

PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION: VIEWS FROM JOHN DEWEY'S EDUCATION PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: The study aims to clarify some actual contents that we think should be noted in the study of Dewey's educational philosophy. The study begins with Dewey's criticism of traditional education, which served as the basis for his progressive educational views. The article then analyzes the learner-centric educational process and teacher's qualities from a progressive viewpoint. Progressive education's ultimate aim is to achieve democracy in education. That, in our opinion, is the prominent reason that the influence of Dewey's educational philosophy continues to have a bearing on the education systems of the United States, many European countries, and Asia. The article concludes with John Dewey's contributions to educational development to demonstrate that his progressive educational views still have directional value and provide meaningful guidance for educational innovation in many countries.

Keywords: John Dewey, progressive educational views, educational philosophy, democracy in education.

Progressive Education: Views from John Dewey's Education Philosophy

John Dewey (1859-1952) was a prominent American progressivist, educator, philosopher, and pragmatist from the late 19th century to the first half of the 20th century (Hildebrand, 2018; Wadlington, 2013; Williams, 2017). His progressive education theory was influenced by the ideas of Fröbel (Dewey, 1915) and Francis Parker (1837-1902), the most famous early American practitioner of progressive education. Parker was the principal of the Cook County Normal School in Chicago, where Dewey's children enrolled in 1894. In 1896, John Dewey opened the University of Chicago Laboratory school to test his theo-

ries and their sociological implications, with his wife as the principal and him as the director. In 1912, a group of Dewey's students founded The Park School of Buffalo and The Park School of Baltimore under his guidance, which operated with a similarly progressive approach. Dewey summarized and published his experimental results in *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* in 1916 (Dewey, 2004). The work deeply resonated with scholars and marked a significant turning point in his educational career.

In this book, Dewey criticizes some traditional educational ideas and introduced a progressive educational system that unified educational content, curriculum, and educational methods. He

criticizes Plato's educational philosophy in Antiquity, the individualist idealism of the 18th century, the philosophy of education as belonging to the nation and society, the theory that education is the preparation of the child for his or her adult life in the future, and the belief that education is the training of ability and the manifestation of potential abilities to achieve a definite purpose. This book led Dewey to put forth a progressive educational perspective that has had a strong influence until today. In this system, he focuses on two main objects of the teaching process: teacher and student. He gives learners a central position in educational activities and requires teachers to have the qualities to ensure the quality of those educational activities. With these innovative and creative efforts, his progressive educational views have helped create democracy in education and, thus, establish democratic education.

Following the resounding success of his work, Dewey attempted to bring progressivism into the mainstream of American education. After much effort, Columbia established the Lincoln School of Teachers College in 1917. Dewey's progressive educational influence slowly spread to many different countries (Gordon & English, 2016; Passow, 1982; Rogacheva, 2016; Williams, 2017), especially in China, where he lectured from 1919 to 1920 (Dewey, 2021; Peng, 2018). However, despite Dewey's influential ideas, public schools in America have not yet fully adopted his principles and practices (Palmer, Bresler, & Cooper, 2002, pp. 177-178). Today, John Dewey's influence is not as strong as it was in the twentieth century. However, he is still undeniably one of the most influential educators in the world (Nebeker, 2002).

The article aims to analyze Dewey's progressive educational views and his contributions to the education of humanity.

Criticism of Traditional Education

Dewey begins his critique with Plato's philosophy of education. Dewey argues that although Plato presented a reasonably comprehensive educational theory, the object of education was limited to future philosophers and rulers. Accordingly, the aim of this education was to equip them with necessary virtues such as wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. The goal of education in

Plato's philosophy was to serve the ideal state, but it was a state that had never existed in history and existed only in Plato's imagination. Dewey states, "If we do not know its (existence's) end, we shall be at the mercy of accident and caprice. Unless we know the end, the good, we shall have no criterion" to understand and have justice in society. Such understanding is not possible except in a just and harmonious society (Dewey, 2004, p. 95). He criticizes the destruction of the individual in Plato's educational thought. He argues that disregarding individual needs and interests only creates a community that lacks identity, which is fundamentally a step backward.

