



John Dewey's Perspectives on Education: An Observation

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Abstract: Education is one of the important aspects in human life. It helps an individual to transform from an immature state to mature state by gaining skills. If there are problems in providing the right sort of education, it leads to many disturbances in human life culturally, morally, psychologically, economically and socially. Therefore, philosophy of education must study the problems in education and its related aspects and must provide promotable solutions. The solutions we get by following the right sort of curriculum. Among the many educational philosophers, John Dewey's perspectives on education are significant. According to him, to continue social life there must be transformation of belief sets from mature to immature individuals. To succeed in this process, the curriculum must include two significant aspects, namely, play and work which avoid artificial sort of learning and give a scope to emotions and imagination. Having the importance of Dewey's perspectives on education in the present-day world, the paper principally examines his principles and their role on education.

Keywords: Education, Philosophy of Education, Individual, Curriculum, Play and work.

1. INTRODUCTION :

Today we are able to fly in the air, to send rockets to space, to overcome many diseases. Not only this but also, we are capable of inventing new technologies to make our life easier, stronger and healthier. It is a fact that this is not the result of one day's struggle. This is the result of thousands of years of struggle. It is observable that the human mind has been evolving from time immemorial. Very initial stage human beings lived just like an animal. Once the being had started to culture his/her mind by observing the situations in circumstances, the being had separated from the other animal world and started living with new intentions and goals. In the process, the human mind has started to inquire about his/her surroundings and his/her own nature and try to find the reasons behind that particular sort of nature. This reasoning capability made human beings a special species among the other species. With this faculty, they started using surroundings to make their life rich and they started to think of more ways to make not only their life but also their future generations. They also started to find the reasons for his/her own existence. This inquiry makes them produce many results. They introduce language skills to communicate with others, they introduce many sorts of weapons to protect themselves, and they introduce money to make business easier. Also, they produce many theories to run their societies without difficulties. They invent religion to control the human mind and to sustain moral values among the societies. After such kinds of inventions take place, now we are in this condition. To say, this is the result of the human mind's evolution. If we divide western world and eastern world, many people and their ideologies play a key role in this sort of outcome. In the west, from the ancient time to present, people like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Democrats Aquinas, Newton, Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, Hume, Galileo, August Campte, Russell, John Dewey and so on influenced the people either philosophically, or scientifically, or morally, or spiritually, or educationally, or any other way. In the eastern world, people like Chanakya, Confucius, Buddha, Shankaracharya, Ramanujacharya, Madvacharya, Aurobindo, Gandhi, Krishnamurthy, Ambedkar and so on play a key role in uplifting human mind in different ways. In short, there are a lot of ideas and theories from the ancient period to till the date that have been educating the human mind. Even though every theory is peculiar in uplifting the human mind, 20th century philosopher John Dewey's ideas are significant. He has provided a theory that has the nature of scientific temper. In particular, the theory influenced a lot in the educational domain. Having the importance of it, this paper would like to examine his principles relating to child, teacher, school, curriculum and morals.



The paper mainly consists of four sections. The first section deals with the meaning and aims of the subjects of philosophy and education. The second section shall discuss very briefly John Dewey's life and works. The third section examines his views on education, school, child, teacher, curriculum and other related issues. Finally, the paper concludes with a few observations.

2. The Meaning and Aim of Philosophy and Education

a) Meaning and Aim of Philosophy

It is very difficult to define philosophy since there are no such definitions. However, by looking at the root meaning of the term philosophy we would get one idea about philosophy. The term philosophy is derived from the combination of the two Greek terms, namely, "*philo*" and "*Sophia*". The meaning of the combination of the terms is "*love of wisdom*" (etymonline). Love should be of any thing whether it is about the objects in the world, or, about our own existence, or about God's existence, or about moral duties. In short, it is an inquiry of different concepts. The main goal of philosophy is to make us inquire about the true nature of things. In general, on the basis of the specific nature of inquiry, the subject is classified into metaphysics, epistemology, axiology, and logic. Metaphysics deals with questions such as what is the essence of our life or what is the true nature of this world and so on. Epistemology deals with the questions such as whether our knowledge related to external objects is certain or not, or the knowledge relating our belief in god's existence is justifiable or not and so on. Axiology deals with the questions such as why we are moral, or what things are moral and what things are immoral and so on. Specifically, based on the nature of different subjects, many applied branches came out, namely, philosophy of science, philosophy of religion, philosophy of mind, philosophy of education and so on. Even though there are different branches, the ultimate purpose of all the branches of philosophy is to inquire the true nature, aims and problems in those subjects.

