

John Dewey and His Philosophy of Education

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Abstract

This review paper on John Dewey, the pioneering educationist of the 20th century, discusses his educational thoughts, and writings, which gave a new direction to education at the turn of the century. Dewey's contributions are immense and overwhelming in the fields of education, politics, humanism, logic, and aesthetics. This discussion will focus on Dewey and his philosophy related to educational approaches, pedagogical issues, and the linkages that he made between education, democracy, experience, and society. At the heart of his educational thought is the child. Dewey's idea on humanism springs from his democratic bent and his quest for freedom, equity, and the value of child's experiences.

Keywords: Dewey, educational approaches, humanism, pedagogical issues

Introduction

This discussion is based on John Dewey's (1859-1952) contribution to education and educational philosophy. He remains the most influential American philosopher and educationist of the 20th Century, who gave a new direction to educational thought and processes. With his firm democratic belief in civil societies and education, Dewey rejected authoritarian structures and subsequently the traditional teaching methods in schools. He believed in progressive education and advocated for reforms in pedagogical aspects of teaching and school curricula; most importantly, Dewey believed that at the centre of the whole academia was the child, and Dewey's educational philosophy and reforms were concerned primarily with the child. Today, Dewey's philosophy of education and its relation to

experience, democracy, humanism, and pragmatism have largely affected the modern system of education all over the world.

This discussion will look at three areas of contribution of this great educationist's philosophy of education. These aspects are, in different sections united by a thread of continuity to his great philosophy of education.

1. Dewey's philosophy of education
2. Dewey's philosophy of education and experience
3. The role of the teacher and the child

Dewey's philosophy of education

Dewey's ideas mirror the affects of new the industrialized colonized society, fraught with the problems and aftermaths of two World Wars. Dewey was largely inspired by Marx's theory of social struggle and conflict between classes. Marx's theory of conflict is that the society is stratified and layered with different strata and there is a competition within these different classes. Marx stresses that social analysis should focus on class structure and relations. Dewey had an inspiration from Habermas's thoughts, which are in the traditions of Kant, and emphasize the role of education to transform the world into a more humane, just, and egalitarian society.

His writings on democracy and education express his philosophy of education as a way of social reform. He saw education as a means of serving the democratic process through making corrections in the economic evils and by obtaining political ends that would lead to progression of a society. Hence, education for Dewey is the culmination of his political ideas. The shaping of a society in which the common goods, among which are the knowledge and social intelligence, are distributed fairly among all who participate in that society (Berding, 1997).

Establishment of progressive schools in the 18th century was an effort to liberate traditional schools' system of education, and mainly to facilitate the intellectual growth of a child. However, Dewey was critical about these progressive schools on the premise that freedom

alone was no solution; learning needs, a structure and order must be based on a clear theory of experience, not simply the whim of teachers or students. On the other hand, Rousseau, and later Pestalozzi, Froebel and other educational theorists believed that a child was like a seed and if they were left to nourish and nurture naturally, they would naturally bear flowers and fruits.

In *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey clearly states that the methodology of teaching leads to the purpose of teaching. As teaching and learning is pedagogical; therefore, the subject matter should be planned in effective ways. He clearly states, "The subject matter of the learner is not . . . identical with the formulated, the crystallized, and systematized subject matter of the adult" (p. 190). The subject matter alone is not a guarantee of learning and development; rather, the teacher should plan and connect the subject matter to the students, keeping in consideration the needs, desires, interests, and cognitive development of the students, as he shows in 'How We Think'.

Dewey's main concern was a disparity between the experiences of child and the kind of concepts imposed upon him. He believed that this gap curbs a child's natural experiences and abilities, forcing him to follow the dictates of a formal education. Dewey is equally critical of the progressive education which imposes concepts, such as the right of free expression or free activity as these tenets of education also impose ideas upon a child. Dewey was deeply inspired by the vision of a liberal free society and realized the pressing need of freedom and equality, emancipation from social bounds to liberate individual and society from the structures of power.

Dewey's philosophy of education and experience

In Dewey's philosophy of education, we see a close link between a child's life and his experiences as a continuous process, which he regards as the aim of education. In this way, education has the scope of equipping a child with social competence. Unless this link is made, education is useless. Dewey sees a strong correlation between interaction and continuity of experiences. It is through interaction that a child brings in experiences from society. Because of such

continuous interactions, environments are created. These environments are the fields in which situations and conditions interact with personal needs and purposes, and create life-long experiences.