Dewey further criticizes the educational ideas born out of the individualist idealism of the 18th century. This was the period when "Education in accord with nature" emerged as a mainstream trend in society. It was an education that helped people get close to their natural nature, so it required the diverse development of individual talents and the free development of individuals in the collective (Dewey, 2004, p. 99). However, another line of thought emerged: the ideal of individualist education. Dewey observes that with this movement, individual capacities were thwarted and distorted "to meet the requirements and selfish interests of the rulers of the state" (Dewey, 2004, p. 98). Therefore, to free people from external shackles, they must first liberate people from the shackles of false beliefs and ideals; that is, to let human "nature" develop. He emphasizes the desire for human beings to have "complete and harmonious development of all powers" (Dewey, 2004, p. 100), which socially corresponds to enlightened and progressive humanity. Therefore, new education requires reasonable methods and means, as well as a reasonable way of organizing education.

Dewey also criticizes the philosophy of education as belonging to the nation and society, where the state would provide the means and set the end of that education. The theory states that all education, from preschool to higher education, must focus on developing and training patriotic citizens, soldiers, civil servants, and future managers. According to him, this will make individuals dependent on the state and society. Thus, education becomes a process of discipline training rather than personal development (Dewey, 2012, p. 121).

Many scholars in the past have viewed educa-

tion as a child's preparation for future adult life. However, Dewey argues that with this view, children are not seen as formal and legitimate members of the present society but only as "candidates" of the future society (Dewey, 2004, p. 58). He showed that such a vague, uncertain future could not motivate children in the present. On the other hand, a genuine education will gradually help children cope with the future by recognizing the possibilities of the present. So, we must be more concerned with the current motivations for the present effort than with the preparation for the future. We need to see personal growth as a continuous process from the present to the future, not a completed process at a single point in time.

Dewey criticizes the concept of educational purpose as the manifestation of latent abilities to achieve a particular goal through the training of skills. His argument is similar to the idea that "the goal of perfection, the standard of development, is so far away that we cannot understand it, much less reach it" (Trinh, 2008). Dewey argues that no available capacity is waiting to be trained and used. The purpose of education is not to train particular abilities, such as perception, memory, recall, association, attention, and emotion; instead, utilizing formal training, which is repeated over and over at different levels, makes those competencies go from raw to subtle, perfect, and habitual (Trinh, 2008). At the same time, he highlights the error of the theory's separation of activity and capacity from content when "to talk about training a power, mental or physical, in general, apart from the subject matter involved in its exercise, is nonsense" (Dewey, 2004, p. 70).

Following the above criticisms of traditional education, Dewey put forth his progressive educational ideals that put the learner at the center and gradually brought about democracy in education.

The Learner-Centered Approach

According to many researchers, the learner-centered approach is the most remarkable aspect of Dewey's progressive educational philosophy. For Dewey, education is the constant interaction between the learner and the environment that fosters progress and growth via the reconstruction of experience. He places learners at the cen-

ter of educational activities to create circumstances for them to learn through their own experiences. In other words, learners experience meaningful situations to form experiences and, thus, construct knowledge for themselves. The educational program is tailored to the development and interests of each student. Therefore, education is not a preparation for the future but for life itself.

To become the center of teaching and learning activities, learners must have the ability to think independently and creatively. Therefore, it is essential to instruct learners via an effective method. However, Dewey emphasizes that it is impossible to provide methodological models for all students in the learning process because of the uniqueness of each individual. He asserts that imposing a universal and uniform method on all individuals would foster mediocrity for all students because the method of education can be beneficial or harmful depending on the student. The same method could help one student become smarter while proving ineffective for another. Each learner must choose the proper method to solve problems effectively in the learning process and to express their unique individuality.

