

John Dewey's Perspectives on Democratic Education and its Implication for Current Educational Reform

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Abstract—John Dewey was the most influential philosopher of education in America. His famous work *Democracy and Education* has produced tremendous influence on education in the world since its birth in 1916. This paper, based on current literature, attempts to present Dewey's perspectives on democratic education, analyze the present educational situations at traditional schools, and discuss the corresponding curriculum and instruction for Dewey's model of democratic education. It is expected that this paper can bring some insights into the current educational reform in the world.

Keywords—democratic education; educational reform; curriculum and instruction; social learning; John Dewey

I. INTRODUCTION

John Dewey was the most influential philosopher of education in America. His thoughts and viewpoints on education have produced great influence on the development of education in the world. Dewey's impact on education is very evident in his theory about social learning [1]. In his belief, schools should be representative of a social environment and students learn best when in natural social settings [2].

Probably Dewey's greatest impact on education came through his classic, *Democracy and Education*, which was published in 1916. This work became the Bible of the Progressive Education Association and the liberal movement in America. Unfortunately, the Association's attempts to bring democracy to American education were not successful. Today there has been a resurgence of interest in Dewey and his educational vision. Those who aim to create democratic schools often look to Dewey as a primary example [3].

Since the beginning of the 21st century, in order to improve educational quality and cultivate qualified students for the society, many countries in the world have sped up the pace of educational reform as well as the progress of democracy. Since education is the foundation of democracy, Dewey's perspectives on education are significant for those countries that are seeking for success of democracy. Accordingly, based on current literature this article is intended to examine John Dewey's works on democratic education and seek some theoretical foundations and implications for the current educational reform in the world.

II. JOHN DEWEY'S PERSPECTIVES ON DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

Dewey viewed democracy broadly, seeing it as much more than the election of persons to govern. He believed that a democracy should not esteem the well-being of one individual or class above that of another and that a democracy's system of laws and administration should rank the happiness and interests of all on the same plane [4]. In his essay *Democracy in Education*, Dewey asserts that "modern life means democracy and democracy means freeing intelligence for independent effectiveness—the emancipation of mind as an individual organ to do its own work" [5]. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey further states "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" [6]. He was quite clear that association was fundamental to any human community, and he accepted the functional differentiation of different groups serving different needs, and he also promoted a kind of cultural diversity. He saw the major obligations and goals of modern democracy as (a) judging people as individuals; (b) rewarding people on the basis of their behavior; and (c) entitling citizens to shape their careers and conduct their own affairs [6]. Also, for Dewey, the most ideal democracies are the ones that promote the most effective distinctiveness among their members through their participation in the large number of projects of joint inquiry, and that at the same time have the fewest barriers of communication between different groups. Therefore, in the eyes of Dewey, individual participation and freedom of intelligence are important to achieve the goals of democratic education.

However, Dewey points out that the school has limited recognition of the principle of freedom of intelligence [5], which greatly affects two main school elements: teacher and student. Exactly to say, this affects the mind of both teacher and student. As a result, the teacher has no power of initiation and constructive endeavor that is necessary to the fulfillment of the function of teaching. The student, the learner, finds conditions antagonistic to the development of his individual mental power and to adequate responsibility for its use. Therefore, if the direction of the school, including the selection of school textbooks, is in the hands of a body of

people who are outside of the school system, this is opposite to democratic school. Also, the one-person principle is not democratic but autocracy. The school should not run by a few. The dictation of subject-matter to be taught, the close supervision of instruction, and the attempts to determine the methods which are used in teaching, means nothing more or less than the deliberate restriction of intelligence, the imprisoning of the spirit. Dewey argues that in a democratic school setting every member of the school system, from the first-grade teacher to the principal of the high school, must have some share in the exercise of educational power [5]. The remedy to the evils of democracy is not to have one expert dictate educational methods and subject-matter to a body of passive, recipient teachers, but to adopt intellectual initiative, and discussion throughout the entire school corps. Also, Dewey says that what democracy in education mean is that the individual should have a share in determining the conditions and aims of his own work. Upon the whole, through the free and mutual harmonizing of different individuals, the work of the world is better done than when planned, arranged, and directed by a few, no matter how wise, expert, or benevolent that few are. The teacher's time and energy should not be occupied with details of external conformity. They should be provided opportunity for free and full play of their own vigor. Otherwise, they may work least effective.

