

The Relevance of Dewey's Educational Theory to 'Teaching and Learning in the 21st Century'

Yukai Chen¹

¹ School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University

Correspondence: Yukai Chen, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University.

doi:10.56397/SSSH.2023.04.06

Abstract

All of the approaches to education concerned with democracy, John Dewey's educational theory, circumscribed by his pragmatic, "philosophy of experience", is arguably the most renowned and revered. This paper offers a detailed description of Dewey's educational theory, especially his emphasis on educational ideas of inquiry and innovation and children's creativity and cultivation, which are among the core of his education theory and discusses these two aspects in guiding teaching and learning in the 21st century.

Keywords: Dewey's educational theory, 21st century, Children's creativity and cultivation.

1. Introduction

Dewey is a well-known educator in modern America. He combined the philosophy of pragmatism with the practice of American education, and created a unique educational theory, which had an important impact on education in the United States and many countries in the world (Miovskas-Spaseva, 2016). Dewey's educational thought is based on a profound understanding of modern society, science and education, and its essence is to encourage inquiry and innovation to promote children's development. To this end, Dewey conducted in-depth research on children's creativity, the application of scientific methods in education, and the cultivation of good habits in primary education. Therefore, the aim of this essay is to critically discuss the relevance of Dewey's educational theory to teaching and learning in the 21st Century. The following part offers a detailed description of Dewey's educational theory, especially his emphasis on educational ideas of inquiry and innovation and children's creativity and cultivation, which are among the core of his education theory. The next part discusses these two aspects in guiding teaching and learning in the new century. Then, the last part concludes the whole essay.

2. A Detailed Description of Dewey's Educational Theory

2.1 Dewey's Ideas on Inquiry and Innovation

Dewey encouraged the formation of educational ideas of inquiry and innovation on the basis of a deep comprehension of social change, educational conflict and scientific development. Firstly, the formation of Dewey's thought is inseparable from his comprehension of the changes in American and European societies during that period. According to Dewey (2008), in less than one hundred years since the Industrial Revolution, the society has undergone extensive, profound and rapid changes (Dewey, 1916). The rapid advancement of urbanization and industrialization has not only shifted the world political boundaries, accelerated the population flow and expanded the scale of production, but it has also brought great changes in human beings' hobbies, living habits and morals. The essential consequence of these changes is to enhance the development of philosophy and science. Dewey's educational thought formed on this basis permeated the idea of emphasizing inquiry and innovation, and formed a new feature different from traditional education (Dewey 2008).

Secondly, the formation of Dewey's thought is closely connected to his criticism of the traditional epistemology.

Generally speaking, epistemology is the theory of knowledge and cognition (Zaytsev 2019). In Dewey's view, epistemology is concerned not only with knowledge issues, but more importantly with cognitive issues (Dewey, 2008). Dewey (1916) claimed that traditional epistemology emerges from the theory of "knowledge bystanders" on cognitive issues. This epistemology asserts that knowledge is a "static" grasp or attention to reality (Dewey, 1916). Dewey pointed out that this kind of epistemology has two flaws in cognition: one is that the subject of cognition is separated from the object to be cognition, and the cognition is like a "bystander" or "outsider", with a kind of "contemplation" (Dewey, 2008). The second is that cognition is understood as an event in which the "object" of cognition is presented to the knower, and the knower is passive in cognition (Oliverio et al., 2016). Dewey pointed out that the theory of the "spectator of knowledge" is a metaphysical "dualism" that is untenable in the face of modern science (Dewey, 1916). The development of modern science shows that knowledge is not something isolated and self-improving, but something that is constantly developing in the maintenance and evolution of life.

Dewey pointed out that the acquisition of knowledge is not a process of individual "bystander", but a process of "inquiry" (Dewey, 2008). According to Dewey (2008), "inquiry" is the problem-solving action produced by the subject in relation to an uncertain situation. In action, knowledge does not exist in the passive understanding of bystanders, but in the active response of the subject to the uncertain situation. Knowledge is the result of individual active inquiry. From this idea, Dewey stated that all successful inquiry follows a general pattern. This "inquiry" model can be a scientific research model for scientists, or a teaching model and learning model in school education (Dewey, 1916). In a word, the epistemology based on "inquiry" advocated by Dewey criticizes the traditional epistemology of "dualism", highlights the importance of the subject of inquiry in cognitive activities, and offer a new comprehension of the role of knowledge and the activities of individual students in modern education.

