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The Concept and Purpose of Education According to John Dewey

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Abstract

It is a well-known fact that John Dewey is one of the prominent modern scholars of the 21st century. His immense contribution to the field of education in terms of development in education has not only influenced the West but also the Islamic world. Thus, this research is crucial as it studies Dewey and his beliefs in education as he has a profound influence in the field of modern education.

This particular study explores the fundamental educational philosophy proposed by Dewey. This study will elaborate on the concept and purpose of education based on his prominent work of progressive education which is *Democracy And Education : An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* and *The School and Society*. This research seeks to make a comprehensive exploration of the concept of education proposed by Dewey. In addition, it will assist future educators in determining the true purpose of education while elevating the field of education to the status it rightfully deserves.

Keywords: John Dewey, Thought, Education

Introduction

Generally, John Dewey is often perceived to be a man with reputable skills and expertise particularly in Philosophy, Psychology and Education (Christensen, 2002; Daia, 1973). In the field of philosophy and psychology, Dewey deeply believes in the school of thought of pragmatism which was established by Charles Sanders Peirce (m.1914 M) and William James (m.1910 M). However, the philosophy of pragmatism was actually proposed by James Harun (Hadiwijono, 1980) and subsequently developed comprehensively by Charles Sanders Peirce (Subroto,1999). Dewey was influenced by Peirce in terms of the heavy emphasis on the experimental method while the former was also influenced by James in terms of the consequences of a certain philosophy and study (Ali, 1994).

In the field of education, Dewey believes in the education philosophy that relates to the community, democracy and pragmatism (Christensen, 2002). He is also known for his firm belief that is based on science (Smith & Raeper, 2000). In the year 1896, Dewey had realised his educational philosophy by establishing a world-renowned school which is 'The Laboratory School' (Daia, 1973). This particular school was also known as 'The Dewey School'. At this school, Dewey had conducted various studies which had produced numerous important theories related to the field of education.

Research Methodology

In general, this study focuses on library research. As a result, the data collection involves the study of various literature related to the philosophy of education of John Dewey as the research subject. Based on this particular research methodology, the sources of references related to the research topic in question were gathered.

In the process of creating the framework for this study, the writing process is divided into two phases: data collection and data analysis. Data is referred to the works related to philosophy in general and also the philosophy of education by John Dewey. In addition, the findings about the school of thought of Dewey conducted by various renowned scholars in the past were also the subject of this research. The data collected include numerous academic texts, theses and dissertations, journals, working papers, articles and other various sources related to this particular research topic. Most of the works were in English although some works were in the Malay language. However, the latter are far and few between. The data collected were fully utilised as the sources of references and the fundamental guide in this research.

The primary source or *premier* source is based on the works of John Dewey. Some of his works are namely (*My Pedagogic Creed*, 1897; *Democracy and Education : An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, 1915; *Experience and Education*, 1938). However, the secondary source of research included the translated works of John Dewey. Besides that, the academic research as well as the written works related to the school of thought of Dewey were also classified as the second sources of references.

The Concept of Education by John Dewey

John Dewey had reiterated in depth about his concept of education in many of his prominent works. Dewey firmly believes in the philosophy of pragmatism and this has led to his pragmatic approach in his educational philosophy. He opines that pragmatism should be the primary focus of education. He clearly stated:

"...philosophy may even be defined as the general theory of education..."
(Dewey, 1957)

This is a direct result of the impact of education on philosophy which has given its value. According to Dewey, the needs of education has led to the emergence of philosophy since the Grecian period. Dewey views education as an instrument or medium which will lead people to break free from their shackles of ignorance and propel them to greater heights of enlightenment in the end. He has also defined education as *the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional towards nature and fellow men* or in other words the basic process of creating a natural, intellectual, emotional reaction towards

nature and mankind. He also further emphasises that education is the way of using knowledge to help mankind to acquire more knowledge which will ultimately lead to a more harmonious, productive, meaningful and elevated existence in the end (Dewey, 1957).