According to Dewey, educational goals must seamlessly combine an individual's cultural and societal development. Accordingly, the ethics of education is to help students develop personal talents and be able to fulfill personal responsibilities before societal ones. Dewey always puts the individual at the center of a democratic society, particularly in educational activities; he places the learner as the goal, the central position of democracy promoted by bright individuals. Because the contribution of education to society lies in the development of free individuals with good imagination and creativity, Dewey advocates that the educational process should be encouraged and sustained through student interest and purpose. This most firmly and dynamically resembles the progressive social order, where individuals have the best opportunities to express themselves. When a school prioritizes students' individual development, it operates most effectively; such a school is considered to be "learner-centered" (Archambault, 2012, p. 46).

Dewey prescribes a specific method that can help organize student activities in a cooperative role with the teacher; he insists that teachers and students must jointly participate in social tasks

according to the school method. He also asserts that no single prescriptive plan can effectively promote the educational growth of every child as an individual, that every new individual poses a new problem, and that each individual requires at least some distinct emphasis in the content presented (Archambault, 2012, pp. 61-62).

Dewey's progressive education emphasizes initiative, independence, flexibility, and creativity (valuable qualities of each individual). It does not require the learner to have an attitude of docility, passivity, or obedience, which is entirely different from traditional education. Dewey argues that silence and coercive docility prevent students from revealing their true selves. Although they create false obedience with an appearance of being attentive, proper, and docile, behind such appearances, they still pursue their sly thoughts, desires, and deeds (Dewey, 2012, pp. 106-107). Education's value is not general and abstract, but it must match the needs of learners. Therefore, education goals must be determined based on the student's goals (highest priority), local conditions, social requirements, and skills and knowledge required to complete them into worthwhile projects (also known as learning through doing). Educational goals must be based on the inner workings and needs of the particular individual being taught. Dewey (2004) further explains:

The general aim translates into the aim of regard for individual differences among children. Nobody can take the principle consideration of native powers into account without being struck by the fact that these powers differ in different individuals. The difference applies not merely to their intensity, but even more to their quality and arrangement (p. 125).

To explain why he always promotes individuality and learners at the center of educational activities, Dewey further emphasizes that (a) the opposite of the pressure from above is the expression and cultivation of individuality; (b) the opposite of discipline from the outside is free activity; (c) the opposite of textbook and teacher-based learning is experiential learning; (d) the opposite of learning discrete skills and techniques by practice is learning them as a means to the attainment of goals that are directly appealing and beneficial to life; (e) the opposite of preparing for an uncertain future is taking advantage of

the opportunities of life now; (f) the opposite of immutable goals and materials is the understanding of an ever-changing world (Dewey, 2012, pp. 36-37). Thus, in Dewey's progressive educational perspective, learners are free to choose, express their innate gifts, and be respected for their individuality.

Qualities of a Teacher

All activities and other objects in the progressive education system must serve the learning process to ensure that learners are at the center. This requires the teacher to have certain qualities to be able to control, organize, and guide the learner's learning process and put them at the center. In addition to common knowledge, the teacher must have an understanding of the world and the psychology and age of the learners. That requires them to collect a lot of data, delve into different areas of knowledge, and apply and prove judgments to conclude the teaching process. Additionally, it is vital to learn the methods used by the predecessors as well as the reaction and coordination levels of the learners. This is a shortcut to finding the right way of education and is consistent with the student-centered and respectful attitude towards the learner. Dewey quoted Emerson as saying, "Respect the child, respect him to the end, but also respect yourself" (Dewey, 2004, pp. 56-57). Thus, placing learners at the center of educational activities does not mean lowering the role of the teacher but instead calls for greater demands on the qualities and competencies of the teacher. The teacher must be able to see the world through the eyes of children and adults at the same time. Westbrook (1993) explains:

Like Alice, she must step with her children behind the looking-glass, and in this imaginative lens, she must see all things with their eyes and limited by their experience; but, in time of need, she must be able to recover her trained vision and, from the realistic point of view of an adult, supply the guide posts of knowledge and the skills of the method (p. 281).

