contexts which shape the school settings in which DE programs are being offered, exploring the current policy environments in some states and school districts to ban critical or progressive curriculum and materials. We then use a Deweyan analysis and critique to explore how DE could advance goals of critical pragmatism in public secondary education, despite its framing by many education scholars as a neoliberal policy. Next, we look at the diversity of DE offerings and experiences for students by analyzing two DE observations, gleaned from an empirical study of DE programs, to further understand their educative potential. We conclude with an assessment of critical pragmatism's meliorism as a nonideal theory, which we argue offers theoretical support for the educational and access goals of DE, if not all iterations thereof.

Growth of Dual Enrollment in the United States

The concept of dual enrollment emerged in the mid-20th century as universities and school districts sought ways to bridge secondary and postsecondary education, often to accelerate the progress of high-achieving students (Tobolowsky & Allen, 2016). DE was different from Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate programs, which offer college credit upon earning a passing score on a standardized exam. DE can be traced back to the 1920s when the concept of high school was still expanding and the idea of higher education might refer to secondary schooling, as the distinction between high school and the emerging community or junior colleges was still taking shape (Adams, 2013). During this period, advocates of the community college/junior college movement promoted stronger connections between secondary and postsecondary education to support student success, though structural barriers limited early efforts. In the 1970s, DE re-emerged at Syracuse University through Project Advance, which offered college-level courses to high-achieving high school students (Tobolowsky & Allen). High school and university faculty collaborated to adapt one-semester college courses into two-term DE courses across subjects such as biology, calculus, chemistry, English, sociology, psychology, and computer engineering, taught by high school teachers who completed summer training at the university. Over time, its justifications expanded from efficiency to equity, reflecting broader trends toward accountability and market-based reforms in U.S. education (Labaree, 1997).

DE is also referred to as dual credit, concurrent enrollment, or joint enrollment, and each state has a slightly different definition, but

for this paper, we use dual enrollment (DE) because it is the most pervasive term used in the literature to define educational policies that offer students both high school and college credit. To enroll, students must meet the college readiness standard of the sponsoring IHE, typically by demonstrating proficiency on a reading, writing, and/or math placement exam. Most DE programs are offered through community colleges and confer college credit to students who successfully pass the course (Schaller et al., 2025). In theory, DE students will experience college-level rigor (Arnold et al., 2017), and—because many states, colleges, and school districts subsidize tuition—accumulate free or low-cost credit toward a college degree (Hanson et al., 2015).

As DE programs have expanded and taken shape in the current era, their shape and form have varied according to specific legislative language, and contextual factors including building capacity in high schools to offer college-level coursework. The current landscape of higher education has also shaped what DE programs look like today, as increasing dependency on part-time faculty labor, and the expansion of virtual course formats shapes how high school students experience DE programs and courses.

DE Course Delivery

The mode of DE course delivery varies by state and institution, predominantly conducted within high schools (Shivji & Wilson, 2019). Yet, in many states and cities, students also have the option to attend courses on college campuses or through online platforms where they earn college credits. Few studies have examined the impacts of different delivery methods; however, some evidence suggests that students are more likely to enroll in college after graduation and complete a degree when their DE courses are taken at higher education institutions rather than at high schools (Speroni et al., 2011; Moseley & Slate, 2022). Other findings reveal that students perceive DE courses as more authentic when conducted on a college campus rather than at a high school (Duncheon, 2020). Research into the perceptions of superintendents and principals has raised concerns about the consistency and quality of DE courses, particularly when taught by adjunct faculty or high school teachers, and differences in course quality between high school and college settings (Hornbeck & Malin, 2019; Hornbeck et al., 2023). Principals and superintendents note that secondary school teachers have pedagogical training to instruct adolescent students and that adjunct faculty often are only trained in their area of expertise and can have trouble connecting with students. Added to this are com-

plications with funding; as one example, Ohio local school districts pay institutions of higher education (IHE) the tuition charges for students enrolled in DE courses. For these reasons, districts often prefer to have their own high school teachers become the DE instructors.

In most states, students have a range of DE course options. Some of the options are contingent on geography and their proximity of location to an institution of higher education; for example, rural students may not have an IHE geographically close to them and have fewer options than those in an urban environment (An & Taylor, 2019). Even in urban environments, walkability or public transportation may present a barrier for students to take courses, but there are growing numbers of school districts providing transportation for students to take college courses on campus. Alternatively, online educational options, another possible avenue for DE credits, have proliferated in recent years. Yet another DE option includes Early College High Schools, where high schools and community colleges partner to create a separate high school where students take a course of studies that mix secondary and college-level courses, ending high school with an associate undergraduate degree.

