

A Critical Assessment of John Dewey's Philosophy of Education

Mohammed Zeinu Hassen

Department of Social Sciences, Addis Ababa Science and Technology University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Email address:

Mohammed.zeinu@aastu.edu.et

To cite this article:

Mohammed Zeinu Hassen. A Critical Assessment of John Dewey's Philosophy of Education. *International Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. 11, No. 2, 2023, pp. 28-31. doi: 10.11648/j.ijp.20231102.13

Received: November 10, 2022; **Accepted:** January 4, 2023; **Published:** June 5, 2023

Abstract: This essay on John Dewey, a prominent educator of the 20th century, explores his pedagogical theories and writings that influenced teaching-learning procedures. Dewey's influences are vast and overwhelming in the fields of aesthetics, politics, humanism, and logic. In the center of his educational concept is the child. His democratic leanings and pursuit of liberty, justice, and the value of a child's experience are the roots of Dewey's conception of humanism. Dewey's main concern was the gap between a child's experiences and the expectations put on him. He emphasizes the need of teachers showing sensitivity to the unique differences and needs of their students. A youngster has the potential to be nurtured by a skilled mentor since they are naturally curious, companionable, and productive. As a result, it is the responsibility of the instructor to create a welcoming and productive environment for the students in order to give them excellent educational experiences. These environments are developed by the joint testing of effective teaching and learning strategies by instructors and students. The objective is to promote student independence. Dewey viewed his school as a community where the students are actively involved. This paper focused on Dewey's educational theory, pedagogical considerations, and the links he drew between education, democracy, experience, and society.

Keywords: Philosophy of Education, Humanism, Democracy, John Dewey

1. Introduction

This paper is focused on the contributions of John Dewey (1859-1952) to education and educational philosophy. He is still regarded as the most important American philosopher and educator of the twentieth century, having revolutionized educational ideas and procedures. Dewey criticized authoritarian organizations and, as a result, conventional teaching techniques in schools, due to his deep democratic conviction in civic society and education. Dewey believed in progressive education and campaigned for changes in pedagogical elements of teaching and school curriculum; most significantly, he thought that the child was at the center of all academia, and his educational philosophy and reforms were primarily focused on the child.

Dewey's educational theory and its connections to experience, democracy, humanism, and pragmatism have had a significant impact on the current educational system across the world. Forcing children to pursue a pre-determined course of study was incompatible with democratic values [1].

This paper will focus on three areas where this outstanding educator's concept of education has made a difference. These characteristics are linked by a thread of continuity to his outstanding educational philosophy in several areas: Dewey's educational philosophy, Dewey's educational theory, and life experiences, and the teacher's and the student's roles.

2. Dewey's Educational Philosophy

Though Dewey is criticized for reducing reason to mere instrumental value and undermining the importance of inclinations and motivation in the analysis of knowledge, his thoughts reflect the effects of a modern industrialized colonial society. Dewey was heavily influenced by Marx's ideas of social struggle and class warfare. According to Marx's theory of conflict, society is stratified and stacked with distinct strata, and there is rivalry among these layers. Marx emphasizes the need of focusing social analysis on

class structure and connections. Dewey and Habermas both criticize positivism, technocracy, autocratic dominance, and other cultural and social circumstances that stifle democracy's potential [2] Dewey was influenced by Habermas's ideas, which are based on Kant's ideas and stress the importance of education in making the world a more humane, just, and equitable society.

In his essays on democracy and education, he expresses his belief in education as a tool for social change. He regarded education as a method of aiding the democratic process by addressing economic injustices and achieving political goals that would lead to societal advancement. As a result, education is the conclusion of Dewey's political views. The creation of a community in which common goods, such as knowledge and social intelligence, is fairly divided among all members of that society.

The introduction of modern education in the 18th century was an attempt to free conventional institutions' educational systems, with the primary goal of facilitating a child's creative thinking. However, Dewey was skeptical of these revolutionary schools because he believed that freedom was insufficient; learning required structure and order, which could not be relied only on the whims of instructors or pupils. Rousseau, and later Pestalozzi, Froebel, and other educational theorists, on the other hand, thought that a child was like a seed and that if they were left to grow and cultivate organically, they would yield blossoms and fruits.