Although Dewey clearly defined education in the abovementioned explanation, he had also constantly linked education to the process and system of education which influenced other various terms in the field of education. In this particular study, several definitions in education will be highlighted based on the works of John Dewey. Below are the following definitions:

Education as a Progressive and Constantly Developing Activity

Among the prominent beliefs asserted by Dewey in relation to the concept of education is progressive education. An interesting aspect which needs to be highlighted is that progressive education actually stems from pragmatism which Dewey then integrated into his concept of education. Progressive education supports the idea that experiences gained will provide the basis of knowledge. Progressive education is a direct response to the heavily criticised educational philosophy which is perennialism education which gave more authority to the teacher during the teaching and learning process. Since the philosophy of progressive education stems from the pragmatism school of thought, it rejects the view that knowledge or truth possesses a fixed or unchanging value instead it is considered as dynamic based on the current situation and environment (Aroff & Kasa, 1987).

Dewey, like everyone else, was impressed by how easy it is for children to learn what they are interested in particularly when it is related to their lives at home or home life. This is apparent when the children were instructed to do the same activity they did at home but this time, in school. Clearly, the children were bored when they were given lessons in the classroom (Peterson, 1987). Therefore, Dewey realises the need for an activity and new approach that will evoke the interest of the children and make them happy while learning. Progressive education emphasises the synergy between the present society and environment and how this helps the society to adapt well to the surroundings and inadvertently create a conducive environment to live in (Aroff & Kasa, 1987).

Another important aspect of progressive education which needs to be highlighted is that Dewey had gained the inspiration for the idea of lifelong learning or education from it. This idea of lifelong learning has been the biggest contribution ever made by Dewey to the field of education. This idea has brought a huge impact as it has broken the barriers of education which encouraged the positive synergy between schools and the outside world or society (Peterson, 1987). Although there were scholars who opposed this idea, it did not stop this revolutionary idea from making a huge impact in the field of education which ultimately solidified the reputation of Dewey as a reputable scholar.

Education as a social activity which promotes sustainability and not merely as a means of survival

Dewey opined that educational-related activities conducted in schools do not adequately prepare students for real life as schools are considered to be only a part of life (Daia, 1973). In his book *The Social and the Society*, Dewey stated that schools are not merely the place to acquire knowledge but rather it is where students learn to socialise with others while

promoting the necessary development for the children based on their respective talents and ages (Dewey, 1920).

According to Dewey, the classroom and school are the microcosmos of the society. Furthermore, Dewey states that the school must play an important role in imparting the necessary skills which are practical such as carpentry, skills-based subjects, commerce and subjects that promote and evoke the interest of students. In this way, the students will learn to identify their potential as well as build their self-confidence (Daia, 1973).

Dewey has clearly explained by providing an effective example in the year 1899 whereby changes were evident in the American society. Children were no longer involved in the sheep shearing process or make candles for their homes. Thus, Dewey was confident that these activities can also be done in schools. Since American families at that time no longer needed their children to do that kind of work anymore, Dewey opined that the school should promote these activities to preserve the legacy and prevent it from dying out (Peterson, 1987).

Another unexpected development of this idea proposed by Dewey which was included in *The School and Society* was that this book had increased the confidence of the society towards the importance of schools in their efforts of shaping the interests of students and training them to develop skills while doing their social responsibility (Daia, 1973). It is not surprising that this book has an immense impact as it was later published into more than 13 foreign languages around the world. Another achievement for Dewey was when the University of Chicago was impressed with him that they established "The School of Experiment" or also known as "The Dewey School". In this school, Dewey had conducted all his experiments by using the students as his research sample. The students were provided with the necessary training while they also created communities within the school equipped with the necessary skills for life in the future (Zakaria).