DE for Access and Equity

DE has, in recent years, been recognized as a means to broaden access to higher education and promote equity among historically underserved student groups (Miller et al., 2018). Research indicates that DE can enhance persistence and graduation rates in higher education for students who participate (Schaller et al., 2025). While the majority of research has concentrated on access, performance, and retention, some qualitative studies have also explored faculty and students' experiences within DE programs (Kanny, 2015; McGowan et al., 2022; Hornbeck & Duncheon, 2022). For instance, Kanny (2015) identified financial incentives, boredom, and the desire for greater curricular choice as motivators for students enrolling in DE courses. Further research into student experiences indicates that DE programs help students understand their roles as college students while still in high school (Duncheon, 2020; McGowan et al., 2022). A study of a DE program in southwest Texas highlighted its reputation as an inclusive and supportive environment for LGBTQ students, providing a refuge from often challenging school conditions (Hornbeck & Duncheon, 2022). Additional research points to the significance of the school setting in influencing DE course success (Edwards et al., 2011; Grabowski & Sessa, 2014). DE is accurately framed as a program which brings curricular flexibility

for high school students who are bored, who seek broader curriculum, or who are seeking more supportive learning spaces than their high schools offer. It can simultaneously give students a financial leg-up on completing expensive post-secondary degrees.

DE as a Market-based Reform

Paradoxically, DE can serve both equity and access goals in education even as it is also seen as supporting market-based policy-making goals. DE reflects contemporary neoliberal tendencies in U.S. education policy, emphasizing individual advancement and workforce preparation, a trend not limited to DE alone but to the broader educational space for the last several decades (Labaree, 1997). Labaree argues that education has long been characterized by a tension between democratic and economic goals, positioning democratic aims on one side and the pursuit of efficiency and social mobility on the other. Additionally, DE is at times framed as an educational reform of choice, where students/parents choose educational options outside of the traditional public school space, which serve to disrupt the form and traditional structures of public schooling. Hornbeck (in press) describes this shifting landscape of the secondary school curriculum as a form of outsourcing the high school experience, where key parts of teaching and learning are increasingly transferred to outside providers such as colleges through dual enrollment, virtual schools, or emerging artificial intelligence platforms.

Research on DE policies and rhetoric demonstrates that neoliberal educational aims are used to advocate for DE programs today. Duncheon & Hornbeck (2023) examined DE policy rationales in all 50 states, looking at websites, legislation, and other documents from state departments of education, finding that most states frame DE as a reform that can benefit students economically, using market logics to frame benefits of DE rather than the democratic or liberatory potential of DE to help students become citizens for life in a democracy, or even to provide exposure to course material that is less restrictive than what is found in states where critical curriculum is censored in schools. The study found that state education departments and schools often discussed DE as a way to "get ahead" of their peers, or to earn a credential for free, rather than the actual learning benefits associated with courses that students could take. Hornbeck (2025) also found that in Ohio, where DE is a pervasive policy, some private evangelical religious institutions of higher education discriminate against LGBTQ students, where they ban students from supporting or advocating for

LGBTQ identities as students of their schools, all while using tax dollars to pay for the education of these private religious institutions.

DE, conceived as a neoliberal policy, and one which can support discriminatory religious agendas in publicly-funded schooling, directly challenges democratic public schooling commitments upon which the common school model is built. Yet DE's promotion of flexibility and diversity of curricular offerings for high school students continue to serve equity agendas often sought though public education. As we discuss in the next section, this is even more true today in conservative U.S. states, where cultural wars battles have resulted in regulation and limitation of "divisive" topics and classes.

In short, DE programs do not fit neatly into progressive democratic or neoliberal policy boxes; they can be rationalized for equity and inclusion goals, as well as market logics of competition, choice, and individual achievement. DE program specifics — course offerings, quality control, instructor training, and program accountability — help determine how the intended DE policy goals play out in practice. One example of this is the ways in which today's educational culture wars are shaping what DE means for high school students in politically conservative regions of the country.

