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Dewey's Thought on Education and Social Change

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Abstract

Dewey published his article "Education and Social Change" in 1937. His preoccupation with this issue is a constant theme in his works, which are infused with ideas about the role that education and, most specifically, our school system have in the transformation of society. His thought has had a tremendous influence on the work of later educational philosophers. He believed in a more democratic, just, free, and peaceful world, where civil liberties and human rights are respected. Education's main goal should be to create individuals who grasp the complexity and broader implications of social issues and who also feel empowered to engage with such issues and prepared to work toward developing real solutions: that is, individuals who fight for a society free of racism, intolerance, discrimination, and xenophobia. My intent is to provide a brief introduction and analysis of his views on these issues, point out specific points of contact with the theories of other educational philosophers, while also highlighting the continued relevance of his thought in contemporary society.

Keywords: John Dewey, Progressive Education, Social change, School System, Experience, Critical Pedagogy.

1. The Shortcomings of the Traditional Education System

Dewey was convinced of the power of education to change society. This conviction made him state that "the chief means of continuous, graded, economical improvement and social rectification lies in utiliz-

ing the opportunities of educating the young to modify prevailing types of thought and desire” (Dewey, 2002, p. 127). Youth are by nature curious, flexible, and experimenting, but their lifelong habits are still under development. It is in their character to question the established social system. In Dewey’s opinion, here lies the main flaw and perversion of the traditional school system: students do not have the opportunity to reflect on and criticize the content and belief system that they are being taught. As Williams (2017) points out, unfortunately, the fundamental flaw of this traditional approach to education persists in the United States more than one hundred years later: “Education in most classrooms today is what Dewey would have described as a traditional classroom setting” (p. 91), one that is not appropriate for the development of the young.

To illustrate, Dewey (1958) uses the metaphor of teachers trying to pour knowledge into the “empty heads” of students. He asserts, “that education is not an affair of ‘telling’ and being told, but an active and constructive process, is a principle almost as generally violated in practice as conceded in theory” (p. 46). In the traditional school system, students do not become critical thinkers, but rather receive content and are expected to accept it as true. They typically do not question the curriculum, which raises a major concern: Adults (and more specifically, the dominant classes) are the ones responsible for the belief system taught in schools through their curriculum. Without critical reflection, our school system would consequently perpetuate the current situation. “Education becomes the art of taking advantage of the helplessness of the young; the forming of habits becomes a guarantee for the maintenance of hedges of custom” (Dewey, 2002, p. 64). Schools have become centers of social reproduction, maintaining the status quo, and places where students are “trained to enrich the system, not themselves” (DeFalco, 2016, p. 58). A point that Dewey repeatedly criticized, arguing that it is through education, as a means of becoming part of a democratic society, that individuals improve and become the best possible human beings. He points out that this is where the great difficulty lies, as each generation is going to try maintain the existing conditions and situation as it is: “Parents educate their children so that they may get on; princes educate their subjects as instruments of their own purposes” (Dewey, 1958, p. 111).

Effective schooling does not need to teach different beliefs or shape different morals in our youth, but rather should form habits that are “more intelligent, more sensitively percipient, more informed with foresight, more aware of what they are about, more direct and sincere, more flexibly responsive than those current” (Dewey, 2002, p. 128). This kind of educational system would equip young people with the skills to shape their own morals and propose their social improvements when they face

their own problems. Dewey believed that education should be grounded in the open honest discussion of current events, or it becomes irrelevant, a mere archeological look to the past or a way to acquire special skills and knowledge, but disconnected from society. Education has to serve as a way to understand the present and provide individuals with the means to improve society (Fallace, 2016, pp. 182-185).