Thirdly, this thought of Dewey is also inseparable from the criticism of the phenomenon of separation of action and knowledge within the traditional education. According to Dewey, as the "spectator theory" of knowledge usually separates cognitive subject from cognitive object, emphasizing that cognition is a kind of cognitive "object" presented to the knower, and thus gradually formed a system of knowledge in education (Dewey, 2008). Knowledge is the center, learning is passive acceptance, and knowledge and behavior are separated. As a result, in schooling, the subject becomes something that is remote from the child's experience and incapable of influencing behavior. Dewey stated that human knowledge and behavior should be as a whole. Starting from the idea of "the unity of knowledge and action", Dewey highlighted that schools need to transfer pure knowledge-centered education to activities of children (Dewey, 2008). Dewey's critique of the phenomenon of "separation of knowledge and action" and the elaboration of the thought of "unity of knowledge and action", raised the question of the combination of knowledge and behavior and the initiative of individuals in gaining knowledge, and encouraged children to comprehend correctly the relationship between children's activities and knowledge imparting, acquiring knowledge and experience through inquiry activities (Dewey, 1916).

2.2 Dewey's Emphasis on Children's Creativity and Cultivation

In Dewey's educational thought, since the spirit of inquiry and innovation was highlighted, issues such as the understanding of children's creativity and its cultivation, the reform of school teaching methods and the main tasks of primary education became the center of Dewey's attention (Oliverio et al., 2016). Education should value and cultivate children's creativity. In Dewey's view, to emphasize inquiry and innovation, people must recognize 'innovation' and 'creativity', and recognize the 'creativity' of children in education (Dewey, 2008). Dewey deeply discussed about these issues in *Democracy and Education*. According to Dewey, innovation and inventive planning is seeing something in a new light and using it in a different way (Dewey, 1916). In Dewey's view, new perspectives and different approaches are important in understanding 'creativity', not the material used.

After analyzing the characteristics of children, Dewey (1916) pointed out that a conclusion that can be drawn in education is that all thinking that can take into account things that have not been known before is creative. For instance, a three-year-old discovering what he/she can do with blocks or a six-year-old discovering what he/she can add up to five cents, even if everyone in the world knows about it, the child is in a discovery process by him/herself. His/her experience has really grown, not by adding another item mechanically, but by a new nature that enriches the experience. If the word creativity is not misunderstood, the joy that children experience for themselves is the joy of intellectual creativity.

Here, Dewey raised the question of how to evaluate and recognize children's creativity. Dewey (1916) claimed that the evaluation of children's creativity should not be on the basis of the traditional viewpoints. The evaluation of children's creativity should be on the basis of the level of children's self-development, that is, in children's development, they have not considered in the past but can now self-discover or use methods are creative. Linked to the perception of children's creativity, Dewey (2008) also criticized the traditional view of education that only

a few are creative. Dewey (2008) pointed out that the difference between the average student and the gifted student in traditional education is that the average student lacks creativity is purely fictional. How one person's ability compares quantitatively with another person's ability. This comparison has nothing to do with the work of teachers. What the teacher does is to give each student the opportunity to use their own strength, mind, personal approach, creativity, in meaningful activity, to express the nature of purposeful or directed activity (Casey & Quennerstedt, 2020).

At the same time, in teaching, children's learning and actions should be combined, and scientific arrangements should be made to give children enough time to think and let them make their own decisions. The democratic nature of school construction is that children can freely express and test various ideas, beliefs and values in schools (Zaytsev, 2019). Any cultural heritage of human society can become the object of individual criticism, exploration, research and transformation of children. Facilities and utensils are open and used by all members. Dewey (2008) attached great importance to the selection of materials and the use of tools in the teaching process. Dewey (1916) claims that if teaching is too eager to select materials and tools that have no chance of error, it will limit students' initiative, minimize students' judgment, and force students to use methods away from complex life situations, so that the abilities acquired by students are useless. Dewey (2008) emphasized that in school education, it is more important to make the student develop a creative and constructive attitude than to engage children in activities that are too small and too strict in order to achieve apparent completeness.

3. The Relevance of Dewey's Educational Theory in the New Century

Although Dewey's educational thought on inquiry and innovation and on children's creativity and cultivation is a product of the early 20th century, its basic spirit still guide teaching and learning in the 21st century.

Firstly, the understanding of modern educational reform should be enhanced with an ever-changing and exploratory perspective (Casey & Quennerstedt, 2020). This mainly includes two aspects. One is to guide the reform of modern education with the spirit of development and change. Modern society is a society that is constantly developing and changing. Traditional and immutable ideas are not suitable for the development of modern society. If modern education still continues the traditional, single emphasis on knowledge education, while ignoring children's action and hands-on ability, breaking the connection between knowledge and action, and staying away from children's life, it will only hinder children's development (Leshkovska & Spaseva, 2016). Therefore, the knowledge imparted by the school should be closely integrated with the development of the society and the life of children, and become a tool for solving practical problems (Yu 2008). The second is to promote the reform of modern school education with the spirit of continuous inquiry of children. In the context of the continuous development of modern society, the development of school education is not passive, and every step of the school's development requires continuous exploration (Wei-d, 2013). In this process, each school is the main body of inquiry, and it should exert its own initiative in light of the actual situation. Only the inquiry carried out in combination with its own actual situation is the most valuable. Therefore, modern schools should regard continuous exploration and innovation as their own life, in order to promote their own development.

