

John Dewey in the 21st Century

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John Dewey was a pragmatist, progressivist, educator, philosopher, and social reformer (Guttek, 2014). Dewey's various roles greatly impacted education, and he was perhaps one of the most influential educational philosophers known to date (Theobald, 2009). Dewey's influence on education was evident in his theory about social learning; he believed that school should be representative of a social environment and that students learn best when in natural social settings (Flinders & Thornton, 2013). His ideas impacted education in another facet because he believed that students were all unique learners. He was a proponent of student interests driving teacher instruction (Dewey, 1938). With the current educational focus in the United States being on the implementation of the Common Core standards and passing standardized tests and state exams, finding evidence of John Dewey's theories in classrooms today can be problematic (Theobald, 2009). Education in most classrooms today is what Dewey would have described as a traditional classroom setting. He believed that traditional classroom settings were not developmentally appropriate for young learners (Dewey, 1938). Although schools, classrooms, and programs that support Dewey's theories are harder to find in this era of testing, there are some that still do exist. This paper will explore Responsive Classroom, Montessori Schools, Place-Based Education, and Philosophy for Children (P4C), all of which incorporate the theories of John Dewey into their curricular concepts.

Introduction

John Dewey was born in 1859 in Burlington, Vermont (Guttek, 2014). He grew up in a family that was very active in the social community in Vermont, and in the democratic vision of the political community; these experiences influenced who he was as an educator and philosopher. Dewey was a firm believer in groups of people coming together to problem-solve in a peaceful way, through a process of “discussion, debate, and decision making” (Guttek, 2014, p. 78). Dewey's beliefs about democracy, community, and problem solving, guided the development of his social and educational philosophies. John Dewey may have been the most well-known and influential philosopher to impact education to date (Theobald, 2009).

Philosophical Perspective

John Dewey was a pragmatist, progressivist, educator, philosopher, and social reformer. He felt strongly that people have a responsibility to make the world a better place to live in

through education and social reform (Gutek, 2014). According to Schiro (2012), Dewey believed that education was “a crucial ingredient in social and moral development” (p. 174). Dewey’s beliefs and philosophy about education and learning have impacted countless educators over the years and are woven throughout many learning theories such as progressive education, constructivism, learner-centered theory, and experiential knowledge, all of which differ from what Dewey describes as a traditional classroom setting (Dewey, 1938; Schiro, 2012).

Theoretical Perspective

Dewey (1938) described progressive education as “a product of discontent with traditional education” which imposes adult standards, subject matter, and methodologies (no page number). He believed that traditional education as just described, was beyond the scope of young learners. Progressive education as described by Dewey should include socially engaging learning experiences that are developmentally appropriate for young children (Dewey, 1938). Dewey thought that effective education came primarily through social interactions and that the school setting should be considered a social institution (Flinders & Thornton, 2013). He considered education to be a “process of living and not a preparation for future living” (Flinders & Thornton, 2013, p.35; Gutek, 2014). This set of beliefs set Dewey apart from philosophers that supported traditional classroom settings.

In contrast to traditional classrooms, Dewey thought that schools and classrooms should be representative of real life situations, allowing children to participate in learning activities interchangeably and flexibly in a variety of social settings (Dewey, 1938; Gutek, 2014). He was of the idea that abruptly introducing too much academic content, out of context with children’s social lives, bordered on unethical teaching behavior (Flinders & Thornton, 2013). This notion would be a point of conflict in education today, as it is vastly different from what is happening in classrooms with the strong emphasis on implementing the Common Core standards. The strong focus on increasing academic achievement through the use of Common Core standards in today’s classrooms makes finding evidence of John Dewey’s philosophies in classrooms less common than it used to be (Theobald, 2009).

