

An Exploratory Analysis of John Dewey's Writings: Implications for School Leaders

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to synthesize the operational definition of education through an exploratory analysis of John Dewey's writings. Dewey's definition of education changed from 1938 to 1896. Findings suggest that schools promote more social and emotional learning through instructional activities such as service-learning.

In 1776, Thomas Jefferson penned the following words, perhaps the most inspiring sentence in American language: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness" (as cited in Cannon, 2004, p.13). How does education contribute to an understanding of the pursuit of happiness? John Dewey saw many ethical implications among education, democracy, happiness and social service. Dewey wrote in *Education and experience* (1938/1998): "We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future" (p.51).

Method

Primary writings of John Dewey are highlighted in this historical paper, including *The school and society* (1896); *The child and the curriculum* (1902); *Democracy and education* (1916); and *Experience and education* (1938/ 1998). Additionally, several anthologies were explored, including *The Philosophy of John Dewey, Volume I; The structure of experience, Volume II; The lived experience* (McDermott, 1981), and *Classic and contemporary readings in the philosophy of education* (Cahn, 1997). Secondary sources that interpret Dewey are listed in the reference section of the paper. With this in mind, the meaning of democracy was unpacked through qualitative interpretation as Dewey understood the term. The term "happiness" was also explored from the era of Plato and Aristotle to the present. A resource that offers some fresh insight into the phrase "the pursuit of happiness" as an American idea, *The pursuit of happiness in times of war* by Cannon (2004) was consulted.

Theoretical and Historical Perspective

As a result of a literature review of the primary writings of Dewey, two broad themes emerged: (a) education and democracy, and (b) pursuit of happiness.

Education and Democracy

Dewey goes back to Plato and the Greeks often in his writings on education. Plato was a starting point for so many issues in the history of ideas and in the development of philosophy as a discipline. Plato was a product of his context. Plato's society produced a stratification of classes in which the individual was subordinated to the larger group. Plato was unable to see the static nature of his society and its ideals. Ironically, democracy raised the quality of education and the availability of education to more people regardless of their social station in life (Dewey, 1916).

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Historical perspectives. Changes in society influenced the kind of education that was made available to different classes of people from Plato's time to Dewey. According to Bennett de Marais and LaCompte (2000), "military leaders, town governments, and royal courts encouraged the establishment of public schools for the teaching of arts, rhetoric, music, literature, and grammar" (p.154). As the Roman Empire collapsed, so did school systems. Literacy survived within the priesthood. Beginning with the Renaissance and the Reformation, the lower and middle classes gained increased access to education. In reality, the church and the government viewed education "as a cure for social disorder, especially that allegedly fomented by the working classes" (p.155). By the end of the 1600s, a two-tracked system of education was in place throughout most of Europe. Children of the aristocracy studied Latin, Greek, and the classics, leading to a university experience; the children of the middle class and the poor studied the vernacular languages and trained for a vocation in manual labor (p.155). At the time Dewey was born and subsequently entered into pathways of teaching and musing about the role of education in society, "types of education were strictly differentiated by social class" (p. 156). Children of the rich received an education leading to the university and children of the poor received an education leading to a life of social regimentation by law and the church.

