

John Dewey: His Philosophy of Education in Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Since times immemorial there have been various pursuits for unfolding the mystery of the universe, birth and death, sorrow and joy. Various ages have produced different thoughts throwing light upon the mystic region. The ultimate truth is yet to be found out. This eternal quest for truth lends the origin of philosophy. A love of wisdom is the essence for any philosophical investigation and let various philosophers to put forward diverse thoughts of educational philosophy. The current article will focus and will through light 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: John Dewey, Educational Thought, Historical Perspective

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I. Introduction

John Dewey was a twentieth century American philosopher. He was born on October 20, 1859, to Archibald Sprague Dewey and Lucina Artemisia rich of Burlington, Vermont. Dewey was exposed to the evolutionary theory through the teaching of G.H.Perkins during his tenure of graduation. John Dewey has made, arguably, the most significant contribution to the development of educational thinking in the twentieth century. He was an American psychologist, philosopher, educator, social critic and political activist. Dewey's philosophical pragmatism, concern with interaction, reflection and experience, and interest in community and democracy, were brought together to form a highly suggestive educative form ^[1-3, 7]. Dewey's Philosophy represents a happy blend of naturalism and idealism because it is based on the evolutionary concept of Darwin and Pragmatism of William James. Like Darwin he believes that world is still in the process of making and that life in this world is an ever-changing and self-renewing process. Like William James, he believes that whatever useful, is good and whatever good, is useful. Truth is also that which works, which fulfils our purposes and satisfies our desires. Dewey builds his philosophy on the basis of doctrine of change. For him, philosophy must not be a thing aloof from everyday life but must be constantly applied to political, social, economical and educational problems. He was eminently influenced by the pragmatism of the 19th century. According to Dewey's philosophy of education, education will be useful and purposeful, if it contributes to the human welfare progress ^[2, 8, 11]. Education must change according to changing needs of society. For Dewey, in a progressive society only those educational processes and institutions can remain alive and active which are flexible enough to satisfy dynamic needs of changing society and which provides real life experiences together an opportunity to react in a real life situation. According to Dewey the child is born with certain powers and capacities ^[2-4]. Those powers are to be developed according to the demands of society. So education should enable the individual to act and react with his environment to gain experience for proper social adjustment. Education is not simply amassing facts but ability to apply intelligence in solving different problems. The basic designation of Dewey's whole philosophy is experimentalism because its foundation is his philosophy of experiment. According to him, philosophy has to follow the spirit of science not only in its approach to the problems of metaphysics and epistemology, but also in the fields of ethics and aesthetics. Dewey saw democracy as the political manifestation of the scientific method, with its combination of purpose and objectivity, freedom and discipline, individual speculation and public verification. Democracy and science came closest to being the only absolutes in Dewey's experimentalist philosophy. Dewey created his broad philosophical and educational thoughts on the basis of experimental naturalism. Major fundamental concepts of his educational philosophy such as continuity, growth, development and genetic method, could be also traced back to Darwinian evolutionary theory. He re-constructs the ideas and methods of traditional philosophy on the basis of Darwin's explanation about species. He also

introduces new scientific methods into educational theory and practices and applies critical intelligence to reject the traditional ways of viewing philosophical discourse. The important contributions Dewey has made, which entitle him among the great philosophers of modern times, are not to metaphysics but to the other fields of philosophy. Dewey's work is one of the most profound and comprehensive theoretical synthesis developed in twentieth century. He made major contributions in almost all areas of the spirit: in philosophy (pragmatism), in pedagogy (progressivism), in logic (instrumentalism), in psychology (functionalism), in aesthetics (aesthetic naturalism)^[3, 4] and so on.

Educational Perception

According to Dewey Education is a fostering, a nurturing, a cultivating process. Thus education involves the rearing, raising or bringing up of immature members of the society to partake in the accepted mode of life of the matured members^[4]. It is a process of leading or sharing which results in shaping, forming and moulding ones activities into the standard form of the society; to be accepted as a member of society, a child for instance, will need to watch, learn and acquire the habits, etiquettes, norms, language, practices and the entire cultural pattern of the society in which he is incidentally located. It is only when he does this, that he could be readily regarded as a real member of society^[5]. Thus, education is a continuous process of growth which involves development of human intelligence in gaining experiences and carrying over such experiences to subsequent ones for problem solving. The entire process of education, for Dewey, may be properly regarded as a process of securing the conditions that make for the most complete effective adaptations of individuals to their physical and moral environment. This means that education is an endless experiment where in educators and learners in creating ways of actively transforming themselves to secure the most complete and effective adaptation possible.

Social Efficiency Development

According to Dewey, the development of social efficiency is one of the aims of education. Dewey says, "What nutrition and reproduction are to physiological life, education is to social life^[6]". Man is essentially a social being, a citizen, growing and thinking in a vast complex of interactions and experiences. Through education, he is developing reasoning in social relations, cultivating social virtues and thus becoming socially efficient. To him school is a social institution. The school is simply that form of social life in which all the factors are concentrated that will most effectively and rapidly bring the child to share in the accumulated knowledge and skill of the race. The school should be organized in such a way that the activities of the outer world are reflected. The school, therefore, should grow out of the home and play life which is the sources of child's principle experiences^[7].

Education is Life

Dewey emphasizes that education is not a preparation for life: it is a life itself. He says that life is a by-product of activities and education is born out of these activities. He rejected the idea that education is preparation for life. If at all it is preparation for life then it is preparation through life Experiences^[8, 9]. The child lives in the present. The future is meaningless to him. Hence it is absurd to expect him to do things for some future preparations. As the child lives in the present, the educative process will be naturally based on the present needs and interests of the child. The School is a miniature society facing problems similar to those faced in life. Children's should therefore be made to participate in the social life effectively.

Education as Experience

Dewey favored an education of and for experience^[9]. Every new experience is education and an old experience is replaced by new experience. Dewey contented that the major developmental experiences of the human race have been gained in the struggle to satisfy the needs of life. This "*struggle for experience*" is a continuous process. Natural impulse of the human organism to seek food and protection has resulted in the evolution of human intelligence. It is true dominating impulses of the race that the development of young child can be achieved. A conscious effort has been made to make men more competent to take part in the activities and the purposes of the race. This effort is education. Dewey said education helps "the process of reconstruction of experience^[10]".

Education as Growth

Growth is the real function of education^[11]. It, therefore, must lead to growth. But growth is not directed towards any pre-determined goal or end. The end of growth is more growth and so the end of education, more education. An individual is a changing and growing personality and education is to facilitate that growth^[12]. It is, therefore, the duty of the teacher to provide opportunities for proper growth by arousing the instincts

and capacities of children and by providing to them the solution of those problems which make the children think.

Curriculum in Dewey's view

Dewey's approach to education was truly child centered. In his view, children should be allowed to explore their environment^[13]. Dewey recognized that "children's development and learning were anything but rational and orderly, he and his followers advocated a child centered and community centered curriculum to give students experiences that make rigorous intellectual demands in the content of democratic social living"^[14]. With regard to curriculum, Dewey strongly objects to the subject based curriculum and introduced pedocentric approach that advocates subjects as simply the sum and substances of human activities. He believes that child should be allowed to learn a subject through his own experiences.

II. Conclusion

Dewey's remarkable works and contributions are in education, politics, humanism, logic, and aesthetics, given the limited scope of the current article the concrete focus has been Dewey's educational philosophy related to experience and education, for the growth and development of a child, development of social efficiency and much more^[15]. 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.

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