Secondly, according to Dewey, attention should be paid to the recognition and cultivation of creativity of children in education. Modern society is a society that encourages inquiry and innovation, and creativity is the foundation of human inquiry and innovation. Modern education should place the cultivation of creative people in an important position (Huachu, 2013). From the above research on Dewey's thought, it can be seen that Dewey's understanding of children's creativity is not on the basis of the general comprehension of the concept of creativity but is based on the understanding of the characteristics of children's individual development. Not on a few gifted children, it is based on the knowledge of most children, which is of great significance for modern society to recognize and cultivate children's creativity (Leshkovska & Spaseva, 2016). According to Park (2018), this view enriches the educational connotation of children's creativity, that is, a child's creativity is related to his own level of development. This realization provides the possibility of changing traditional concepts in education and carrying out creative development activities for children. Moreover, as Casey and Quennerstedt (2020) have agreed, this view also offers a new perspective on children educationally, that is, every child is creative. This understanding helps to positively evaluate the creativity of the majority of children, provides a relaxed environment for the development of creativity of children, and makes school education more closely related to children's lives (Wei-d, 2013). Lastly, this view also helps to increase children's interest in actively exploring the world and enhance children's confidence in self-development (Park, 2018). It should be pointed out that the cultivation of children's creativity cannot be separated from children's practical activities, and it is carried out in children's practical activities.

Thirdly, according to Dewey, attention should be paid to the important role of primary education in cultivating children's ability to explore and create under modern social conditions. Primary education is an important period of child development and an important stage linking secondary and tertiary education (Huachu, 2013). In the primary education stage, if the task of school education is only to impart knowledge and learn knowledge, but

suppress children's curiosity, inquisitiveness and inquiry, the attitude of research and the quality of inquiry, the ability of inquiry and the germ of creativity that appear in early childhood will gradually wither (Casey & Quennerstedt, 2020). Therefore, in the stage of primary education, how to deal with the relationship between mastering knowledge and developing children's habits of curiosity, questioning and thinking is a problem that should be carefully studied.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Dewey's emphasis on educational ideas of inquiry and innovation and children's creativity and cultivation are still highly relevant in teaching and learning in the 21st century. In the new century, the understanding of modern educational reform should be enhanced with an ever-changing and exploratory perspective, which is in line with Dewey's claim. Moreover, attention should be paid to the recognition and cultivation of creativity of children in education. Modern society is a society that encourages inquiry and innovation, and creativity is the foundation of human inquiry and innovation. Modern education should place the cultivation of creative people in an important position. Lastly, attention should also be paid to the important role of primary education in cultivating children's ability to explore and create under modern social conditions.

References

- Casey, A. and Quennerstedt, M., (2020). Cooperative learning in physical education encountering Dewey's educational theory. *European Physical Education Review*, 26, pp. 1023-1037.
- Dewey, J., (2008). *Experience & Education*, New York: Free Press Publishing.
- Dewey, J., (1916). *Democracy and Education*, New York: Macmillan.
- Huachu, L., (2013). The Influence of Evolution on Dewey's Educational and Philosophical Thoughts. *International journal of social science and humanity*, pp. 83-86.
- Leshkovska, E.A. and Spaseva, S.M., (2016). John Dewey's educational theory and educational implications of Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences theory. *International Journal of Cognitive Research in Science, Engineering and Education*, 4, pp. 57-66.
- Miovska-Spaseva, S., (2016). The Educational Theory of John Dewey and its Influence on Educational Policy and Practice in Macedonia. *Espacio, Tiempo y Educación*, 3, pp. 207-224.
- Oliverio, S., Striano, M. and Waks, T., (2016). Dewey's Democracy and Education a Century Later: A Source of and a Resource for European Educational Theory and Practice. *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, 8, pp. 5-155.
- Park, S., (2018). Meaning of Two Thinking Modes in Dewey's Experience Theory And Their Educational Implications. *Korean Association for Learner-Centered Curriculum And Instruction*, 18, pp. 75-103.
- Wei-d, S., (2013). Influence Research on the Development of School Physical Education in China from Dewey's Educational Theory. *Journal of Beijing Sport University*, 6, pp. 2-10.
- Yu, C., (2008). Exploration of originality of Dewey's educational theory. *Journal of Chongqing College of Education*, 2, pp. 12-24.
- Zaytsev, A.V., (2019). "Critical thinking" in the context of John Dewey's philosophy of education. *Vestnik Kostroma State University, Series: Pedagogy. Psychology. Sociokinetics*, 3, pp. 112-123.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).