2. The Role of Experience

Dewey (1963) believes that there is a close relationship between experience and education, but they are not the same. He states that “[t]he belief that all genuine education comes from experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other” (p. 25). The quality of the education will depend on the quality, nature and frequency of the experiences. Being exposed to ineffective, defective, or deficient experiences can arrest or impede education; Dewey (1963) refers to these as “mis-educative” experiences, those that suppress growth and result in routine action (p. 37). In fact, the traditional school “is so isolated from the ordinary conditions and motives of life that ... [it] is the one place in the world where it is most difficult to get experience” (Dewey 1899, p. 31). To sum-up, experience is not equivalent to education, but positive educational experiences are a necessary condition for education.

According to Deweyan theory, we learn from positive experiences by reflecting on them. Conscious reflection enables us to attach meaning to such experiences; it is through the process of consciously reflecting on them that those experiences become meaningful. If teachers do not require such focus-on-meaning reflection from students, they do not educate, but only train.

When things have a meaning for us, we mean (intend, propose) what we do: when they do not, we act blindly, unconsciously, unintelligently. In both kinds of responsive adjustment, our activities are directed or controlled. But in the merely blind response, direction is also blind. There may be training, but there is no education. (Dewey, 1958, p. 35)

Students need to think reflectively about the beliefs that teachers present to them, as such beliefs inform the way that they interpret the world and relate with it (behavior). Paraphrasing his own example (Dewey 1910, p. 5), when one believes that the world is flat, it affects the way she thinks about antipodes, navigation, and the position of planets in the universe. If the reflection piece is not present in learning, students will not develop conscious understandings of connections, they will simply develop “habits” (Schutz 2011, p. 269). Through such habits, individu-

als develop control over the environment, and they learn how to react to similar situations—although no two situations are ever going to be exactly the same. Dewey believed that reflective thought is a conscious inquiry, an “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends” (1910, p. 6). He raises the concern that this key reflection piece often is missing in the traditional education system.

Parallelisms between Dewey’s and Freire’s description of the traditional schooling system are easy to find. For example, Freire (2005) depicts a very similar situation when he uses the banking model metaphor, and his explanation resembles Dewey’s very closely.

Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into ‘containers,’ into ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are. (71-72)

In this model, knowledge and society are fixed, motionless, static entities; the first one is deposited into students, who need to accept it without critical questioning. The element of inquiry, an absolute necessity in the educational process, according to Dewey and Freire, is missing from this approach. Teachers and students play completely opposite roles: One is the knowledgeable individual; the others are ignorant parties who know nothing and accept their ignorance. Teachers are the authority who are in charge of completing this one-way transmission process. This school system mirrors the situation of an oppressed society, where the oppressed (students) have a passive role that they accept without developing a critical consciousness.

3. Indoctrination and Social Change

Dewey (1937) considered traditional autocratic schooling systems as indoctrinatory structures, the primary goal of which is the continuation of the current social organization. He stated that “there is a great deal of indoctrination now going on in the schools, especially with reference to narrow nationalism under the name of patriotism, and with reference to the dominant economic régime.” (p. 472). Parents (especially those from upper classes) are often accomplices in such indoctrination and demand that the school system maintain the status quo and transmit the accepted social and moral values. Regenspan (2017) believes that Dewey’s thought is a useful tool that teachers can employ to overcome

these barriers, to help students explore their own social constructions, and to offer them “a ‘next step’ in their own ongoing process of healthy differentiation from their families of origin” (pp.14-15).

In order to reach a true education, in his progressive model, Dewey rejects the idea of using the existing teaching methods and just reversing their objectives. That is, we should not use the same old approach to teach different ideas. In fact, he proposed to fundamentally change education’s frame of reference so that it has a new unified objective. He posits that such a framework already exists: It is education for democracy (Dewey, 1937, pp. 472-473). In the indoctrination process there is no such a thing as an exchange of ideas, and genuine student participation is non-existent.