b) Meaning and Aims of Education

In the above excerpt, we have seen that philosophy of education is one of the applied branches in philosophy. The applied branch in general inquires the nature of education. It examines its aims and also investigates the problems involved in it. If we look at the meaning of education, we would get the nature of this subject and its relation to us. The term education is derived from the Latin word "educere" or "educare". The meaning of the term is "to bring forth" or to "lead out" (etymonline). In simpler terms, education brings out the capacities that are inherent in human beings. This is the true nature of education. It helps to strengthen physical powers, intellectual powers, and spiritual powers. With these powers an individual can lead his/her life fruitfully in the society. If every individual leads a happy life then that does mean the society is morally, psychologically, culturally, economically, technologically sound. Bringing all these sorts of improvements in any individual and accordingly in any society is the aim or purpose of education. If education does not bring these positive results then that is not considered as a right sort of education. It brings religious, economic, cultural, and psychological disturbances which mean nothing but no peace would be in an individual as well as in a society. To construct the best society where all sorts of developments take place, many philosophers provided their educational theories from Plato's era to John Dewey's era in the West and from Upanishad era to Ambedkar era in the East. Among the many, John Dewey's educational philosophy is one of the best theories which influenced both the West and the East.

Before going to examine Dewey's principles, it is needed to briefly look at his life and works. In the following section we shall see his life and significant works which influenced the educational domain.

3. John Dewey's Life and Works :

John Dewey was born into a modest family in Burlington, Vermont on October 20, 1859. He was one of four boys born to Archibald Sprague Dewey and Lucina Artemisia Rich Dewey. Like his older brother, Davis Rich Dewey, he attended the University of Vermont and graduated in 1879 with a Phi Beta Kappa. Dewey married Alice Chipman in 1886, shortly after he received his Ph.D. They have six children. After the death of first wife, he married Estelle Roberta Lovitz Grant, a long-time friend, on December 11, 1946 and adopted two kids.

Two years he has worked as a high school teacher and one year as a primary school teacher in a small-town Charlotte. He has decided he is not fit to teach primary school children. After receiving PhD, he joined as faculty member at the University of Michigan from the year 1884 to 1894. In the year 1894, he joined the newly founded University of Chicago. He continued in the university till the year 1904. At the University of Chicago, he has developed belief in empiricism and promoted pragmatist philosophy. In the year 1899, he produced a major work on education, namely, *The School and Society* which discussed pedagogical beliefs. In 1899, he was elected as the president of the American

Psychological Association (APA). After that he worked as professor of philosophy at Columbia University from 1904 until his retirement in 1930. So far, we have seen John Dewey's life and career.

In his lifetime Dewey produced many influential papers and books on different subjects. Approximately, he has published 700 articles and 40 Books. The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" (1896), *Democracy and Education* (1916), *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), *The Public and its Problems* (1927), *Experience and Nature* (1925) are some of the influential works. However, among the many, one of the most celebrated works is *Democracy and Education* which promotes the progressive education. By observing this section, we can understand his contribution to the development of human society (Ryan, 1995, Pp.37-60).

In the following section we shall examine Dewey's educational principles which influence predominantly western and eastern world.

4. Dewey's Perspectives on Education and its Implications

In the Book *Democracy and Education*, we can see Dewey's views on education and its importance to human society. He says "The continuity of any experience, through renewing of the social group is a literal fact. Education, in its broadest sense, is the means of this social continuity of life" (Dewey, 2004, p.2). The point is crystal clear that education is the only means to transfer any sort of experience to other generations in the social groups. To make the bridge between immature members of the groups and mature members of the group, education is a necessary aspect (ibid., p.3). By transferring interests, purposes, information, skill, and practices from matured members to unmatured members, it plays a key role. He believes, if not this transformation takes place then the social group will "cease its characteristic life" (ibid). However, he insisted formal education's importance was to fulfil the needs of social groups, in particular in civilized societies. He says that any society continues its life by transforming habits of doing, thinking, and feeling from the matured to immature. In civilized societies, the span between mature and immature is widening. There is a less scope of "playful imitation" for younger groups because of a remote work space of the elder group whereas in the case of less civilized societies children imitate their parents' habits of doing, thinking and so on playfully which is incidental and natural. To bridge the gap between younger and adults there must be some intentional agencies—schools—needed. He claimed that "without such formal education, it is not possible to transmit all the resources and achievements of a complex society" (ibid., p.8). Despite the fact the system of formal education gives a scope to bridge between mature and unmatured, there is a danger that "the material of formal instruction will be merely the subject matter of the schools, isolated from the subject matter of life-experience" (ibid., p.9). The consequences, he says, are that we reach an ordinary notion of education where only technical information would be informed in the form of symbols but not carried over the social interests and its life. Therefore, he suggested, "one of the weightiest problems with which the philosophy of education has to cope is the method of keeping a proper balance between the informal and the formal, the incidental and the intentional, modes of education" (Dewey, 2004, p.9). His intention seems very clear that education must nurture, cultivate immature members' minds to sustain social group's interests. Clearly to say, education must focus on the conditions of the growth of the immature. Dewey says what actually the term growth means is. He says "in directing the activities of the young, society determines its own future in determining that of the young. Since the young at a given time will at some later date compose the society of that period, the latter's nature will largely turn upon the direction children's activities were given at an earlier period. This cumulative movement of action toward a later result is what is meant by growth" (ibid., p.45).