The immense contribution of "The Dewey School" was evident in the rise of student population that have since reached adulthood and the success they have gained as they were all equipped with the necessary skills. Hence, this is indeed a significant success for John Dewey and it can be considered that the Dewey doctrine has left an important mark in the field of education (Dewey, 1920).

Education as a process of renewing experiences that are continuous

As a pioneer and advocate of pragmatism in the field of education, Dewey asserts that experience is the primary factor in gaining knowledge (Alsagoff, 1984). In other words, the most suitable phrase about education would be *...process of renewal of the meaning of experience...* which means that presentation is similar to the interaction with experienced and older people or through the formal educational institution (Dewey, 1957). The phrase that aptly reflects this definition is *learning through doing* whereby this theory clearly highlights that the best way to learn is through gaining experience.

Dewey further elaborates that experience is an odd combination consisting of two elements: active and passive. The former involves trying or experimenting while the latter involves something that is happening at the moment. When we experience something passively, we often react and by doing so, we will be affected by our reaction. Moreover, when we take

action, we will get a reaction. This is what is defined as an odd combination. The connection between the two phases of experience (action and reaction); the value and result of the said experience can be measured or gauged (Dewey, 1957).

In an attempt of finding the underlying concept in education based on experience, Dewey has made everyday life or daily activities as the catalyst for his theory and philosophy of education. To Dewey, the normal life experience is actually the only reality that every human being faces and really needs (Daia, 1973). Dewey was greatly influenced with the success of physical science in his effort to resolve practical problems, explain, predict and control the surrounding environment (Alsagoff, 1984).

Democracy and Education

According to Dewey, one significant element that is often discussed in the philosophy of education is the relationship between education and democracy. The educational philosophy established by Dewey was related to democracy and was clearly highlighted. He also stated that education serves a social or societal purpose and not individualistic. Furthermore, Dewey opined that democracy is the best or perfect social system due to numerous aspects. Consequently, it is vital that a philosophy, system and education process that embody aspects of democracy be established (Dewey, 1957). Hence, Dewey had established *Democracy Conception in Education* as a testament to his belief in education and democracy.

Dewey had established the educational philosophy based on the ideal democracy that society desires. He had further highlighted two important features within the democratic system itself. Firstly, democracy is not merely the dream or aspiration of any particular community but what is more important is the recognition of the commitment that will be achieved by the community as a whole (Dewey, 1957). This fact firmly outlines that the principle of democracy ensures the right of freedom and mutual respect of the rights of every individual. Within the context of education on the other hand, each individual has the right to receive an education regardless of gender, race or religious beliefs. Most importantly, what needs to be further emphasized is the close rapport built on mutual respect among students or between students and their teachers regardless of social status (Prasetya, 1997). Secondly, democracy does not merely focus on the individual right to voice one's opinion but rather the behavioural changes due to the interaction between different individuals (Dewey, 1920). In a democratic system, it allows freedom of speech and expression but firmly prohibits the abuse of that right which infringes on the rights of oneself and others within the society. By establishing the norms and values within a society, inadvertently this will present certain limitations to the right to freedom of each individual whereby no one will be able to abuse that right. As a result, everyone within a democratic system will understand and willingly accept these limitations on their right to freedom (Prasetya, 1997). In other words, each individual in a democratic system will put into practice and apply the said principles in their daily lives which will lead to a harmonious society. In the context of education, Dewey opined that each individual is given the right to acquire knowledge without pride or prejudice. It is only through education will mankind be able to truly comprehend the changes and habits of other members of society from diverse backgrounds.

As a direct result of the rising influence and popularity achieved by Dewey, numerous Muslim scholars including Malay-Muslim scholars have adopted the popular phrase "education and

democracy” or “democracy of education”. Furthermore, this definition of democracy has also led to the idea of equal rights in education. Therefore, a democratic education system is defined as the individual right or the equal right to receive an education regardless of external and superficial factors (Diah, 1989).