Dewey further points out "The undemocratic suppression of the individual of the teacher goes naturally with the improper restriction of the intelligence of the mind of the child" [5]. For Dewey, subjecting the mind of the student to an outside and ready-made material is a denial of the ideal of democracy, which roots itself ultimately in the principle of moral, self-directing individuality. What democracy means to the student is that he should have a say in school activities and enjoy freedom of intelligence in school. In his essay *What is Freedom*, Dewey says that "The slave is man who executes the wish of others, one doomed to act along lines predetermined to regularity. A free man would rather take his chance in an open world than be guaranteed in a closed world" [7]. At the same time, he emphasizes that intelligence is the key to freedom in act. Therefore, reform of education in the direction of greater play for the individuality of the child means the securing of conditions that will give outlet to a growing intelligence. This freed power of mind with reference to its own further growth cannot be obtained without a certain leeway, certain flexibility, in the expression of even immature feelings and fancies. For Dewey, freed activity of mind is important for students. Unfortunately, in some traditional countries the tendency we see at school is to reduce the activity of mind to a docile or passive taking-in of the material presented. Learning activity is mainly memorizing, with simply incidental use of judgment and of active research. As is frequently stated, acquiring takes the place of inquiring. Dewey argues that everyday activity at schools should turn to making judgment, reasoning, and the calling up of personal experience. Until the emphasis changes to the conditions which make it necessary for the child to take an active share in the personal building up of his own problems and to participate in methods of solving them, mind is not really freed. Thus, schools should provide opportunities for students

to participate in the planning and implementation of their own educational experience because such participation is so important to the development of democratic attitudes and practices. Those schools that fail to provide opportunities undermine the ability of children to learn about and practice the important principles of democracy.

According to John Dewey, education and democracy are intimately connected. In his book *Experience and Education*, Dewey contends that good education should have both a societal purpose and purpose for the individual student [8] Educators have the responsibility to provide students with experiences that are immediately valuable and which better enable the students to contribute to society. In this book, Dewey criticizes traditional education for lacking in holistic understanding of students and designing curricula overly focused on content. At the same time, he argues that we need to know how or why freedom can be most useful in education. Freedom for the sake of freedom is a weak philosophy of education. Thus, Dewey strongly points out that educators must first understand the nature of human experience.

Dewey's theory is that experience arises from the interaction of two principles -- continuity and interaction. Continuity is that each experience a person has will influence his/her future, for better or for worse. Interaction refers to the situational influence on one's experience. In other words, one's present experience is a function of the interaction between one's past experience and the present situation. The value of the experience is to be judged by the effect that experience has on the individual's present, their future, and the extent to which the individual is able to contribute to society. Dewey also contends that subject matter should be organized in a way that it takes students' past experiences into account, and then provides them with experiences which will help to open up, rather than shut down, a person's access to future growth experiences, thereby expanding the person's likely contribution to society. Accordingly, democratic education highly values the students' experiences.

III. CURRENT SITUATIONS AT TRADITIONAL SCHOOLS

Today traditional schools in many countries of the world still implement a national required curriculum. Teachers in the same subject area teach the same content prescribed in the same textbooks. Thus, school curriculum characterizes traditional education that is structured, disciplined, ordered and didactic [8]. Furthermore, teachers in traditional schools are often under great pressure of the local or national standardized tests. They have to teach to tests because the evaluation of teachers' instructional quality is mainly based on the test scores of their students. Thus, to improve students' academic achievement is their daily topic and important task. For such teachers, on the one hand, like what Dewey says, they represent social and moral authority, sitting in the high places of the classroom [5]. On the other hand, they do not really have freedom of intelligence and they do not really participate in the school affairs.

Similarly, at traditional schools students cannot enjoy freedom of intelligence, and the happiness of sharing their experiences in class. Most of the day they sit in a teacher-centered classroom quietly, listening to lectures one by one,

studying for passing a test, and memorizing classical texts and formula. As for the learning of subject matter, Dewey argues that subject matter is what a student needs to know in order to do what one is interested in doing [8]. In order that a purposeful situation may develop, ideas and knowledge of relevant facts are necessary. These facts may be observed, recalled, read about or acquired in any way. However, in traditional schools, very often subject matter is not within students' interests. Science study doesn't involve rich first-hand experience. Students' free thinking is confined to book learning. The teacher is still regarded as the source of knowledge, and students are still passive learners in the classroom.