The Critical Pedagogy movement shares Dewey’s concern that our current school system serves those in power to maintain and expand their privileges. Influenced in large part by Marxism and revolutionary movements, there are significant differences in their general framework, though. For this group of educational philosophers, those who control the flow of information and ideas control society. They seek to give oppressed peoples an equal, interactive share of that control. Freire identifies six states that we need to be aware of when organizing the content of education or political action necessary to liberate the oppressed. In the first phase, *submergence*, the oppressed do not understand the forces that control their lives. Those forces are deliberately imposed on them by the oppressors, even if those in power are not consciously complicit in their dehumanization of others and of themselves (Freire, 2005, pp. 58-59). In this state, individuals are passive, and they are afraid of freedom. There is not manipulation of people so much as there is suppression. In the second state, the individuals need to identify the *general thematics* that constrain their lives. The third state is *codification*. The oppressed must co-construct visual aids and images that remind them of the injustice they suffer. By doing so, they are able to name it and, consequently, become conscious of the unfairness and discrimination. The fourth stage is *decodification*, that is, reflecting on the situation to discover the contradictions between their situations and the direct and indirect causes of their current condition. The fifth state is *emergence*, in which the community as a whole develops consciousness of the oppression and becomes united. That state serves as the catalyst which ultimately begins the conflict among classes. The sixth and final state in Freire’s theory is *praxis*, a revolutionary process, a cultural transformation, possibly even a revolution, to create a new society. The oppressed free themselves from the structures and transform society.

This in-depth analysis of power and oppression, or call for extreme

political and revolutionary action, is not present in Dewey's educational philosophy. He saw the need for social changes, but he argued that such changes should be done in a nonviolent manner. Dewey (1958) stated, "society must have a type of education which gives individuals personal interest in social relationships and control and the habits of minds which *secure social changes without introducing disorder*" (p. 99; emphasis added). I tend to agree with Schutz's (2001) argument, "while Dewey sometimes noted that social conflict could be productive, he generally argued that such conflict was not, ultimately necessary" (p. 287). In his vision, most conflicts are not rooted in problems between individuals and other individuals, but with the collective social/natural environment.

In what ways could education promote social change then? First of all, education needs to be rooted in current social problems. Dewey argues that education should be ingrained in the present social conditions and needs, otherwise it just has an "antiquarian interest." With an interdisciplinary approach, students and teachers need to apply the knowledge of the past to current issues (Hatcher, 1997; Fallace, 2016). But how would social change be achieved? We must agree with Schutz (2001) when he states that Dewey "hoped that by teaching his students to perceive the relationships between their individual activities and the processes and structures of the larger society, he could help to free them from it, helping them participate in changing this reality, especially in their work lives" (p. 273). We can draw a parallelism between Dewey's "perception of the relationships" and Freire's stage of identification of the general thematic. In both cases, the individual becomes aware of her role in society and how her actions (or lack of action) perpetuate the current social order. Understanding the role that the individual has in the social fiber, is key to igniting the change. Dewey believed that participation is a key element in achieving social change, as only those who participate and contribute to the consecution of common goals truly realize the necessity of a true democratic society (Honnet, 1998, p. 776).

This realization process should consequently create engaged citizens. The role of education transcends mere individual growth. I agree with Hatcher (1997) when she clearly states that, in Dewey's thought, "education should develop individual capacities, however they must be for the benefit of the local community and society at large; the development of individual capacities is for the common good" (p. 24). For Dewey, personal development is pointless if it is not applied to the improvement of society as a whole.

4. Education and Democracy

Those who criticized Dewey's educational philosophy tried to undermine his method from a relativistic perspective. They negate the existence of a clear and universal definition of democracy and, consequently, they sustain that we cannot base an education system on a concept whose characteristics vary depending on who is invoking it. Dewey did recognize that there is not a single, definitive, and universally accepted definition of what a democracy is; however he did underscore certain features that every democratic society shares.