We notice two points in the teaching method proposed by Dewey:

1. The teacher must guide learners from complex life experiences and provide them with

opportunities to solve related problems. The teacher is not an authority that distributes knowledge for students to absorb passively; on the contrary, he is a guide, a stimulus that helps students create relationships with knowledge on their own, leading to knowledge discovery and acquisition. The teacher no longer holds the boss or dictator position on the outside, but he must play the role of the leader of group activities (Dewey, 2012, pp. 101-102). The teacher must enable the learner to fully cope with present conditions and new tasks in the unpredictable future.

2. Teachers are not allowed to force learners to create certain habits, but they must know how to choose knowledge to help learners have the ability to cope with all possible situations. In these cases, the teacher is the essential agent for liberation (Archambault, 2012, pp. 48-49) and stimulates the learner's curiosity by providing materials, information, and hints. In other words, the teacher fosters a learning environment where curiosity and critical thinking skills are combined to help learners develop rational thought.

Dewey argues that teachers should be responsible for the educational process and for providing an environment that encourages learning and helps students become self-directed and take a central position in the learning process. To fulfill his mission, the teacher must be a well-trained professional with broad general knowledge that can be used in developing lessons for students. He must have a solid educational theory background to understand education's philosophical, psychological, and sociological basis. Moreover, he must recognize the dialectical relationship between theory and practice so that his teaching is grounded in theoretical science while being connected to practice.

Dewey defines the role of the teacher not as a transmitter of knowledge but as a facilitator who can guide students in achieving their learning goals. While encouraging rather than restricting their freedom, teacher guidance enables students to make the most of their intelligence. The teacher's suggestion is not a mold to shape a product; instead, it is a starting point to develop a plan that comes from the contributions of everyone involved in the learning process (Dewey, 2012, p. 120). In particular, Dewey points out that teachers must consider the unique differences between

students, such as genetics, experience, past, and the ability to perceive knowledge. Therefore, educational methods and programs must be designed to allow for that individual difference when helping learners achieve their learning goals. To achieve this, the teacher must put himself in the position of the student, adopting his characteristics and habits with an attitude of curiosity and without labeling any student as stupid or "unintelligent (lacking in mind)" if he finds it hard to understand school subjects or a lesson (Dewey, 2004, p. 139).

Dewey suggests that education should be designed based on an empirical theory, not simply on the whims of teachers and students. This point of view shows us that each person learns a lot from his present experience, which affects his future experiences. The teaching method includes many kinds of life experiences to connect education and life. Dewey believes educators need to know this vital information to design appropriate educational programs, even if every situation might lead to significantly different experiences for different individuals. Although it is impossible to control all a student's past experiences, teachers must strive to understand past experiences to construct better educational situations for students. In other words, teachers need to rely on the effects of past experiences that students have gone through to be able to provide the best quality of education for them.

In summary, Dewey emphasizes experience in the educational process and requires the teaching method to focus on real-world, meaningful, and vital problems that students must work hard to solve (Archambault, 2012, pp. 44-45). Accordingly, Dewey leans toward what he calls practical pedagogy, i.e., teaching in which learners face a real problem, thereby learning dynamic work connected to social reality (Archambault, 2012, p. 19).

Democracy in Education

The author argues that Dewey tried to apply the theory of democracy to the field of education to develop the concept of "democratic education". In a democratic society, all citizens are free, equal, and fully qualified to participate in the process of social change; Dewey's democratic education must also protect and implement the

principles of a democratic society. A democratic society “always rejects the principle of external power. It is, therefore, forced to find an alternative power within personality dispositions and voluntary interests”. This can be possible only through education. Thus, education is the primary means of building a democratic society. Dewey sets out the basic tasks that need to be done to achieve democratic education. (a) Cultivate scientific thinking and flexibility so that citizens of a democratic society can achieve political freedom; (b) Reveal the potential in each person; (c) Strengthen the connection between family-school-society. Dewey believes that, in democratic education, all members are equal and can contribute to the making of the world. This view is espoused by Jessica Ching-Sze Wang, who points out that democracy is not concerned with freaks, geniuses, or heroes; it is concerned with how interpersonal communication will make each person's life more memorable (Wang, 2009, p. 409).