Dewey clearly emphasizes in *Democracy and Education* [3] that the teaching approach leads to teaching purpose. Because teaching and learning are both pedagogical, the subject matter should be well-planned. "The topic matter of the learner is not... same with the articulated, crystallized, and systematized subject matter of the adult," he asserts emphatically. As he demonstrates in 'How We Think,' the subject matter alone is not a guarantee of learning and growth; rather, the teacher should prepare and relate the subject matter to the students, considering their needs, wants, interests, and cognitive development.

The discrepancy between a child's experiences and the notions placed on him was Dewey's major worry. He thought that this divide stifles a child's natural knowledge and skills, pushing him to conform to the demands of a formal school. Dewey is also skeptical of progressive education, which forces notions such as the freedom to free expression or free action on children, as these educational ideals also put ideas on them. Dewey was strongly moved by the ideal of a liberal free society, and he saw the urgent need for equality and justice, as well as liberation from social ties, to liberate individuals and societies from oppressive power systems.

3. Dewey's Educational Theory and Life Experiences

We find a strong relationship between a child's existence and his experiences as an ongoing process in Dewey's theory of education, which he sees as the goal of education. In this

sense, education has the potential to provide a youngster with social skills. Education is meaningless until this relationship is established. Dewey believes that contact and experience continuity are inextricably linked. A child draws in experiences from society through contact. Environments are generated as a result of such constant encounters. Circumstances and surroundings interplay with personal wants and objectives in these contexts, resulting in existence.

Teachers appreciate and direct these encounters; as a result, there should be order and direction to a child's experiences, resulting in a composed and integrated personality. He uses the example of children's games, in which they actively obey the rules of the game in order to continue playing. Similarly, students participate in class activities in groups, with the goal of completing the task. Students have the freedom to think, judge, and make judgments as a result of this learning process.

These teaching methods should have a defined goal, a grasp of the surroundings, and knowledge of previous events so that reflection and analysis of issues and experiences may take place. An inclination becomes a plan of action as a result of such organized encounters.

This is where Dewey's theory of humanism comes into play. The child is expressly recognized as the key actor of the entire learning process as he or she finds by doing. The function of the child is no longer fragile or prone to encroachment. A youngster, on the other hand, is a free individual with his own aptitudes and interests. The child is an engaged social actor who engages in social encounters because he is actively immersed in the learning process.

For him, an experience entails both the process of comprehending and affecting the world around us, as well as the process of being impacted and transformed by that experience. As a result, education should be concerned with the child's experiences both within and outside of the classroom. Experiences should be evaluated in terms of how much they help to grow or gain additional experience. "Growth in Dewey's context involves developing the ability to grasp the links and interconnections between diverse experiences from one learning experience to the next". [4]

"Experience occurs continually since the interaction of live creatures and their surroundings are engaged in the very process of living," Dewey [5] writes. Dewey's teaching technique was based on his progressivism, Pragmatism, and he believes that all methods are founded on direct experience. Any relevant knowledge or information is subjective in some way because it ties directly to the lived experience of the people involved. For him, learning occurs in tangible and meaningful settings, as a result of children's spontaneous actions. Dewey's teaching techniques were founded on the idea of learning via performing tasks that were relevant to a child's life. Project-based or problem-based learning techniques are used in such teaching and learning approaches.

Dewey urged that curriculum not be imposed on students, but rather that it allow for individual variations among pupils and appreciate their experiences. Dewey's curriculum theory is founded on anthropological, psychological, and

social-philosophical (political) viewpoints that see a child as an organism in need of stimuli to grow.