Therefore, under such one-man principle or authoritarian system, "The needed intelligence is confined to a superior few, who are endowed with the ability and right to control the conduct of others; laying down principles and rules and directing the ways in which they are carried out [9]. As a result, students do not have a say in school activities, and individual participation, freedom of intelligence and personal experiences are totally ignored and not well valued in the classroom.

IV. A CORRESPONDING CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Based on the analysis of John Dewey's perspectives on democratic education, it is time for us to reclaim a purpose for education that is worth having, one that is forged from the more generous impulses and aspirations of democracy and the democratic way of life, and one that demands we take action [10]. We should begin to ask something about the curriculum and instruction, and make a drastic reform in traditional education. According to the analysis of Wyett, for Dewey, education should represent growth in the individual's capacity to deal with situations; Education is a continuous process and cannot be a terminated by the completion of course requirements, promotion and graduation; Education demands self-direction as opposed to authoritarian imposition[11]. In the eyes of Dewey, school should be representative of a social environment and that students learn best when in natural social settings [2].

Therefore, innovative curriculum and instruction should bring diverse groups of the young children together in communities of learning where they can live and work in democratic ways, where their diversity is a prized aspect of the group rather than a criterion for the sort-and-select machine. New curriculum and instruction should focus on topics that are of real significance to both young people and the larger society. Also, new education mode should never insult the intelligence of children or their capacity to recognize the irrelevant when they see it. It should treat students with dignity as real people who live in the real world and care about its condition and fate, valuing the knowledge and experience they bring with them to school. Students should have a say about their own learning experiences and their say should really count for something. No doubt, "The sciences flourish where the free exchange of ideas and results is encouraged" [12].

Innovative curriculum should engage important knowledge from many sources and be organized so that it is

meaningful and accessible to young people. The rhythms and patterns of their inquiring minds should play a more important role determining the scope and sequences of knowledge than the recommendations of academics who rarely see young people in schools or bureaucrats. We need an educational belief that involves knowledge that as rich in its diversity as our society, and emphasizes understanding rather than memorizing.

"Education is not an affair of 'telling' and being told, but an active and constructive process" [6]. Innovative curriculum and instruction should bring young people into contact with the most important and current ideas through the best resources we can find. We have an obligation to help our children well-informed though access to the Internet. School curriculum and instruction should offer young people a chance to critique existing knowledge and construct new meanings, accepting no fact as authoritative simply because it appears in a book. It should offer something better than short-answer, standardized tests, for in their cold impersonalness they insult our humanity, trivialize our desires and balkanize our young people. We should have a new curriculum that its goals and expectations are reasonable and achievable for all young people.

Innovative curriculum and instruction should involve more making and doing, more building and creating, and less of the deadening drudgery that current curriculum demands. In other words, new curriculum should emphasize learning by doing. In addition, it should challenge young people to imagine a better world and to try out ways of making it so. We must see to it that the new curriculum should serve the best interests of young people and the real democracy we are trying to seek, not be implicated in the ambitions of politicians or someone with great power.

V. CONCLUSION

John Dewey has left us for 67 years and we have entered a new century for nearly 20 years, unfortunately, finding evidence of John Dewey's theories in classrooms today can be problematic [13]. Education in most classrooms today is still like what Dewey described as a traditional classroom setting [1]. Therefore, school education need to have a drastic change. Dewey's thoughts and ideas on education are worthwhile experimenting with and implementing at schools, though they have received some criticism. As for formal education, it is of great importance to free students' mind, to cherish their experiences, to provide opportunities for them to participate, and to let them have a say in school activities and affairs. The author strongly believes democratic education will benefit the progress of our society because such a curriculum will produce a really educated citizenry with democratic thoughts. Most importantly, students will participate in meaningful learning activities and really enjoy freedom of intelligence. Hopefully, with modern technology and the Internet, John Dewey model of democratic education will have its spring day.

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