I do not claim for a moment that the significance of democracy as a mode of life is so settled that there can be no disagreement as to its significance. The moment we leave glittering generalities and come to concrete details, there is great divergence.... But there is a tradition and an idea which we can put in opposition to the very much that is undemocratic in our institutions. The idea and ideal involve at least the necessity of personal and voluntary participation in reaching decisions and executing them—in so far it is the contrary of the idea of indoctrination. (Dewey, 1937, p. 473)

In fact, Dewey's own conception of democracy changed over time, becoming more complex and thorough.¹ Democracy is not a mere form of state organization. In a real democratic society, the citizens' participation goes much further than the periodic legitimization of those in power; their role goes much further than the bare control of the state apparatus. It is a model of social cooperation, in which all citizens are integrated in a self-organizing community (Honneth, 1998, pp. 763-767).

There are two elements that characterize a democratically constituted society: "Recognition of mutual interest as a factor in social control" and "freer interaction between social groups, ... [and] change in social habit—its continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse" (Dewey, 1958, p. 100). Consequently, a democracy is a progressive society that facilitates communication, cooperation, and respect between people of different groups. Individuals should not be mere observers of what happens around them, but they must actively participate and engage in social interactions and shared interests. Originally, according to Dewey, such shared interests are not the result of deliberate and conscious effort, but the consequence of economic and manufacturing development. The opposing forces of individualization and a broader community of interests make imperative that we intentionally work to support, increase, and spread them. In socially mobile, adaptable societies, it is essential that "intellectual opportunities are accessible to all on equable and easy terms" (Dewey,

1958, p. 102). Such accessibility allows individuals to adapt to changes and understand the significance of social interconnections among groups. Otherwise, the few educated individuals will exclusively benefit from the results of the directed actions of the rest of the society.

In contrast to the often oversimplified, child-centered interpretation of educational progressivism, in Dewey's opinion, students do not simply "learn by doing." He places most emphasis on the kind of activities that they complete. The activities should be democratic and scientific. A democratic activity must have the following characteristics: (1) the activity has to be purposeful; (2) students must understand the activity's purpose and embrace it; (3) the activity has to be social and every student voice must be heard. It does not mean that students are free to do whatever they want, rather that teachers are not mere transmitters of knowledge. That is, "teachers" become coaches and facilitators. Shor (1992) agrees that in order to be democratic, "the learning process needs to be negotiated, requiring leadership by the teacher and mutual teacher-student authority" (p. 16). Students need to have a say when choosing the curriculum, which needs to be grounded in current events, and conflicts are managed and resolved through negotiation between the teacher and the students, not by the imposition of the teacher's opinions or ideas. Shor describes this learning environment as a "participatory classroom."

Secondly, in addition to educational activities being democratic, schools should employ scientific methods of teaching and learning. The key idea is that schools have to teach students how to think, not what to think. Teachers provide the problems, the context, the tools, and the instruments, not the results. For example, in a scientific activity, the outcome is uncertain (problem); students make predictions about potential outcomes (hypothesis); students elaborate possible approaches to test their predictions (methodology); students act on their ideas (test); students observe and examine the consequences (analysis); students reflect on the results (confirmation or revision).²

5. Dewey's Thought and Our Current Educational Policy

Our society currently suffers from polarization, from extreme divisions between cultural and political perspectives. Opposing views and values are marked by extreme dichotomies: Everything is black or white. Such radical opposing positions have long been present in the educational debate. Jia (2005) states that "to Dewey, education is perhaps the area most polluted by such conceptual dichotomies" (p. 101). Among the dichotomies he mentions the following stand out: naturalism vs. humanism, physical studies vs. social studies, intellectual vs. practical,

vocational education vs. general education” (Jia, 2005, p. 101). Among many others, one could add private vs. public education, bilingual vs. monolingual education, and assimilative vs. multicultural education. Dewey opposed a dual education system (liberal education vs. vocational education), as he believed that it would make class divisions even more prevalent (DeFalco, 2016, p. 60).