Philosophical and psychological foundations. The study of ideas and the study of behavior, or the complex and problematic nature of human life, became life-long pursuits of Dewey. Dewey used both philosophical and psychological perspectives to build a theory of education (McDermott, 1981). Both Aristotle and Dewey believed that "thinking" informed "doing" to refine the practical experience, and that "doing" informed "thinking" to cultivate a richer grasp of the problem or idea being considered (Chambliss, 1993). When Dewey arrived at the University of Chicago in 1894, his practical experience with elementary and secondary education was very negative and highly critical (Handlin, 1959, p. 41). Public education in the 1880s and 1890s looked backward rather than forward, generally preparing graduates for jobs that were disappearing (Handlin, 1959, p. 23). It was in this context that Dewey began the Laboratory School at Chicago in 1896 because he was startled by the waste he observed in public education. The child would come to school with a storehouse of experience gained at home and in the community, yet could not apply daily life to what was learned in school (Dewey, 1915, p. 75). At the Laboratory School, Dewey wanted to break down the isolation of school from society. At the same time, Dewey was equally concerned that teaching was not the imparting of new facts or the "propounding of new hypotheses" (Dewey, *The child and the curriculum*, 1902, as cited in Cahn, 1997, p. 284). What Dewey observed in American public schools in the 1880s and 90s—rote learning, memorization, the lack of developing the child's reasoning powers, and the contradiction of experience which drove many a child to question the practical value of going to school—is still haunting public education in the United States more than one-hundred and twenty years later.

Progressive aims of education. *Democracy and education* (1916) was Dewey's pinnacle work. In the book, Dewey established the aims of progressive education. Throughout his experiences as an educator, Dewey observed the corrosive effects of industrialization on a changing American society. Most glaring was the creation of class inequities. In this aspect, American democracy was as flawed as the Greek democracy of Plato and Aristotle. "Wherever social control means subordination of individual activities to class authority, there is the danger that industrial education will be dominated by acceptance of the *status quo*" (Dewey, 1916, p. 120). In 1938, Dewey refined his life-long thoughts on the role of experience in learning. The title of this relatively short, but profound, work was *Experience and education*. In the book,

Dewey develops a philosophy of experience. Dewey could criticize the foundation of traditional education and the imposition of subject matter from textbooks into the minds of young people, but he would not throw out the wisdom of the past and materials associated with learning about the past.

Value of reflection. Dewey (1938/1998) grappled with issues in *Experience and education* with focus on how to use experiences for further learning and how to organize the experience so that the child pulled ideas from the experience which would lead him or her to more questions, observations, and future experiences. That made the concept of progressive education much more challenging to implement as an organizational proposition than traditional education. He stated, "The process is a slow and arduous one. It is a matter of growth, and there are many obstacles which obstruct growth...deflect it into wrong lines" (p.11). One of those wrong lines was the idea that a progressive, or new, school could function without some kind of social control. Children, Dewey believed, operated just like the rest of society: "rules are part of the game. They are not outside of it" (p. 56). The trouble with traditional schools was not that they didn't have rules; it was that a traditional school was not a community. When a school had a sense of community, "the primary source of social control resides in the very nature of the work done as a social enterprise in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute and to which all feel a responsibility" (p. 61). The opposite side of social control is freedom. Dewey often addressed the nature of freedom because people misinterpreted progressive education as allowing children to do anything they wanted without any social control boundaries. Dewey felt that the most important idea in freedom was not "freedom of movement" but "freedom of intelligence" (Dewey, 1938/ 1998, p. 69). A person who enjoyed freedom could make observations freely, critically analyze those observations, construct questions from the analysis of the observations, and then judge whether the entire enterprise was worth the engagement. The value of freedom for Dewey was the opportunity it provided for "quiet reflection...after times of more overt action...used to organize what had been gained in periods of activity"(p. 72). Intellectual growth is fostered when a person develops the capacity to stop and think about the purpose of an action, to judge the pros and cons of making a decision to take action. Reflection, for Dewey, was at the heart of experiential education because it enabled the learner to form purposes about why he or she would engage in a learning activity and to step back and judge the value of the learning for future engagement (Dewey, 1938/ 1998).