Curricular Restrictions in U.S. Education

Recent years have seen escalating controversies over the teaching of "divisive" topics related to diversity, race, gender, and sexuality in public schools (Morgan, 2022; Malin & Hornbeck, 2022; Hornbeck & Malin, 2023; Knight Abowitz & Hornbeck, 2025). These disputes have led to significant restrictions on educational content across the United States. Since 2021, disputes over teaching race, gender, and history have fueled an unprecedented wave of state-level censorship in American classrooms. Nearly one-third of states have enacted bans on curricula that offer critical perspectives on the nation's racial past (Hornbeck & Malin, 2023). Between 2021 and 2024, lawmakers in 23 states enacted 47 educational gag orders and other restrictions on classroom instruction, targeting K–12 teachers and their ability to discuss race, gender, and LGBTQ+ identity (Sachs et al., 2024). These measures often extend to library collections and professional trainings, with more than 200 bills introduced across roughly 40 states seeking to penalize educators for addressing so-called "divisive concepts" (Alleyne, 2022). As a result, students have seen their access to knowledge streams limited, restricting diverse perspectives, a problem for all students in public schools, but arguably even more problematic for students of mi-

noritized identities, where knowledge about their racial/ethnic/sexual identity is limited (Cassaro, 2024). Experiences and interactions in these potentially restrictive school environments may be miseducative (Dewey, 1938) for students and potentially damaging.

Beyond the curriculum affected by these restriction measures, there is also the risk of miseducation through "collateral learning" (Dewey, 1938, p. 48)—the kind of learning that occurs outside the formal curriculum as students absorb and notice what happens around them. When certain identities are ignored or banned, these unintended lessons can distort the school's learning environment and diminish students' desire to continue learning. Two prominent examples come from Florida where the state banned the Advanced Placement African American Studies course as well as passing a bill dubbed the "Don't Say Gay" law, which prohibits educators from discussing issues related to sexuality in classrooms or schools (Goldberg, 2023). These restrictions are similar to restrictions placed in other politically conservative states (Hornbeck & Malin, 2023). Against this backdrop of restriction, dual enrollment may be a space where secondary students can access more diverse and liberatory learning opportunities, though curricula in higher education in the Trump's second term has also been turned into a place of contestation where there is an effort to control speech within the academic and censor majors and curricula with a critical bent (Benitez et al., 2025).

Applying Critical Pragmatism to DE

Dewey's (1938) principles of the experiential continuum can be usefully applied to democratic education as a critical pragmatist endeavor responding to curricular restrictions in many U.S. secondary schools. For Dewey, "the principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (1938, p. 35). Freedom is one important criterion of educative experiences insofar as it enables the continuity of experiences, enabling growth. DE programs can be seen as a practical embodiment of Dewey's educational philosophy, particularly in light of restrictions that limit critical perspectives, ban certain books, and constrain freedom of gender and other forms of expression. DE is philosophically pragmatic in the Deweyan philosophical sense because it opens up more opportunities for education to be individualized thus meaningful for student learning and growth. DE is critical because in some cases it provides students, particularly those hailing from marginalized communities or

identities, with some freedom to choose a wider array of courses or learning communities that exploring a wider variety of topics. Deegan (1988) defines critical pragmatism as "a theory of science that emphasizes the need to apply knowledge to everyday problems based on radical interpretations of liberal and progressive values" (p. 26). DE offers a potential way to mitigate the problem of a restrictive learning environment and offers democratic possibility where students can elect to take college courses that explore topics that suit their needs, offered in potentially less restrictive settings, and whose pedagogies and content may more consistently embody egalitarian values. Dewey (1938) wrote,

> As an individual passes from one situation to another, his world, his environment, expands or contracts. He does not find himself living in another world but in a different part or aspect of one and the same world. What he has learned in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow. The process goes on as long as life and learning continue. (p. 48)

Dewey's experiential continuum and theory of experience suggest a distinction between experiences that are educationally worthwhile and those that are not, with the former offering continuity and interaction which are important for meaningful learning (Dewey, 1938). He emphasized that experiences in the classroom are influenced by "objective conditions" that can either constrict or provide valuable learning potentials (Dewey, 1938, p. 41). The traditional education system can, in the best circumstances, be restrictive in nature as aforementioned, often failing to acknowledge the individual experiences of children and leading to negative educational outcomes for some students. This critique is echoed in DE's capacity to provide an alternative pathway for education—one that acknowledges and builds upon each student's unique background and experiences for a more engaging learning experience, and importantly, one that helps students gain access to knowledge that might be considered politically dangerous in the public secondary school. As Kadlec (2007) notes, in Dewey's social philosophy, "lived experiences may be harnessed as a tool for meaningful democratic struggle only to the extent that it consists of a critical and forward-thinking perception of the private and shared consequences of our actions" (p. 22).