These experiences are given value and direction by the teachers; therefore, there should be order and direction of a child's experiences, which will give him a composed and integrated personality. He gives example of the games children play, in which they follow rules of the game willingly to continue the game. Similarly, students are involved in class activities in groups and the moving force is to get the activity done. This learning process allows students the freedom of thought, judgment, and power to execute decisions. These learning experiences should have a clear purpose, an understanding of the surrounding conditions, knowledge of what occurred before, so that it could allow reflection and analysis of issues and experiences. Such structured interactions turn an impulse into a plan of action.

This brings forth Dewey's philosophy of humanism. As a child discovers by doing, the child is explicitly realized as the main actor of the entire learning process. The child's role is no longer vulnerable or a subject of imposition. Rather, a child is a free individual with his aptitude and interests. As he is actively involved in the learning process, the child is an active social actor who participates in social experiences.

An experience for him involves a dual process of understanding and influencing the world around us, as well as being influenced and changed by that experience. Therefore, education should be concerned about the child's experiences in school and in natural environments outside the school. Particular experiences should be assessed to the degree that they contribute to the growth or to getting more experience. "Growth in Dewey's context means that the individual is gaining the ability to understand the relationships and interconnections between various experiences between one learning experience and another" (Guttek, 1997, p.105). According to Dewey (1934), "Experience occurs continuously, because the interaction of live creature and enviroing conditions is involved in the very process of living" (p. 1). Dewey's method of teaching was based on his

pragmatic philosophy-the Pragmatism, and he is of the opinion that direct experience is the basis of all methods. Any relevant knowledge or information is in some sense experiential as it relates directly to the lived experience of the individuals concerned (Dewey 1916). For him, knowledge takes place in concrete and meaningful situations, through spontaneous activities of children. Dewey's methods of teaching were based on the principles of learning by doing activities in connection with life of a child. Such approaches to teaching and learning follow strategies like project based or problem based method of learning.

Curriculum, Dewey demanded was not imposed upon the students, rather it had the capacity to allow individual differences among the students and value their experiences. Dewey's curriculum theory is based on anthropological, psychological, and social-philosophical (political) perspectives that hold a child to be like an organism and this organism is searching for stimuli in order to grow (Berding, 1992).

Dewey strongly supported experiential learning, as it offers students a hands-on, collaborative learning experience, which helps them to "fully learn new skills and knowledge" (Haynes, Sakai, Rees, Gilbert, Frith & Passingham, 2007). EYler and Giles (1999) asserted that Dewey described service-learning as experiential learning and that such learning has a "continual spiral of events starting with direct experience, followed by periods of reflection where hypotheses are generated about immediate and future meaning, and then tested through experiences and actions" (p. 184). Toulmin (1984) argues, that Dewey in his work was able to dismantle the epistemological tradition and was able to display farsightedness and originality, which was at his time could not be recognized. To Dewey (1916), "Development means transformation,... that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (p. 76). Such experiences raise the child's curiosity and hope, and gives him a purpose to carry out school activities. This participation moulds his views and perceptions about the world, education, and also his attitude about participation in school activities. Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism is his premise on education as a

lived-experience, that is, a person experiences learning with others. This approach of learning combines theory and experience into mutual accommodation and adaptation. Dewey used both philosophical and psychological perspectives to build his theory of education (McDermott, 1981). He saw that education's purpose is to make students' imagination strong and he regarded it an important goal of education (Cunningham, 1994). The role of the teacher is to guide students, especially adolescents on the verge of adulthood, "To make choices among desirable alternatives, is vitally important in the building of character" (Cunningham, 1994, p.12).

However, as one studies Dewey's educational philosophy, there appears to be a gap in the operational plan of learning through experiences. Firstly, in Dewey's work, we do not find any objectives or criteria based experiences. We do not get to know how to evaluate the experiences that help a child grow, so that in accordance, the growth of child could be geared in measurable terms. Also, how do we know that the child is getting more knowledgeable, mature or intellectual through the experiences given by the school? What the learning objectives are and where the learners are expected to reach at the end of experiential learning. For this, the teachers would find themselves without direction. If the learning is heavily dependent upon experiences, then how many experiences are to be planned in a term? How would teachers handle various responses, reactions, feedback on a similar experience? I guess it can very soon lead to the teacher burnout. We do not find any pilot study of experiential learning or how are the experiences of a child then incorporated into the objectives of learning. Next, no guidelines are given on the processes of application in a structured manner; who are the agents of change: school management, teachers, parents, curriculum designers or association of schools? In this whole process of democratization of education, what would be the role of community or the society? What would be the role of the parents? Dewey has not given any clear guidelines for these aspects.

