

Education and Social Change

John Dewey

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John Dewey



- John Dewey was a prominent American philosopher and professor of the late 1800s and early 1900s.
- He founded the educational philosophy of progressivism which is derived from pragmatism.
- Pragmatism is the school of philosophy which held that “the meaning and value of ideas could be found only in the practical results of these ideas” (Johnson, Musial, Hall, Gollnick, & Dupuis, 2008, p. 327).

Progressivism

- Progressivism is an educational theory that supports active learning.
- It emphasizes that “ideas should be tested by experimentation and that learning is rooted in questions developed by the learner” (Johnson, Musial, Hall, Gollnick, & Dupuis, 2008, p. 327).
- In agreement with Henry Giroux, progressivists view schools as instruments of social change (Johnson, Musial, Hall, Gollnick, & Dupuis, 2008, p. 329).

Dewey's Essay: Education and Social Change

- The big question Dewey addresses is *how* schools participate in social change.
- In Dewey's essay, "Education and Social Change," one can observe traces of progressivism as he supports the notion that society is constantly changing, and that education reflects, generates, and guides social change.
- He also states that there is some confusion about the direction in which schools lead our society.

Contradictory Conservatives (and Proof that Society is Changing)

- Dewey argues that conservatives wanting to maintain “old and time-tried values and truths” is evidence that times have changed, and that they continue to change (Dewey, 2001, p. 335).
- Conservatives are opposed to modernism and progressivism. Dewey claims that since schools already reflect these changing times, conservatives basically oppose the present educational system.

Contradictory Conservatives continued

- Conservatives believe that schools should not influence or guide social change.
- They favor older types of study and “disciplinary methods” in schools (Dewey, 2001, p. 335). This suggests that schools can and should have a positive influence on society, but by instilling conservative principles.
- This contributes to the confusion about education’s relation to social change.
- Dewey suggests that those who take this view are conservatives in education because they are socially conservative, as they reject the direction in which society is taking.

Impotence of Education

- Along with conservatives, those who represent the dominant economic and political regime believe that education does not influence social order or social change.
- This group believes that the economy is the influence, and that education merely reflects this social order and the dominant economic class.
- They believe that schools “are engaged in shaping as far as in them lies a mentality, a type of belief, desire, and purpose that is consonant with the present class-capitalist system” (Dewey, 2001, p. 338).
- They believe that nothing can change, not even for education, without overthrowing this dominant economic class and replacing it with another.

Impotence of Education continued

- Dewey argues that if all of this were true, then any coup of the current dominant economic class would also have to bring with it other changes such as changes in the morals, mentality, and culture of society so that this new system/social order can survive and thrive.
- But Dewey finds no evidence that an economic change can solely make these other kinds of changes in society.
- Under the theory about the impotence of education, schools shape morals, mentality, and culture in agreement with the economic class.
- Therefore, for this argument, education still plays a vital role in social change.

Decisions, Decisions...

- Dewey argues that schools have the power to lead society down certain paths.
- We must be aware of the different directions in which education can lead society and how it does this. This is so that schools and educators can attempt to move society in the right direction, and so that we do not continue to influence society without knowing how.
- The decisions schools make will also give us a better understanding of the relation between schools and social change.

Decisions, Decisions...

- Dewey states that schools and educators can:
 - a) continue to influence society without exploring how or why.
 - b) employ a scientific method of teaching and learning that corresponds with the cultural forces that cause social change.
 - c) take a conservative approach and make schools a force of maintaining old order and rejecting any new forces that steer society away from this old social order.

Decisions, Decisions...

- Dewey believes that schools should employ scientific methods of teaching and learning.
- This stresses active learning and teaching students how to think as opposed to what to think (Johnson, Musial, Hall, Gollnick, & Dupuis, 2008, p. 328).
- If schools and educators are to take this route, then they must be knowledgeable in how to prepare students to accept social change and make appropriate and positive social changes for the good of society.

Neutrality

- What if schools were to remain neutral?
- Dewey states that “the most effective way of reinforcing reaction under the name of neutrality, consists in keeping the oncoming generation ignorant of the conditions in which they live and the issues they have to face” (Dewey, 2001, p. 337).
- Then this would only perpetuate the confusion about schools’ relation to social change.

Indoctrination

- Indoctrination is the teaching of “systematic use of every possible means to impress upon the minds of pupils a particular set of political and economic views to the exclusion of every other” (Dewey, 2001, p. 229)
- Indoctrination occurs in many schools, and many believe that this is the way schools reflect and effect social change.
- However, Dewey suggests that even though indoctrination occurs often, there is no evidence that it properly reflects and effects social change.
- Dewey notes that indoctrination leaves no room for active participation or experimentation of ideas, which he finds imperative for education and therefore social change.

Democracy

- Since Dewey argues that education influences social change, then it must have some “frame of reference,” or else education would be meaningless (Dewey, 2001, p. 340).
- Dewey claims that democracy is the frame of reference for education.
- He admits that there is no set, clear definition of democracy, but the idea involves active participation in making decisions for society.

Democracy continued

- Dewey compares “the problem” of education and how it relates to social change with “the problem” of our search for the clear-cut definition and importance of democracy in its applications in society (Dewey, 2001, p. 340).
- This problem (the search for the significance of democracy in society) is a result of the fact that we forget how democracy needs to be practiced and lived, and in new and different ways due to our changing society.

Democracy continued

- Dewey observes one clear aspect of democracy in relation to education: that the education system was founded on the principle of equal opportunity.
- Schools and educators cannot “create or embody this idea [of democracy]” alone, but they can teach and enforce it in schools. They can develop and prepare individuals (students) who understand this idea, appreciate it, and support it.
- In this way, students are prepared and confident enough to use what they know and apply it to their decision-making to improve society (Dewey, 2001, p. 240).

Democracy continued

- Dewey also points out that democracy also involves freedom and “voluntary choice” which brings together the individual and society (Dewey, 2001, p. 341).
- This means that we willingly and freely live and act with one another. This allows individuals to participate in the improvement of society through the decisions they make together.
- As a progressivist, Dewey argues that if educators make efforts to find answers about the idea(s) of democracy, then we will be able to better understand and answer the question about how schools contribute to social change.

Questions?

Concerns?

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Discussion Questions

- Do you agree with Dewey that schools are agents for social change? Why?
- Do you think Dewey makes accurate statements about schools being in a state of confusion? Are we really unaware about how schools influence social change? What is your take on this? Are you a conservative, a progressive-liberal like Dewey, or other?
- What do you think schools can do specifically to influence society? Does this relate to democracy at all?

References

- Dewey, J. (2001). Education and social change. In F. Schultz (Ed.), *SOURCES: Notable selections in education* (3rd ed.) (pp. 333-341). New York: McGraw-Hill Dushkin.
- Johnson, J. A., Musial, D., Hall, G. E., Gollnick, D. M., & Dupuis, V. L. (2008). *Foundations of American education: Perspectives on education in a changing world* (14th ed.). Boston: Pearson Educational.

Extra Information

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opXKmwg8VQM>