Through DE, students have an alternative opportunity for autonomy and agency as they may choose courses that resonate more with their interests, a process that Dewey might say is important for educational experiences to be truly transformative. He posits that "the principle of interaction makes it clear that failure of adaptation of material

to needs and capacities of individuals may cause an experience to be non-educative quite as much as failure of an individual to adapt himself to the material" (Dewey, 1938, pp. 46-47). DE, thus, can become a manifestation of Dewey's progressive educational goals, offering students educational experiences that transcend the boundaries of traditional schooling and that are guided by student interest. By allowing students to select courses that are meaningful to them from a variety of institutions (even online), DE also aligns with Dewey's advocacy for education that is deeply rooted in experience and relevance to the individual's life. As Dewey argued, true learning occurs when there is a connection between the student's lived experience and the educational material; where learning comes from the student and is derived from the process of inquiry.

In *The School and Society*, Dewey (1899) argues for education that reflects the needs and aspirations of all individuals in a democratic society. DE can be viewed as a practical implementation of this idea, offering students an escape from a one-size-fits-all educational model to one that respects and nurtures their unique identities and aspirations. By engaging with college-level courses, high school students can possibly explore subjects and perspectives that might be unavailable or censored in their regular school settings, thereby enriching their educational experience and personal growth. To understand the real potential of these transformative possibilities, however, a closer look into DE classrooms is necessary. In our next section, we compare two DE classrooms to illustrate the broad (and troubling) range of classroom experiences that live underneath the DE umbrella of programming and illustrating the gap between the realities and potential of DE opportunities for high school students. Critical pragmatism demands that reforms be judged by their capacity to expand democratic participation and address power imbalances, not merely individual success and under these conditions, DE might be a way to provide this criticality and rectify imbalance.

It should be noted, however, that while DE can possibly reflect Deweyan principles of experience and path toward purpose, it also has the potential to reproduce inequities when the institutional "objective conditions" are not democratic. This can occur when contingent faculty lack pedagogical support, when high school faculty lack content expertise, when access depends on family resources, or when, hypothetically but imaginably in the present political context, more higher education institutions alter their curricula in response to authoritarian political pressures. These limitations are real, and we consider and illustrate them in the next section of the paper.

Dual Enrollment Context:Variation of Experience

In this section, we explore the situatedness and diversity of Dual Enrollment (DE) experiences by presenting two illustrative examples. We acknowledge the wide range of DE offerings across different contexts and use these examples to both illuminate our argument and highlight a few limitations. The first author, as part of a grant-funded project, observed DE courses in one large Texas city. While these two observations are not meant to be representative of all DE experiences, they serve to demonstrate the potential polarities in teaching quality within the DE space. We do not present this as an empirical study, nor do we rely on qualitative methods to fully understand the phenomena. Rather, we present these examples as reflective vignettes to consider the possibilities and pitfalls of DE classrooms through a critical pragmatist lens in our normative argument for this paper, not as representative examples. One example illustrates how DE may provide meaningful, educative experiences where students seem to engage with purpose, explore their interests, and align with their identity in a democratic setting. Conversely, the second example shows how DE can sometimes may result in miseducative experiences, emphasizing the importance of pedagogical quality control to ensure that all students receive valuable and enriching opportunities.

Observation 1: This observation takes place in an introductory United States history course at a community college in a large city in Texas. The instructor enters a couple of minutes late, and high school students flood the classroom behind her as she opens the door. She explains to me (the observer) that students usually aren't on time because their local high school provides bus transportation and whispers that the students come from areas that lack financial resources. Half of the students take out laptop computers, open their notes, and some begin the class by talking or looking at their phones. The instructor places her lecture notes, a word processing document, on the projection screen and proceeds to begin lecturing to the class. Over the course of an hour and a half, the instructor continues lecturing, asking rhetorical questions throughout with only one student responding consistently. One hour into the lecture, most students are not engaged with the material. I notice (as I am seated in the back of the room) that they are looking up music videos or watching videos on their laptops, and several students are asleep. At one point, the instructor looks at a sleeping student and remarks to the class, "I don't want to embarrass anyone because I know that some of you work [jobs to help support their family when they are not in school]." With 15 minutes left in the class, six stu-

dents were on their phones, and four were asleep when the instructor abruptly ends the lecture and says, "Are we really at the end of our stuff?... Okay, let me find the test questions to go over. Take a minute and wake your neighbor up." This example highlights that even when policy opens doors for access, the quality of the classroom experience determines whether it is truly educative in Dewey's sense.