The role of the teacher and the child

Dewey stresses the sensitivity of educationists towards learners'

needs and their individual differences. For Dewey, teachers should realize that there is no one-for-all concept of teaching and learning. Learning processes should be planned considering the aptitude, learners' former experiences, and their present experiences. The teacher should observe the interest of the students, observe the directions they naturally take, and then help them develop problem-solving skills. A teachers' primary purpose is to increase freedom of the children to enable them to explore their environments. He believed in an interdisciplinary curriculum, or a curriculum that focuses on connecting multiple subjects, where students are allowed to freely move in and out of classrooms, as they pursue their interests and construct their own paths for acquiring and applying knowledge. A teacher is engaged with the learners through interaction, which is a social process. Teachers are members of the community of learning, and play a major role in selecting experiences and to give a proper direction to these educative experiences.

Dewey argues that the centre of gravity needs to shift whereby he [the learner] is at the center (Dewey, 1910). Dewey is often referred to as a child-centered educationist (Bantock, 1963; Darling, 1994; Entwistle, 1970; Pring, 2007; Woods & Barrow, 2006). Dewey (1987) suggests, "Indeed the starting point should be the internal condition-the child's own instincts and powers furnish the material and give the starting point for all education" (p. 44). His conviction was that the child must not be authoritatively told beforehand what is good or evil, but should discover these opposite realities for himself.

Dewey was most concerned about the development of the individuality of child. The child's voice was nowhere heard, as curriculum, subject matter, and concepts were imposed on him in the school. That is why Dewey regarded a child as the most vulnerable member of the society, who is directly affected by the practices and attitudes of the members of the academia- those who impose policies on him, and control him. Dewey was specifically concerned about the rights of child as an individual, his right to exercise his decisions, choices in learning and education, and his participation in a democratic learning process. A child is by nature curious, social, and constructive, and possesses inherently the raw material to be developed by experienced

guide and mentor. It is therefore responsibility of the teacher to plan positive and constructive environment for the students so as to create positive educative experiences for them. Such environments are built in the joint partnership of teachers and students, where together they try out effective techniques of teaching and learning. The objective is to make students more self-reliant. In this way, Dewey considered his school a community where the students become active members.

Conclusion

Although Dewey's innumerable works and contributions are in education, politics, humanism, logic, and aesthetics, given the limited scope of this paper the focus has been Dewey's educational philosophy related to experience and democracy, for the growth and development of a child. Summing up the salient works and concepts of John Dewey was a very challenging task. In his long satisfying career in education, Dewey brought about revolutionary reformations in educational philosophy, approaches, and pedagogies. Essentially, with the child as the centre of education, Dewey's philosophical creed focuses on the development of child who is a valuable member of society; a society which believes in equity and freedom, practices democratic qualities and ideals.

There have been pedagogical and practical challenges faced by the practitioners in applying Dewey's approach to education. The most important criticism is his lack of clarity as to how to set up systems that can see through the inception of ideas to the conclusion of the experiences, to gauge the growth and development, and to design, and plan curriculum clearly. However, given all these objections it cannot be denied that John Dewey remains one of the pioneering figures of contemporary educationists, who left a rich trail of researchers and educationists, who continually study the methods and theories of education presented by him and add invaluable to his body of knowledge.

Likewise, there are various operational challenges experienced in a developing country like Pakistan. In the implementation of

Dewey's system of education, the administration is usually found reluctant to set up such a system, as the physical set up is for passive learners, traditional teaching, and limited financial resources. Another challenge is the gap in teacher education to make the academia understand the philosophy, objectives, and methods of offering such educational systems. Because of this, partners in education such as, the parents, teachers, administrators, and the child himself usually become critical of such systems.

The role of teachers in Pakistan is also perceived in a different light. A teacher is one who is knowledgeable and authoritative. What would happen if students in such systems find the teacher asking questions, or asking them to take lead? Students would naturally try to take advantage of such teachers, and least of all, they would take teachers less seriously. In Pakistan, students especially of professional colleges or business schools, are highly geared towards grades and are marks-oriented. They would be lesser adherent to the process and would like to find out the end-product. Such system would also put teachers under a lot of pressure to motivate and involve passive and shy learners in projects or problem solving discussions.

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