Experiential learning, according to Haynes, Sakai, Rees, Gilbert, Frith, and Passingham [6], provides students with a hands-on, collaborative learning experience that allows them to "completely absorb new skills and information." Dewey described service-learning as Experiential learning, according to Eyler and Giles [7], and such learning has a "continual spiral of events beginning with direct experience, followed by periods of reflection where hypotheses about immediate and future meaning are generated, and then tested through experiences and actions". Toulmin [8] claims that Dewey was able to demolish the epistemological tradition in his work, demonstrating farsightedness and creativity that could not be acknowledged at the time. "Development is transformation," according to Dewey [9], "that reconstruction or rearrangement of experience that adds to its significance and enhances power to control the path of later experience". Such experiences pique the child's interest and offer him a reason to participate in school activities. This involvement shapes his worldview and ideas of education, as well as his attitude toward participation in school activities. The formation of attitude, both intellectual and emotional, for Dewey is the foundation of learning and the meaning of experience [10]. Dewey's pragmatism is based on the idea of education as a lived experience, in which a person learns alongside others. This method of learning incorporates both theory and practice into mutual adaptation and adjustment.

Dewey developed his educational philosophy from both philosophical and psychological viewpoints [11]. He believed that one of the most essential goals of education is to strengthen Pupils' imaginations [12]. The teacher's duty is to help pupils, particularly teenagers on the cusp of maturity, "to make choices among attractive options, which is crucially essential in the development of character". [12]

However, there appears to be a gap in Dewey's operational strategy of learning via experiences when studying his educational philosophy. To begin with, there are no aims or criteria-based experiences in Dewey's work. We don't learn how to assess the events that help a child grow so that the child's development may be tracked in quantitative terms. Also, how can we know if the child is becoming more informed, mature, or intelligent as a result of the school's experiences? What are the learning objectives, and where do you think the learners will be at the conclusion of experiential learning? As a result, the teachers would be at a loss for what to do.

How many experiences should be prepared in a semester if learning is primarily based on experiences? On a comparable scenario, how would teachers manage diverse answers, reactions, and feedback? I'm guessing it'll quickly lead to instructor fatigue. There is no pilot research of experiential learning or how a child's experiences are then incorporated into learning objectives. Next, no formal instructions are provided for the application procedure; who are the agents of change: school administration, teachers, parents, curriculum designers, or school associations? What role would the

community or society play in this process of democratization of education? What role would the parents play? Dewey hasn't provided any specific recommendations on these topics.

Dewey emphasizes the need of educators being sensitive to students' needs and individual diversity. Teachers, according to Dewey, should recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and learning.

4. The Teacher's and the Student's Roles

Learning procedures should be planned with the aptitude, previous experiences, and current experiences of learners in mind. The instructor should pay attention to the pupils' interests, as well as the natural routes they take, and then assist them in developing problem-solving abilities. The fundamental goal of a teacher is to give children more independence in order for them to explore their surroundings. He advocated for an interdisciplinary curriculum, or one that focuses on integrating many disciplines and allows students to freely move in and out of classrooms as they explore their interests and create their own routes for learning and application. Interaction, which is a social process, engages a teacher with the students. Teachers are members of the learning community, and they play an important role in selecting experiences and directing them appropriately.

According to Dewey, the center of gravity must change such that he [the student] is at the center [13-18] allude to Dewey as a child-centered educator. "Indeed, the starting point should be the internal condition-the child's inherent instincts and capacities provide the material and provide the starting point for all education," Dewey says. His belief was that the child should not be informed what is good or bad in advance, but rather should discover these opposing truths for himself.

Dewey was primarily concerned with a child's development of uniqueness. As curriculum, content, and concepts were pushed on him at school, the child's voice was drowned out. That is why Dewey saw a child as the most vulnerable member of society, one who is immediately influenced by the actions and attitudes of academics—those who impose regulations on him and exert control over him. Dewey was particularly concerned with the rights of the child as a person, including his ability to make decisions, study and educate himself, and participate in a democratic learning process.

A child is curious, sociable, and constructive by nature, and contains the raw material that can be developed by a skilled guide and mentor. As a result, it is the teacher's job to prepare a pleasant and constructive atmosphere for the students in order to provide them with great educational experiences. Such settings are created by a collaborative effort between instructors and students, in which they test out successful teaching and learning approaches together. The goal is to help pupils become more self-sufficient. In this sense, Dewey saw his school as a community in which the children play an active role.