Observation 2: This observation took place in a humanities course that focuses largely on Western cultural traditions at a community college in a large city in Texas. The instructor began class promptly and announced that Spring Break was coming soon, stating that the students needed to really "push through" to get to where they need to be. He then announced that they would be holding a salon that day and that students needed to meet in their previously assigned groups. Students brought food and drinks, which were set up on a table in the hall for them to enjoy while meeting with their groups to discuss the Enlightenment thinker they were assigned to present about. Students rose from their chairs, began to share food, meet in their groups, and talk about their Enlightenment thinkers. Overall, the students were all engaged. There were six groups, and they all chatted with each other. I could hear phrases like, "Montesquieu was not in favor of Democracy," and another student explained, "yeah but neither was Hobbes." Most of the students stood in groups, chatted, and remained engaged, switching groups to chat with others about the Enlightenment thinker they were assigned. The instructor transitioned to a new topic after the salons and presented information in a short lecture about Avant-Garde and Rococo art, using modern queer examples like ball culture from 1980s New York City and clips from the television show "Pose," or a video of the pop singer Sam Smith who dressed in modern Rococo fashion. Students remained lively and engaged for the entirety of the class, including students who identified as queer (who said so during discussion of the lecture) who seemed excited about these modern examples. This vignette exemplifies Dewey's idea of learning as interaction and growth, where freedom and relevance foster what seems like genuine engagement.

Analysis and Implications

In analyzing DE as a potential enhancement to the educational landscape, particularly during the critical transition period of adolescence to adulthood, one must recognize that while DE offers more diverse experiences and opportunities, it is not without challenges, and in some cases similar challenges that exist in traditional K12 public schooling ~~as demonstrated by observation one above~~. In this section we explore the

democratic possibility and constraint of DE as a policy, in light of the wide diversity of DE courses suggested by these observations.

In the first observation, from an introductory history course at a community college, we see some of the limitations that may occur in DE educational settings where students are taught by ~~contingent~~ faculty who may well be working under conditions of increasing constraint: bigger teaching loads, bigger class sizes, more likely to be contingent or non-tenured, and under other suboptimal conditions of the higher education faculty labor force of the present age (Rhoades, et al., 2024). These faculty are also likely to be teaching students who are working part-time, juggling multiple responsibilities, and who are often dis-engaged from their own education (Winthrop, Shoukry, & Nitkin, 2025).

In observation one, despite the opportunity to attend college-level courses, many students were disengaged, with some resorting to watching videos on their computer, playing on their phones, or even sleeping during the lecture. While this could happen in a high school class as well, teachers in a high school setting often spend more time with students and are encouraged to form relationships with students that may provide additional support for unmotivated students, working in concert with parents, administrators and counselors. In the college setting, there may be some academic supports, but parents are not required to be part of the process, and educational law, The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, prohibits instructors from talking to parents about student progress.

In the first observation, the disengaged atmosphere of the history course highlights challenges that may occur when DE classrooms are treated as standard college sections rather than hybrid learning spaces serving adolescent learners. While contingent faculty often play an essential and dedicated role in sustaining institutional teaching missions, they may not always receive the developmental training or institutional support needed to work effectively with younger students. Yet, to attribute classroom disengagement solely to faculty status would oversimplify a more complex set of dynamics. One might also consider how curricular design, scheduling, transportation logistics, and students' outside responsibilities converge to shape the learning environment. Many DE students balance work and family obligations alongside academic expectations, and these intersecting pressures can influence classroom participation as much as instructional approach. Returning to Dewey's "objective conditions," while the policy opportunity may exist, and the instructor has room to be creative with their curriculum, instructors might not make the objective learning conditions interesting. One may easily imagine a traditional lecture hall at

a large university where a professor or graduate assistant lectures to a large crowd with little to no engagement. These experiences may well be miseducative and problematic for students, perhaps even making them less likely to attend further courses in higher education. Teaching methodologies aside, the relative freedom and content expertise of college instructors as compared to high school teacher may better allow for lecture content to reflect the current trends and knowledge of the field under study rather than that of the politically conservative climate of some states or school districts.