The Purpose of Education according to John Dewey

Dewey explains that the purpose of education is to accept the responsibility in conducting observations, managing expectations and arrangements necessary in executing any task. The purpose or objective is not fixed but rather dynamic or constantly changing. Dewey has outlined three important aspects as follows

First : The goal to be achieved should be properly planned and arranged as to exceed expectations or the present situation. It should also take into account the current situation; the available resources and possible obstacles. However, the theory which outlines about positive outcome whether from the educational or moral perspective will usually contradict this principle.

Secondly: The goal should also be flexible whereby it can change according to the situation and environment. Any goal that is based on external factors in the teaching and learning process will normally result in an outcome that is rigid. Moreover if this external factor has been changed by force, it will disrupt the synergy between the work relationship and the concrete situation.

Thirdly: The end goal should also reflect freedom of activity. Hence, the term *end in view* should be taken into account as it is crucial to envision the outcome in our minds. In order to define the outcome or result of a certain activity it is imperative that there is a focus on the end goal and the way to reach the goal in question. It is important that the desired object or target is merely a symbol or sign as our minds will determine the activity that has to be conducted. In reality, it is not just the target which should be the focus but rather the way to achieve the target that should be given prime importance or considered as *end in view* (Dewey, 1957).

Dewey has opined that there is not much difference between education and other activities. Dewey has defined and compared the teacher or educator to a diligent farmer that has to fulfill various tasks to ensure a bountiful harvest in the end. The teacher has to bear in mind several aspects which include: available resources and the target in question. Another important aspect that has to be considered also include - the suitable way to resolve future obstacles. All these aspects need to consider numerous factors which will make achieving the said target much easier. As a farmer that must consider the changing weather, fertiliser used, pest attacks and other problems, the wise teacher will also try to strike a balance by integrating each activity and energy required to achieve the desired goal. It is obviously unwise to act rashly without considering all aspects which might only hinder the learning process in the end. Thus, the purpose and goal to be achieved will be affected by the type of activity conducted and amount of energy being channeled into achieving the desired target.

Similarly, Dewey asserts that the role of the teacher or educator is akin to that of the parents. Dewey opines that as an abstract concept, education does not have a specific or clear purpose or direction. This is the influence of pragmatism whereby existence and life are considered as

continuous or dynamic and never static. According to Dewey, the purpose or goal encompasses the acceptance of responsibility to observe, expect and arrange whatever is necessary in executing any task; in education or agriculture. It is unreasonable to set or determine a particular goal based on an object (children) as they will eventually develop and change in the process. Thus, to determine or set a predetermined end or target will only hinder or limit education to a certain degree. The goal should however, be dependent upon a particular time period which will come to an end eventually and will inevitably lead to the need of a new goal (Peterson, 1987).

Nonetheless, a general goal could be proposed by taking into account several factors. The following factors are outlined below:

- i. The goal must be based on an intrinsic value or instinct, need and norm of the respective student. This will include natural instincts and behaviour instilled within an individual. In general, the teacher will set a target in each teaching and learning session without considering the success of achieving the said target. In other words, the teacher decides the teaching objective based on the needs without taking into account the preparation and level of acceptance of the students.
- ii. The goal can be realised into a teaching pedagogy which can be naturally accepted by the students without force. Hence, it is recommended that a conducive environment be created whereby the students are given the freedom and ability to learn based on their own individual interests and capabilities. Furthermore, Dewey explains that this goal will not be achieved if the method of evaluating, correcting and guiding the students be predetermined from the beginning. By doing so, the teacher will not be attuned to the needs of the students and their respective potential and capabilities.
- iii. The goal cannot be claimed to be the ultimate goal. Moreover, Dewey emphasises that teachers or educators must be well-prepared with the end goal in mind which should be considered as a general and primary goal. Although each activity conducted has clearly set goals, it is still considered general as it involves ambiguity. Until the present, this idea has made people realise the importance of connections or relationships which are abstract and general whereby any abstract aspect has lost its definitive or specific purpose (Dewey, 1957).