5. Conclusion

Despite Dewey's numerous works and contributions in education, politics, humanism, logic, and aesthetics, the focus of this article has been on Dewey's educational philosophy connected to experience and democracy for the growth and development of a child, due to the restricted scope of this study. It was a difficult effort to summarize John Dewey's most important writings and thoughts. Dewey ushered in revolutionary changes in educational philosophy, methods, and pedagogies over his long and fruitful career in education. Fundamentally, Dewey's philosophical creed places the child at the center of education, focusing on the development of a child who is a useful part of society; a society that believes in fairness and freedom, and implements democratic traits and principles.

In implementing Dewey's method of education, practitioners have confronted pedagogical and practical obstacles. His lack of understanding of how to set up mechanisms that can see from the genesis of ideas to the completion of experiences, evaluate growth and development, and properly create and organize curricula is the most serious complaint. Despite these criticisms, John Dewey remains one of the most influential personalities in contemporary education, having left a rich trail of scholars and educators who continue to examine the techniques and ideas of education he provided and contribute incalculably to his body of knowledge.

Similarly, in a developing nation like Ethiopia, there are a variety of operational problems. When it comes to implementing Dewey's educational system, the administration is typically hesitant to do so since the physical setup is designed for passive learners, traditional teaching, and limited financial resources. Another issue is a lack of teacher preparation that allows academia to comprehend the concept, goals, and techniques of providing such educational institutions. As a result, educational partners such as parents, teachers, administrators, and the child himself are frequently critical of such systems.

Teachers' roles in Ethiopia are likewise viewed in a different way.

A teacher is someone who knows a lot about a lot of things and has a lot of authority. What if pupils in such systems discover the teacher asking them questions or requesting that they take the lead? Students would naturally try to exploit such professors, and teachers would be taken less seriously as a result. Students in Ethiopia, particularly those in professional institutions or business schools, are heavily focused on academics and marks. They would be less committed to the process and would prefer to see the final outcome. Teachers would also be under a lot of pressure to inspire and engage inactive and timid students in projects or problem-solving conversations under such a system.

References

- [1] Sullivan, Phyllis. "John Dewey's Philosophy of Education." *The High School Journal* 49, no. 8 (1966): 391–97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40366240>.
- [2] Antonio, Robert J., and Douglas Kellner. "Communication, Modernity, and Democracy In Habermas and Dewey." *Symbolic Interaction* 15, no. 3 (1992): 277–97. <https://doi.org/10.1525/si.1992.15.3.277>.
- [3] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (Monrovia, IN,: Bumbershoot Books, 2019, 190.
- [4] Gutek, Gerald Lee. *Philosophical, Ideological and Theoretical Perspectives on Education*. Boston: Pearson Central Pub., 2014.
- [5] John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 1934. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.
- [6] *Continuum Library of Educational Thought: Twenty-Five (25) Volume Series* (London: Continuum, 2007).
- [7] Eyler, Janet, Dwight E. Giles, Giles, and Alexander W. Astin. *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?* John Wiley & Sons, 2010.
- [8] Toulmin, Stephen. *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois university press, 2008.
- [9] Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. Monrovia, IN,: Bumbershoot Books, 2019.
- [10] Nebeker, Melia L. "The Teacher and Society: John Dewey and the Experience of Teachers." *Education and Culture* 18, no. 2 (2002): 14-20. Accessed August 15, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42922389>. 15.
- [11] McDermott, John J. *The Philosophy of John Dewey*. Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2011.
- [12] Cunningham, Craig A. *Unique Potential: A Metaphor for John Dewey's Moral Self*. Washington, D. C.: Distributed by ERIC Clearinghouse, 1993.
- [13] John Dewey, *How We Think* (Eastford, CT: Martino Publishing, 2012).
- [14] Bantock, Geoffrey Herman. *Education in an Industrial Society*. London: Faber and Faber, 1973.
- [15] Darling, John. *Child-Centered Education and Its Critics*. London: Paul Chapman, 1995.
- [16] Entwistle, Harold. *Child-Centered Education*. London: Methuen, 1979.
- [17] Barrow, Robin, and R. G. Woods. *An Introduction to Philosophy of Education*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- [18] Dewey, John. *The Psychology of Effort*. S. L., 1897.