Conversely, the second observation from a humanities course focusing on Western cultural traditions showcases the best of what DE can offer. The class was structured around a 'salon' to model the philosophe era in which they were studying, encouraging active participation, collaboration, and discourse among students, effectively engaging them in the learning process and providing a space for democratic interaction. This setting not only fostered a vibrant educational environment but also catered to the diverse interests and identities of the students, including the use of contemporary examples that resonated with queer students. Students smiled, moved around, engaged with the material, asked questions, and participated in active learning, which was evident to the observer. In this scenario, the instructor facilitated learning that appealed to a variety of students with diverse identities. Students engaged in new experiences with one another in a relatively free space that was not solely controlled by the instructor, allowing for shared agency. The instructor had the freedom to choose course materials that would not be allowed in the K-12 public school environment, exposing adolescent students to content with which they might identify more strongly than what is typically accessible in their high school setting. This led to what seemed to the observer as a meaningful educational experience. It is through the ability of the instructor to create objective learning conditions that align with progressive goals that promote justice, equity, and inclusion that makes this critically pragmatic using Deegan's (1988) definition.

Despite its framing as a politically conservative mechanism from the school choice playbook (Duncheon & Hornbeck, 2024), with purely instrumentalist aims focused on social mobility via expanding college enrollment, DE enables progressive educational aims. Dual enrollment, in the context of current educational challenges, can be viewed as a critically pragmatic policy mechanism that offers a means for students to extend their learning beyond the confines of traditional high school curricula, engaging in a potentially more diverse educational experience that is vital for their development as individuals in a dem-

ocratic society. It can, as well, provide a pathway for students seeking to gain more critical educational experiences in post-secondary environments that, due to present educational political contexts in many states, are being cordoned off from high school students. For DE to fulfill its democratic promise, program design and oversight must ensure equitable access, adequate instructor preparation, and curricular freedom. Public education systems, rather than private or profit-driven entities, should lead these initiatives to maintain accountability and sustain the commons (Greene, 1988; Houser, 2023). And those who engage in teaching within these programs should receive training related to adolescent development and pedagogical best practices.

In Texas, the state from where these interviews are derived, state law requires that when mentioning LGBTQ+ issues that teachers are to say that "homosexuality is not an acceptable lifestyle" (Tex. Health & Safety Code § 85.007, 1991). In 2023, an 8th grade English teacher was fired from a public school in Texas for assigning Anne Frank's diary where she described same-sex attraction (Aguilar, 2023). Similarly, in Florida and other Red states where 'divisive concepts' have been banned, teachers can be penalized, even losing their license to teach for mentioning topics related to sexual identity (Hornbeck & Malin, 2023). Some of the same states that have banned any curricula/discussion about LGBTQ topics have also considered requiring Christian religious displays in public schools, like the Ten Commandments, or required Bible reading. In light of these dangerous trends, Deegan's (1988) definition of critical pragmatism as "a theory of science that emphasizes the need to apply knowledge to everyday problems based on radical interpretations of liberal and progressive values" (p. 26), positions DE as a space of possibility for educative experiences. DE allows for, though does not guarantee, instructors to change the objective conditions now mandated in K12 law for secondary school students in some states. DE provides avenues where high school students can take a course at a community college that allows them to meet their interests, with students from different backgrounds, using curricula that affirms their identity along with an instructor who has the ability to explore topics that would be illegal in many high school classrooms.

As we prepare to conclude, we introduce one caveat and one anticipated criticism of this thesis. The first caveat has to do with the nature of DE class formats; the portraits introduced in this paper are taken from observations of face-to-face college classes, but this omits the increasing role that online learning plays in higher education. In 2021, 61% of United States undergraduate students took at least some courses fully online and 28% of undergrads took all of their courses

online (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2023). These data do not tell how many of these online students were DE, but we do know that as of 2021 that nearly 20% of all community college students were DE students (Fink et al. 2023). Thinking about Dewey and his experiential continuum, it is possible to see value in an online learning environment, especially if the traditional K12 school environment is miseducative with restrictive curricula that stymies the learning path of an adolescent. However, if "collateral learning" (Dewey, 1938, p. 48) that occurs in online instruction is non-existent in an asynchronous course where little democratic association takes place and students simply complete modules without any sort of interaction, is this a better option for students or is it educative?