Based on the abovementioned factors, Dewey proposed three main goals of education which take into account the following aspects: natural development, social competence and culture. However, these general goals are still viewed as somewhat limited and bound to the present ideas which include culturalisation which vastly hinders freedom in education (Butler, 1957). Thus, there are a few important factors according to Dewey which relates to the the goals of education. The following factors include:

To create well-rounded individuals and productive citizens

In the field of education, Dewey often asserts that socialisation itself is the educational concept. Moreover, he believes that the educational activities in schools will be an integral part of life of the students. As a result, schools play a monumental role in ensuring that the students become upright members of society who will make immense contributions to the nation. Schools are considered the medium and the primary agency in providing adequate knowledge to the younger generation to lead better and productive lives in the future. It is

hoped that will lead to endless possibilities for the people and the country. Any changes made to the method and curriculum of education will lead to positive social changes which will fulfill the needs of the society in producing well-rounded and holistic individuals and productive citizens (Peterson, 1987).

Although Dewey was impressed with the philosophy of Plato, the former had contrasting views with the latter in determining the path of society. Previously, the views of Plato regarding education whereby the school is seen as a medium to pass on the culture and norms of past generation to the next was widely accepted by society. Nevertheless, Dewey had a different view which had a significant impact on education and that is the important role of teachers or educators in ensuring that the younger generation is well-trained in improved cultural aspects. However, at the time no one knew much about forming new cultural aspects. Thus, it was imperative that schools play their role in creating new and improved cultural aspects (Peterson, 1987).

Although it was Dewey that proposed that new cultural aspects be introduced to future generations, he did not elaborate further on it. However in his last written work, *Education and Experience*, he explained the importance of gaining necessary experience in ensuring that the minds of youths will be further open to new experiences, ways of thinking and knowledge. Furthermore, there were numerous scholars that agreed with Dewey in integrating or building a rapport between the students and adults in society which can be done by conducting field trips to factories, overseas trips, in-depth discussions with others about current issues and so forth. By doing so, not only will the youths be able to improve their abilities in gaining experiences but it will also train them to become better members of society (Peterson, 1987).

Provide students with the adequate experience and necessary skills to face future challenges

Undoubtedly, the primary focus of education according to Dewey is to equip each student with as much experience necessary to face a world full of challenges. Dewey opined that experience is indeed the main source of knowledge whereby one learns more through experiences which ultimately enriches the individual. The more experience an individual has, the more knowledge he will be able to acquire which will ultimately lead to a better life experience. Thus, Dewey asserts that progressive education is considered the best type of education that can help students achieve their true potential.

Furthermore, Dewey also expounds on the important role that the teacher or educator play in ensuring the success of progressive education that he firmly believes in. He emphasises that teachers should play the role of a mentor, guide as well as advisor and help students in identifying their challenges or problems in a constantly evolving environment. Hence, the role of teachers should be given more priority as they are the ones responsible in moulding the younger generation to be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to face the challenges in the future (Dewey, 1957). Numerous scholars of progressive education assert that the inductive approach is the most suitable method in reaching the objective of the teaching process. Due to the fact that the inductive approach does not provide a general introduction but in reality, this approach will allow the students to form their own opinions and beliefs based on the phenomena and the situation they are in. The thinkers of progressive education defines the student as an individual who is experienced, open-minded and

explorative. Progressive education also exposes students to various aspects which include social experiences, social studies, challenging projects and experiments which will further provide the much needed freedom to students to resolve their own conflicts or challenges in their own unique way (Aroff & Kasa, 1987). Therefore, the students will possess the necessary skills and adequate knowledge to face future challenges.