In the chapter "Democratic Conception in Education," Dewey insisted on the importance of bringing democratic conception in education. The reason for him is that it stimulates each individual "who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity" (ibid., p.93). He says we could see the class system in the platonic view of ideal society. In the 18th century, the ideal society promoted individual based conception. And, in the 19th century, while overcoming the drawbacks of the two systems, people promoted state agency-based conception. However, he says, they narrowed the concept and reintroduced the idea of subordination of individuals to institutions. The three ideal societies developed educational philosophies according to their concepts (ibid., Pp. 106-107). Dewey's principal argument seems that making an individual a subordinate to something or someone is a mistaken notion.

Dewey thinks that in order to bring this conception in education, aims in education must play a vital role. Simply it is about the results of the actions or it is about the end. To reach the end there must be a way. According to Dewey, foresight is an important activity. The forethought would function in three ways. Firstly, a keen observation of the given conditions is involved. Searching available means to reach the end and find the possible obstacles in the way. Secondly, the observation and the findings of the means and obstacles in the way suggest the proper order in the use of means which smooth the progress of economical selection and arrangement. Finally, it makes a choice of alternatives possible.

Moreover, he says, if we are able to predict the outcome of acting then it is easy to evaluate the value of the two courses of action consequently, we can “pass the judgment upon their relative desirability” (ibid., p.110). In short, aim must be focused on given circumstances and existing theories and it must be flexible in nature. More importantly he insisted aims in education are just like aims in agriculture. How a farmer deal with his farmland, an educator also must deal with education (ibid., p.115).

In order to achieve the aim of education and make a learner as a mature individual, there must be a specific curriculum. Dewey explicitly suggested that the curriculum should include two important aspects, namely, play and work. He expresses that “Experience has shown that when children have a chance at physical activities which bring their natural impulses into play, going to school is a joy, management is less of a burden, and learning is easier” (ibid., p.210). If a curriculum gives an opportunity to playful learning then a learner learns activities by doing or by active participation in work. Moreover, he stresses, in a play and work method a learner learns more by the mistakes that occur in doing activities. According to him, learning by making mistakes is “an incidental requirement”. It creates zeal to select proper means which prevent a chance for further mistakes and using methods that are so inaccessible from the complex situations of life (Dewey, 2004, p.213). Dewey insisted that a learner becomes more skilled if he/she learnt any subject by doing. His gardening example clearly shows the possibilities of more skills that a learner could get. He argues that a child if he/she starts learning in the garden then he/she can understand the nature of soil, different species of plants and their nature, different sorts of pests that harm the plants, chemicals that are useful to plants and so on. The subject Botany can be understood by a learner by doing these activities. By this sort of “active occupation” in any subject, a learner can set his/her own future goals which make the individual more intelligent. Dewey thinks it is not possible in closed rooms with materials that are symbolized. Most important point he has raised is that if curriculum would not include play and work, there is greater scope for a danger that “the ordinary course of action fails to give adequate stimulus to emotion and imagination. So in leisure time, there is an imperious demand for their stimulation by any kind of means; gambling, drink, etc., may be resorted to” (ibid., p.221). Moreover, he has suggested that we need to understand the terms play and work, which must be included in the curriculum, in terms of psychologically but not economically. He says that in the case of psychological, play and work “are equally free and intrinsically motivated, apart from false economic conditions which tend to make play into idle excitement for the well to do, and work into uncongenial labour for the poor” (ibid., Pp.222-223). Simply to say, for Dewey, the learning process has to give a space for emotions and imagination in a learner’s mind to produce more fruitful achievements.

5. Concluding Remarks :

The concluding remarks from our discussion so far are as follows. We have seen Dewey’s emphasize the role of philosophy of education in finding the problems in giving education to immature individuals. As he noticed, if education could not bridge the gap between mature and immature then the continuity of social life will not be possible. Also, the point he has raised is more convincing that since in civilized societies the gap between adults and young is more, mere closed rooms teaching with symbolized books is not sufficient. To bridge the gap and make a path to the continuity of the social life culturally, economically, technically and so on, there must be a suitable curriculum. As he suggested, the curriculum must include play and work. The play and work must be considered in terms of psychological where there is a scope to emotions and imaginations. We can say by our observation of Dewey’s contribution to education that his principles are useful to the present situations where the gap is increasing between parents and children.

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