According to Dewey, democratic education requires morally necessary benefits so that an individual can learn from all the connections in life. Education is life itself, requiring cooperation between members of the community, regardless of love or hate, differences of opinion, and the length of time of cooperation (Dewey, 2012, p. 126). Dewey proposes a humane, people-oriented approach to education. He further emphasizes that collaboration means waiting for opportunities for differences to manifest and believing that the expression of differences is not only the right of every individual but also a way of doing things. Enriching an individual's own life experience is an inherent part of democratic individualism (Hickman & Alexander, 1998). Dewey puts learners at the center of education by always emphasizing individual differences. Moreover, he opposes the separation of individuals in the educational process because he believes that when an individual is isolated, that individual will be prone to bad behavior, affecting his development and society.

However, there are also many criticisms of democratic education, more precisely the concerns about student autonomy in education. These criticisms are all based on the fact that children are cognitively and socially immature, and the child's brain is not fully developed until the age of 25 (Campellone & Turley, 2013). The

first opposing view is that a disadvantage of teenagers being responsible for their own education. Ruder (2008) argues that “young brains have both fast-growing synapses and sections that remain unconnected. This leaves teens easily influenced by their environment and more prone to impulsive behavior”. The second one is that children are influenced by many curricula beyond the school curriculum. Deal and Nolan state that “one of the most significant tasks any school can undertake is to try to develop in youngsters an awareness of these other curricula and an ability to criticize them ... it is utter nonsense to think that by turning children loose in an unplanned and unstructured environment they can be freed in any significant way. Rather, they are thereby abandoned to the blind forces of the hucksters, whose primary concern is neither the children, nor the truth, nor the decent future of ... society” (Deal & Nolan, 1978, p. 207). The author believes that the above objections have a reasonable basis. However, it would be too far to assume that in democratic education, children must take full responsibility for their education. Because every school model must have a teacher, the author believes that there can be no educational model where there are only students without teachers. The main difference is that students are given more rights than in the traditional educational model. Most the humankind today thinks that a democratic society is a social model worth building and developing. It will be challenging to develop a democratic society if future citizens do not envision their rights and obligations in that society. This raises questions about the need to include civics in the curriculum. According to the author, this proposal may help address the concerns of Deal and Nolan mentioned above. As educators, teachers, and parents, we must consider some of the bare minimum necessary for our children to grow up in a democratic society, including civic education. In line with this view, Amy Gutmann (born 1949) is an American academic and diplomat arguing that passing on democratic values requires an imposed structure. This opinion is subject to a great deal of rebuttal from scholars who argue that if civics education is taught in a compulsory setting, undermines its own lessons in democracy. Democracy must be experienced to be learned (Greenberg, 1993). In response to the above comments, the author restates Émile Durkheim's

view of the diverse role of the individual in modern society (more complex than in primitive hunter-gatherer societies), thus placing imposing a heavier responsibility on those elders in educating the next generation in what he terms “secular morality” (Durkheim, 1961).

In addition, practical studies in the United States of America (US), and the United Kingdom (UK) show positive results of the democratic educational method. Specifically, three student surveys at Sudbury schools (USA) indicated that students “have been highly successful in their higher education (for those who chose that route) and careers” (Alternatives to School, n.d.). Furthermore, Sands School (UK) was inspected by Ofsted in 2013 and was found to be “good” overall with several “outstanding” features. The above encouraging results show that democratic education is going right with our wishes (educators, parents). For these reasons, the author asserts that democratic education is the right choice, especially for countries coming out of a centralized economy like Vietnam, Russia, China.

Dewey’s Contributions to Education Development

With essential works such as *Democracy and Education* (1916) and *Experience and Education* (1938), John Dewey has become a “preeminent” educational theorist and philosopher and one of the most influential figures in history (Ansbacher, 1998; Castner, Schneider, & Henderson, 2020; Dewey, 1998; Gibbon, 2019; Lowery & Jenlink, 2019). By highlighting his significant contributions below, the author further aims to support the above claim made by several researchers.