Dewey’s pragmatic philosophy, in opposition to this approach, underscores the importance of true communication that allows individuals to break any rigid, isolating barrier, and builds integrative, constructive bridges. In a democratic society, the goal of education should be to break the barriers that the above-mentioned dualisms create. The origin of Dewey’s integrating understanding of education is rooted in his conception of reality as a fluid, ever-moving, unstable process. Consequently, the key concept in his educational philosophy is growth, which can only be achieved through communication. Education, as with communication, should be destructive in a useful way: It should dissolve custom, pernicious and hardened habits (Dewey, 1958, p. 5-7; Jia, 2005, p. 104). Such habits precondition the content that students learn as well as the methods and strategies used to attempt to promote learning; as a result, such habits can limit future learning.

Dewey (1958) believed in multicultural education, which he considered an efficient way “to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race and national territory which keep men from seeing the full import of what they are doing” (p. 101). Education should integrate all different groups into a greater society, eliminating the boundaries between them.³ Multicultural communication and education provide opportunities for individuals to modify the students’ experiences, increase the number and variety of habits, and make the individual more inclined to abandon or modify them (Sun, 2011, p. 22).

Myopically, the most recent educational reforms in the U.S. have arisen from the fear of losing a competitive edge on an international economic scale. They have followed an instrumentalist approach, considering school’s main goal to provide students with the skills they will need to become more efficient and competent workers to join the work force. In contrast, Hatcher (1997) derived from Dewey’s philosophy five characteristics that any good education system should maintain: “Integration of personal experience with academic learning, structured opportunities for reflection, inquiry-based learning, face-to-face communication, connection with the community,” all of which are sound methodological and teaching practices. Instead of focusing on “training” students, these are the characteristics that a sound democratic educational policy should nurture into the school system.

6. Can Education Alone Change Society?

Could we then fix the educational system if we just implemented democratic, scientific activities provided students with opportunities to reflect on the habits, beliefs, and morals that are being taught? In 1991, Hodgkinson stated that an educational reform is a task fated to fail when pupils in schools do not have their most basic needs covered. Among the major factors that Hodgkinson identified that contribute to the failure of our educational system include improper nutrition; high housing costs; transportation costs; threats to personal safety; health risks; and lack of access to medical services. His recommendations to improve education included creating a national health care system, food assistance, subsidized housing, and transportation for families in poverty, and community and job training programs for parents and guardians in at-risk situations. In a similar way, Dewey (1958) argued that “school facilities must be secured ... the adequate administrative provision of school facilities and such supplementation of family resources as will enable youth to take advantage of them” (p. 114).

In 1991, Hodgkinson asserted that “at least one-third of the nation’s children [were] at risk of school failure before they enter kindergarten” (1991, p.10). Unfortunately, 25 years later, the situation has changed very little and is still frightening. According to Children Defend Fund analysis of the 2016 US Census, 3,810,000 children under the age of five live below the poverty line, that is, one in five infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are in this tragic situation. From those, approximately 1,750,000 live in conditions of extreme poverty.⁴

Hodgkinson (1991) argued that “educators alone cannot ‘fix’ the problems of education, because dealing with the root causes of poverty must involve health care, housing, transportation, job training, and social welfare bureaucracies” (p. 16). Well before Hodgkinson, Dewey (1937) pointed in this direction:

I conclude by saying that there is at least one thing in which the idea of democracy is not dim, however far short we have come from striving to make it reality. Our public school system was founded in the name of equality of opportunity for all, independent of birth, economic status, race, creed, or color. *The school cannot by itself alone create or embody this idea.* But the least it can do is to create individuals who understand the concrete meaning of the idea with their minds, who cherish it warmly in their hearts, and who are equipped to battle in its behalf in their actions. (p. 474, italics added)