Service-learning. In his thoughts about education and democracy, Dewey leads us logically to a form of experiential education which is alive, well, and relevant in the era of teaching-to-the-test and No Child Left Behind (NCLB). This form of education is known as service-learning. Service-learning "include(s) a balance between service to the community and academic learning...the hyphen in the phrase symbolizes the central role of reflection in the process of learning through community experience" (Eyler & Giles, Jr., 1999, p. 4). A widespread example of service-learning in a public high school language arts classroom would be 11th or 12th grade advanced students mentoring 9th grade, below-level, remedial-reading students as a part of the advanced-placement literature curriculum. Through reflective journals, other formal essay writing, and discussion activities, the students would seek parallels and linkages between their mentoring experience and themes or questions pertaining to the literature. Schmidt, a Chicago Public Schools service-learning specialist says, "It's a tangible learning experience that people remember. You get it in your gut and your heart as well as your head" (as cited in Smith, 2006, p. 57).

Dewey established the principles for service-learning in his ideas and writings about

experiential education: “Learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection” (Eyler & Giles, Jr., 1999, p. 7) more profoundly than through simple reading and lecture. Dewey concluded that education fortified democracy and led toward individual as well as collective fulfillment because education embodied the following basic truths: (a) education is a process in living which fosters growth; (b) schools should foster a desire for continued growth in the child; (c) education assumes continuity between persons and things, between the child and the adult, between the individual and the community, and between the home, the school, and the world; (d) education is a process of experiences for the individual in a multitude of contexts on a daily basis throughout life; (e) education helps in the formation of democratic citizenship by relating knowledge to conduct and teaches people how to associate and communicate with others in ways that break down barriers of class, race, gender, religion, and national territory; and (f) education places the teacher in the role of a guide to encourage the learner to take personal responsibility for learning.

In 2004, after more than two decades of research on K-12 service-learning, evidence is building that service-learning positively impacts "academic/cognitive, civic, social/ personal, and career outcomes...it affects the heads, hearts, and hands of our students" (Billig, 2004, p. 24). The research has been asking harder questions of service-learning lately, as this educational practice becomes more prominent. According to Smith (2006), in 1984, fewer than one million students volunteered for service-learning projects through their schools across the United States. In 2004, 10.6 million students volunteered (Smith, 2006, p. 55). Smith (2006) reiterates the importance of volunteering and questions the quality of such programming. Difficulties arise around the “quality” of service-learning programming. Such issues include the number of hours, depth and sophistication of a project, student rather than teacher initiation and creativity, and community sustainability (Smith, 2006, p. 55).

The Pursuit of Happiness

For Dewey, the role of education in the pursuit of happiness is both clear, convincing, and, yet, problematic. Winn captures two aphorisms of Dewey on the notion of happiness: First, “Because all men want to be happy, it hardly follows that every man wants all to be happy” (Dewey as cited in Winn, 1959, p. 53). Dewey is pointing out that individualistic happiness will override any personal desire for a community state of happiness. Second, “Suppose we drop the hedonistic emphasis upon states of pleasure and pain and substitute the wider, or vaguer, ideal of well-being, welfare, happiness, as the proper standard of approval” (Dewey, as cited in Winn, 1959, p.54). Here Dewey introduces the possibility that happiness as a state is something more profound than pleasure and pain sensations aroused in us “by objects or the contemplation of objects” (Beckner, 2004, p. 13). The pleasure (good)-pain (evil) dualism was a philosophical argument arrived at by John Locke (Beckner, 2004, p. 13). Locke was building on self-preservation motivation within the individual espoused by Thomas Hobbes (Beckner, 2004, p. 12). John Dewey allied himself with Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas (McDermott, 1981). But Dewey also found himself in agreement with much that was argued by Bentham, Mill, and Darwin, even if he didn’t subscribe to it (Cannon, 2004).

An American interpretation of happiness. De Tocqueville considered Jefferson’s words and wrote the following in his treatise, *Democracy in America*: “An American occupies himself with his private interests as if he were alone in the world”, and “a moment later, he gives himself over to the public as if he had forgotten them...the human heart cannot be divided in this manner” (De Tocqueville, as cited in Cannon, 2004, p. 7-8). Both de Tocqueville and Dewey, in different time periods of American history, distinctly saw how inquisitive Americans are—the

love of land, the admiration for wealth, the infatuation with bigness, the delight for technology, and the production of gadgetry. At the same time, there is a spirit of generosity and goodwill in the American character that might well be founded in the diversity of ethnicities and nationalities so unique to the unfolding of American history (Cannon, 2004).