Learner-centered educators believe that Dewey’s work is supportive of many of their beliefs about how students learn (Schiro, 2013). In learner-centered classrooms, one can see much of John Dewey’s social learning theory and educational beliefs in action. He viewed the

classroom as a social entity for children to learn and problem-solve together as a community. In these classrooms children are viewed as unique individuals; students can be found busy at work constructing their own knowledge through personal meaning, rather than teacher-imposed knowledge and teacher-directed activities (Schiro, 2013). Children will be seen learning-by-doing in these classrooms and they will be solving problems through hands-on approaches. When teachers plan for instruction, student interests will be taken into consideration and curricular subjects will be integrated with an emphasis on project learning. The educational experience encompasses the intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual growth of the whole child, not just academic growth (Schiro, 2013).

Although Dewey's work seems to have fallen out of favor, at least as far as current educational policy is concerned, his work remains fundamental in many departments of education (Theobald, 2009). John Dewey's philosophies and work in the field of education have been very influential to educators over the years (Theobald, 2009). His philosophy that children, not content, should be the focus of the educational process, has left a lasting impression on educators who share in his beliefs and philosophies about education and how children learn most effectively (Schiro, 2013).

Conceptual Framework

The United States has a growing and increasingly diverse population and these changes most certainly affect classrooms (Ford, Stuart, & Vakil, 2014). Public schools and teachers in the United States are challenged on a daily basis with meeting the diverse needs of *all* students encompassing differences in gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and various learning styles and needs. Because there is a strong connection between culture and learning, educators should use culturally responsive pedagogy, including high expectations for all students, varied approaches to learning, and fostering community and family engagement (Ford, Stuart, Vakil, 2014). Slaughter (2009) points out that effective urban education is by far one of the most challenging issues in education today. With the end-result in many urban high schools resulting in high dropout rates and low student motivation, urban educators must think outside-the-box for instructionally relevant ideas to use in their classrooms.

Main Arguments

Evidence in the 21st Century

Dewey was known as the father of progressive education and was an advocate of social learning (Slaughter, 2009). More than fifty years after his death, some of his ideas and philosophies, although looking very different, are being used to promote student engagement in classrooms through the use of technology. As Slaughter (2009) points out “our world today has become the electronic world” (p. 16). With technology driving the social lives of students, its use is an effective way to promote student engagement, resulting in a passion for lifelong learning. Teachers have a responsibility to provide a new level of instruction that is relevant, effective, and socially engaging for students (Slaughter, 2009). Through the use of tools such as cell phones, texting, instant messaging, chat rooms, and wikis, teachers can instruct students using the tools that they are already comfortable with, to most effectively disperse information and academic content (Slaughter, 2009). By designing instruction to meet the social needs of students through the use of appropriately aligned technology, Dewey’s social learning theory is evident in these classrooms.

Responsive Classroom

Taylor (2005) shared Dewey’s vision that it is the responsibility of educators to create cultural changes within the classroom that are accepted, internalized, and acted on by students. Taylor (2005) pointed out that by fostering positive learning communities in classrooms academic achievement should increase. In an educational system as diverse the one in the United States, it is essential to explicitly teach that different opinions and perspectives are highly valued in classrooms today (Taylor, 2005). One teaching approach that stresses the importance of building a community of learners and shows evidence of Dewey’s theories in the 21st century is the Responsive Classroom curriculum. It is a research-based approach to teaching grades K-8, that focuses on the strong link between academic achievement and social-emotional learning. The premise behind the Responsive Classroom approach is that a high-quality education is built on the foundation of a safe and happy learning community (Responsive Classroom, n.d.). Many of John Dewey’s theories and ideas are evident in the Responsive Classroom approach. Responsive Classroom has very specific recommendations and strategies for how teachers can start the school year off in a way that establishes a classroom community that will allow students

to thrive socially and academically. Denton and Kriete (2000) discuss the importance of teachers “setting intentions” during the first six weeks of school, when organizing the classroom setting and establishing routines (p. 3). The four intentions suggested can be used in any classroom and at any age or grade level. These aims include, creating a warm climate and tone in the classroom in which students feel safe; teaching the schedule and routines of the school day including behavior expectations within each of them; showing students their physical learning space and the materials that they will be using, *and* teaching them how to care for them; and establishing learning expectations for the school year (Denton and Kriete, 2000). The four intentions as suggested in the Responsive Classroom approach help to build positive social relationships among students and teachers, and students and students. Dewey’s belief that students learn best through positive social interactions are evident here (Responsive Classroom, n.d.; Flinders & Thornton, 2013).