But the fact that we cannot fix the school system without addressing first the social needs of the students does not mean that we are not

responsible for our children's future. Education alone cannot change society, but is an instrumental piece to build a more educated, politically, and civically active and engaged population. Schutz (2001) expresses this idea with meridian clarity: "The fact that schools cannot, alone, change society does not release us from the responsibility for imagining how schools might develop 'effective' democratic citizens, even if this can only happen on a small scale in individual schools" (p. 281). We can take small steps and create a scalable system. A clear example of this are the Deweyan roots and inspiration of the fundamental guidelines and processes in service-learning pedagogy. According to Hatcher (1997), it "integrates personal experience with classroom learning, creates opportunities for reflection, is inquiry-based, facilitates face-to-face communication, and connects students to the community. Thus, service-learning exemplifies Dewey's educational philosophy" (p. 27).

In order for our public school system to truly educate our children we must also ensure that all children have the minimum instruments required for their success, that we create a society where their most basic physiological and safety needs are covered. In his later years, Dewey "more openly acknowledged that schools were inextricably tied to prevailing structures of power and therefore extremely difficult to transform into agencies of democratic reform" (Westbrook, 1991, p. 509). He criticized those that defended that education's main goal is to prepare students for life, for a brighter future, by providing them with the skills that they will need to succeed in the labor market. He opposed a utilitarian understanding of education. In fact, he saw such an approach as a system of maintaining the privileges of the dominant class, the status quo of the cultured upper class. Dewey (2002) argued that such attempt is conscious and intentional, an idea that later on reappeared in the Critical Pedagogy movement:

As traditionally conducted, it [education] strikingly exhibits a subordination of the living present to a remote and precarious future. To prepare, to get ready, is its key-note. The actual outcome is lack of adequate preparation, of intelligent adaptation. The professed exaltation of the future turns out in practice a blind following of tradition, a rule of thumb muddling along from day to day; or, as in some of the projects called industrial education, a determined effort on the part of one class of the community to secure *its* future at the expense of another class. (pp. 269-270, italics in the original)

Our students need to become aware of the socioeconomic structures and injustice that impede their success. We also need to separate schools from private interests and existing powers that are trying to gain even more control over them. This is not a new or revolutionary concept. John

Dewey pointed us in this direction over a hundred years ago. DeFalco (2016) rightfully states, “Deweyan education reform can help to alleviate the exploitation of workers—if schools sincerely want to become instruments for democracy instead of maintaining the status quo” (p. 64). If we are serious about fixing our educational system, it is time for our society to move in the direction that Dewey so clearly mapped for us.

Note

¹ See Honneth (1998) for an exhaustive discussion of the evolution of the concept of democracy in Dewey’s thought and its validity as an alternative to republicanist and proceduralist interpretations of democracy.

² “So much for the general features of a reflective experience. They are (i) perplexity, confusion, doubt, due to the fact that one is implicated in an incomplete situation whose full character is not yet determined; (ii) a conjectural anticipation—a tentative interpretation of the given elements, attributing to them a tendency to effect certain consequences; (iii) a careful survey (examination, inspection, exploration, analysis of all attainable consideration which will define and clarify the problem in hand; (iv) a consequent elaboration of the tentative hypothesis to make it more precise and more consistent, because squaring with a wider range of facts; (v) taking one stand upon the projected hypothesis as a plan of action which is applied to the existing state of affairs; doing something overtly to bring about the anticipated result, and thereby testing the hypothesis. It is the extent and accuracy of steps three and four which mark off a distinctive reflective experience from one on the trial and error plane” (Dewey, 1958, p. 176).

³ Schutz (2001) considers that here lies one of the limitations of Dewey’s model as his “two key criteria of more democratic communities—the promotion of individual distinctiveness through participation in shared efforts and the elimination of boundaries between groups—both appear to contain the seeds of significant oppression for those groups that are already marginalized in our society” (p. 293).

⁴ The U.S. Census defines poverty as an annual income of \$24,563 or less for a family of four. Extreme poverty is defined as an annual income of 50% or less of the poverty level.

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