An anticipated criticism is that our concept of dual enrollment (DE) fosters an individualized approach to education, one that no pragmatist educator would genuinely endorse. By framing education as a matter of which individual courses a student selects and experiences in isolation, we may risk abandoning the collective, communal aspects that are central to a genuinely pragmatist notion of education. Pragmatist educators, particularly those influenced by Dewey, emphasize that education is not merely an individual pursuit but a social process that thrives on shared experiences, collaboration, and collective inquiry. The strength of an educational system, from a pragmatist perspective, lies in fostering communities of learners who engage in co-constructing knowledge, rather than atomized individuals following isolated academic paths. However, our argument is rooted in a ~~practical,~~ realist sensibility that acknowledges the complexities and constraints of navigating the neoliberal maze of contemporary educational policy. In today's educational landscape, where systemic inequities, market-driven logics (Duncheon & Hornbeck, 2024), and rigid policy frameworks dominate, it is often necessary to find pathways that, while imperfect, still promote opportunities for individualized growth. Dual enrollment, though it may appear to emphasize individual choice and experience, offers students the chance to transcend the limitations of traditional high school curricula. While recognizing the potential tension between pragmatist ideals of communal learning and the individualized experiences facilitated by DE, we argue that allowing students some degree of agency and autonomy can still align with the broader goals of pragmatist education—particularly when such opportunities provide access to content and perspectives that may be restricted or unavailable in conventional high school settings. Our perspective does not reject the pragmatist emphasis on community; rather, it seeks to balance this ideal with the practical realities and constraints that shape students' educational trajectories today.

In sum, the observations offered here collectively illustrate that while dual enrollment (DE) provides a platform for a range of educational experiences that can better align with individual student needs, identities, and interests compared to the often restrictive and uniform settings of traditional high schools. This is especially important in states where laws impose limitations on curriculum content, particularly content that challenges dominant narratives or engages critically with social issues. DE, in these cases, can create spaces for students to access more diverse perspectives and engage with topics that resonate with their personal and intellectual development in ways that traditional high school environments often do not allow.

Nevertheless, the success of DE is contingent upon the implementation of strong quality control measures. These programs must ensure that the educational experiences provided are not only rigorous but also genuinely valuable in terms of fostering critical thinking, academic growth, and personal development. The democratic potential of DE lies in its ability to offer students meaningful choices—choices in what they study, how they engage with their learning, and whose voices they encounter in the curriculum. These choices are meaningful insofar as the curriculum and pedagogy of such courses are providing conditions for educative experiences—which requires far more intervention and instructor development than many "free market" approaches to DE are currently offering.

Dewey (1916) wrote, in *Democracy and Education*, that "we cannot set up, out of our heads, something we regard as an ideal society. We must base our conception upon societies which actually exist, in order to have any assurance that our ideal is a practicable one" (p. 83). Moreover, as Festenstein (2017) argues, "we can find in Dewey's account of inquiry the nonideal theorist's focus on local or situational improvement rather than on achieving perfect justice" (p. 102). A critical pragmatist view of the present policy environment emphasizes that social and political life are shifting objective conditions of power and constraint for K-12 educators (and, to a lesser degree, college educators as well). Pragmatism helps us pay attention to the environmental contexts for genuine, experiential education to occur; critical pragmatists recognize the specific power relations threaded through those contexts. DE programs, with necessary supports and quality control measures, can cultivate a more inclusive and democratic educational experience by allowing students to explore subjects and ideas that reflect a wider array of perspectives, particularly those that may be censored in traditional high school classrooms. DE programs must be carefully structured to avoid simply replicating the inequities of the larger education

system. Access, oversight, and resource allocation all play critical roles in determining who benefits from DE and how effective these programs truly are in promoting equity and inclusion. The observations presented show that while DE holds great potential, it also presents challenges. This calls for a nuanced understanding of DE as a flexible yet complex educational strategy. With thoughtful implementation and oversight, DE can serve as a critical pragmatist endeavor, one that encourages student agency, promotes diversity of thought, and supports the development of a more engaged and informed citizenry

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