In terms of the curriculum that should be provided to students, Dewey opined that the basic principle in creating a suitable curriculum or subject matter in education is built on the previous experience acquired which will lead to other experiences in the future. In general, the process of education is constantly evolving and changing and this makes it near impossible to choose one particular curriculum as the sole guide or reference. This particular concept of education emphasises that each topic must encompass all subjects such as History, Geography, Science, Physics, Chemistry, Biology and others. As a result, the curriculum will constantly change and become more complex. Hence, the curriculum is constantly in need of a review, an update, and structuralised in such a way which will suit the needs of the current situation (Dewey, 1957).

To provide students with adequate knowledge and skills to ensure future sustainability

One of the primary aspects of the purpose of education emphasised by Dewey is to provide a comprehensive education to students which will equip them with the necessary knowledge to socialise with the community. Furthermore, Dewey highlighted that the role of the school is important as it has a fundamental influence on the students as schools also play a significant role at par with the role of the home, farm and workshop. In addition, a more concerted approach should be taken whereby the parents, teachers, schools and the surrounding community should cooperate as they have a great impact on the development and well-being of the students. This aspect is the primary principle advocated by Dewey and is considered a vital component of a progressive educator (Peterson, 1987).

In order to create a synergy between schools and the community, Dewey encourages teachers to gain mastery of their subject matter particularly in aspects of socialisation and local economy. To further strengthen the depth of knowledge among teachers in these two aspects, these educators are encouraged to incorporate these aspects into their teaching and learning process as well as conduct field trips to interesting places away from the school grounds (Peterson, 1987). The knowledge gained through the direct interaction with the community will be channeled to the students as an integral part of their teaching and learning process.

To produce individuals that are critical thinkers, creative, confident, and independent

As previously mentioned, the educational philosophy proposed by Dewey was based on the democratic the right to be educated without any bias or prejudice. As democracy allows individuals the right to be involved in any activity or commit any act, it is crucial that students be given the same right to determine their own path in life based on their personal interest and passion.

Furthermore, Dewey firmly emphasises that the subject matter that will be taught must be aligned to the interest and also ability of the individual student. Moreover, Dewey further stresses that students should not be compelled to learn a subject that is not within their field

of interest. By providing the students the opportunity to learn a subject which is aligned to their interest, it will increase the focus and determination of the students to delve deeper into the subject and gain mastery in the process (Dewey, 1957).

In order to ensure that students become holistic individuals that are critical thinkers, creative, confident, and independent Dewey strongly believes in striking a balance whereby children should also be given adequate opportunity to also pursue their personal interests besides acquiring knowledge in the classroom. Moreover, the activities provided to the students should be of quality to ensure that the students be equipped with the necessary fundamental skills. Therefore, the concept of a fully integrated curriculum was introduced to provide the necessary knowledge and skills to the students (Peterson, 1987).

Although the idea and philosophy of education proposed by Dewey is rather impressive, Dewey is acutely aware of the limitations as it is not easy to actually implement a new idea or activity in schools. One of the problems would be the lack of human resource as it is apparent that there is a shortage of teachers or educators of calibre. Moreover, it would also involve a high cost which the schools are not prepared for.

Conclusion

Based on the research conducted, it would appear that education according to Dewey is not merely a preparation for life but rather a lifelong journey in the pursuit of knowledge. Dewey does not see the school as just a place to gain knowledge but most importantly as an avenue where students can experience real life. Furthermore, Dewey also states that education is a continuous journey to gain experience. People should be given the perfect experience of life in this world. Although Dewey did not emphasize about the sources of knowledge, it is apparent that Dewey believes that experience is indeed a source of knowledge that is considered absolute. Moreover, Dewey firmly believes that education is always evolving for the better. This is in line with the changes that happen in life which is the only thing that is constant. It is imperative that mankind is constantly gaining new knowledge as to not be left behind by the inevitable changes in life. In terms of the philosophy of education, Dewey clearly states that education should have a wider purpose and that is to create a holistic individual. Therefore, it is vital that the purpose of quality education is where each individual be equipped with the adequate knowledge and life experience in order to become a contributing member of society.

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