First, Dewey has raised the critical spirit of traditional education by pointing out misconceptions such as (a) education does not consider the innate abilities of children; (b) education has not developed the capacity to cope with all situations in life actively; (c) education has overemphasized exercise and other methods of acquiring mechanical competence that ignore the cognitive capacity of the individual. His criticism is still valid as a point of reference when carrying out educational reform in many countries today.

Second, Dewey has put forth a progressive

educational view that emphasizes the need to learn by doing, i.e., people learn through doing. Based on this educational philosophy, Dewey has built a new educational method in which the learner is at the center, and the teacher is the organizer, guide, and inspirer. Additionally, both the teacher and the learner participate in social tasks according to the school method, which is a special mode responsible for organizing student activities in a cooperative role with the teacher.

Third, learner-centeredness is a characteristic of Dewey’s progressive education. It contrasts with traditional education, which is mainly static in content and arbitrary in the method. Dewey has laid the foundation for a series of principles of progressive education, such as learning through experience, learning through problem-solving, project-based learning, learning through community service, and learning through service, interaction, and cooperation. Most of the progressive educational movements of the twentieth century were strongly influenced by his educational philosophy. Moreover, his educational views are still a part of many countries’ education systems today. Dewey has promoted practical activities in education by placing learners at the center and recommending learning through work and facing practical problems. He emphasized that education is not merely an empty theory; learning must be associated with practice. Additionally, his emphasis on critical thinking, focus on problem-solving, and respect for differences between students is an essential revelation for educators in many countries today.

Fourth, Dewey’s learner-centered education is suitable for a comprehensive democratic society. He put the individual at the center of a democratic society, seeking progress and change for himself. With democratic learning, each person is allowed to freely develop personal talents and be fully capable of carrying out personal responsibilities before societal ones. Dewey’s democratic thought in education has shown the strong connection between education and society; education is life itself, and school must be a democratic community. This is a testament to an educational philosophy associated with the realities of the times and a progressive educational philosophy that demonstrates humanity’s great humanistic aspirations. The author maintains that Dewey’s most outstanding contribution is democracy in education; he has raised education to a new level.

In a democratic education, all students have a full opportunity to learn and develop their abilities and personal qualities, and teachers freely choose materials and teaching methods to suit each student. Because of democracy in education, teachers and students must cooperate and learn and grow together to meet the lifelong learning needs of society.

Fifth, Dewey's educational philosophy embodies progress and establishes a new educational system in which differences are respected. Democratic education has raised the issue of what students should learn in a democratic and scientific educational environment. Accordingly, all educational purposes, content, and methods must be compatible with each specific individual. This thought was followed and developed into "personalized learning within teacher education" in document number IBE/2020/WP/CD/37 of UNESCO (UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2020). Therefore, the spirit of science and democracy dominates every aspect of John Dewey's educational theory, creating consistency in his educational philosophy, as reflected in the many works he has contributed to humanity.

Finally, in the context that education in many countries has not yet solved the problems of educational practice and has not yet approached a democratic and advanced educational model, it is necessary to have a philosophy of progressive-oriented education. In that condition, with its humane, democratic, progressive, and practical nature, Dewey's educational philosophy is of great value for fundamentally and comprehensively renewing education in order to find a way to bring it to life by bringing it out of a state of protracted obsolescence constrained by conservative thinking.

Conclusion

John Dewey was a great thinker and educator whose educational philosophy laid the foundation for a better, more progressive system of education. Forgoing traditional systems of education, he put forth a progressive educational theory that put the learner at the center of the teaching process. He encouraged students to be proactive and creative while preserving their uniqueness and individuality. There is a reciprocal relationship between teachers and students in the

process of teaching and learning in which the learner is the goal of educational activities, and the teacher is the primary agent for the success or failure of educational activities. Accordingly, he proposed the requirements of mandatory qualities of a teacher, such as rich knowledge, creative thinking, good organization, and respect for the specificity of each individual. Additionally, Dewey emphasized creative thinking, practice-based learning, problem-solving, and respecting the individuality of learners as the core ideals of progressive education. Establishing the concept of democratic education, Dewey presented each student with the opportunity to learn and develop their personal, unique abilities and raised education to a new level.

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