Happiness as eudaimonea. Dewey faulted policymakers and business leaders for narrowly conceiving education as “the three R’s mechanically treated” for “getting a living”(Dewey, 1916, p. 192). Higher education was reserved for “the few, the traditions of a specialized cultivated class” (Dewey, 1916, p. 192) while the masses worked in jobs they did not choose, for employers who robbed them of dignity with unimportant and unrecognized labor (Dewey, 1916, p. 192). Dewey felt that if education was not supplying meaning to social life in America, then it was short-changing and demeaning democratic values. Such ignorance, rather than contributing to the flourishing of democracy, was causing the withering of the nation’s ideals. School engaging in “second-handed” knowledge did not allow young people “to build into [their] disposition(s)” (Dewey, 1916, p. 235) or experiences in helping others. Hands-on learning could teach young people such virtues as unselfishness and kindness. But if school was a place for mechanical rehearsal and recital of information, and material was nothing more than pure facts, then no imagination and creativity in learning was being fostered. If democratic habits were not being practiced, then the vibrancy of the overall culture was diminished. The development of imagination in students was a most appropriate goal of education for Dewey (Cunningham, 1994, p.11). The role of the teacher in helping to guide students, especially adolescents on the verge of adulthood, “to make choices among desirable alternatives” (Cunningham, 1994, p.12) is profoundly important in the building of character. The shaping of character is a democratic practice in which schools can make an effective contribution. Dewey believed it was a primary function of education to help a democracy build good citizens who could make critical choices.

In summary, making critical choices is an element in the construction of a disciplined mind. Individuals with disciplined minds contribute to flourishing communities. How does a disciplined mind grow? It grows through inquiry. Inquiry is fostered by service-learning. Eyer and Giles (1999) asserted that Dewey described service-learning as experiential learning and that such learning has a “continual spiral of events starting with direct experience, followed by periods of reflection where hypotheses are generated about immediate and future meaning, and then tested through experiences and actions” (p. 184).

Conclusions and Implications

For Dewey, the role of education in the pursuit of happiness is both clear, convincing, and, yet, problematic. That is because, on the one hand, Aristotle was correct in not separating knowledge from conduct, ideas from experience. Education must function to help children and adults develop their potential to be fully-capacitated, choice-making citizens. On the other hand, the complexity of a modern society pushes education into the political arena and turns public schools into debilitating bureaucratic institutions. Dewey would be just as frustrated with and critical of the current accountability, high-stakes, standardized testing climate today as he was of traditional education in his time. Yet, Dewey would not be opposed to increasing the personal responsibility of students, parents, teachers and school leaders for achieving a more enthusiastic learning attitude toward excellence in reading, writing, science, mathematics, history, languages, the arts and physical education. Dewey taught us that learning never ends. The challenge for people who believe that is to keep thinking and asking questions about the aim of American education in the 21st century. Current school leaders would indeed benefit by revisiting Dewey’s

writings about education's function in the creation of a vibrant and sustainable democracy. Dewey believed that happiness was an end or an aim that both individuals as well as groups should reach for even if the goal was likely to be unattainable because of real-world complexities and ambiguities. This exploratory analysis of Dewey's writings and findings about the role of education in the pursuit of happiness yields some real-world imperatives to be worked out at the school-site, or "street-level bureaucracy" point-of-contact by school leaders and other educators. Specifically, schools should be promoting more social and emotional learning (SEL) through such instructional activities as service-learning to help improve academic achievement. Although substantial research supports the idea that social and emotional variables are integral rather than incidental to learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999), it is difficult for educational researchers to produce the data that justifies learning by giving. Consequently, further studies in this area are crucial to provide the policy support for service-learning.

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