Morning Meeting is a method used in the Responsive Classroom that supports Dewey’s ideas of social-emotional learning and building a community of learners. Morning Meeting is a purposeful time during the school day that sets the tone for “respectful learning and establishes a climate of trust” (Kriete, 2002, p. 9). By creating a community with a climate of trust, students will feel comfortable taking risks and trusting their classmates, all of which work toward the goal of promoting a positive social-emotional setting which will result in increased academic achievement. The Morning Meeting allows students to have a sense of belonging, feel significant, and have fun, all of which are essential components to a successful classroom (Kriete, 2002).

Responsive Classroom also encourages the use of Energizers throughout the school day. Energizers are two to three minute activities that allow students to be playful, get some physical activity, and take a mental break from the intense academic learning they are doing throughout the school day. Energizers give students brief physical activity while allowing them to have fun, which allows them to refocus and be more fully engaged in the learning process (Roser, 2015). Energizers support Dewey’s theory on social learning, because they allow for play and help build positive relationships between teachers and students, which contributes to building a sense of community.

Closing Circles are used in Responsive Classrooms. The big idea behind Closing Circles is to end the school day with the same positive learning atmosphere that the school day started

with, not the chaos that often happens in classrooms at the end of the school day. Closing Circles only take about five or ten minutes to do and the investment in those few minutes a day can have a huge impact on the classroom climate (Januszka & Vincent, 2015). Closing Circles include activities such as singing together, thinking about the school day, setting a goal for the next school day, playing a game, and saying a friendly good-bye together. The benefits of Closing Circles include allowing children to celebrate accomplishments, giving students a chance to reflect on their learning, and helping students gain a sense of belonging (Januszka & Vincent, 2015).

Discipline in the Responsive Classroom is handled differently than discipline in most traditional classroom settings. Sometimes referred to as a positive approach to discipline, “it aims to help children develop self-control, begin to understand what socially responsible behavior is, and come to value such behaviors” (Brady, Forton, & Porter, 2011, p. 7). Students in Responsive Classrooms are explicitly taught about how their choices have positive and negative consequences. When misbehavior occurs, teachers use respectful strategies for stopping the misbehavior and redirecting for the return of positive behavior. Fortunately, “school provides an ideal setting for social learning” and there are always opportunities throughout the school day for those teaching opportunities (Brady, Forton, & Porter, 2011, p. 8).

Many of the goals and practices that take place in Responsive Classrooms are aligned with building a positive social classroom climate in an effort to increase student achievement. John Dewey was an advocate for school being a social institution for children and for classrooms to provide learning opportunities that allowed students to engage in appropriate social interactions with their peers. Many of the concepts that have been shared here are reflective of such practices, therefore teachers who currently subscribe to the use of Responsive Classroom teaching techniques are showing evidence of John Dewey’s theory in 21st century classrooms.

Montessori

Montessori schools are an additional model which show evidence of John Dewey’s theories in classrooms in the 21st century. The Montessori method of teaching aligns with the learner-centered ideology of curriculum design, by insisting that teachers design appropriate curriculum through careful observation of their students. Curriculum should be based on students’ talents, personal interests, and their physical and social needs (Montessori, 2013).

Dewey was a proponent of curriculum decisions and learning activities being driven by social needs and student interests (Flinders & Thornton, 2013).

Maria Montessori, much like John Dewey, believed that traditional schools were uninspiring institutions, which did not support an environment for learning (Brendtro, 1999). She viewed traditional schools as boring and monotonous institutions that stifled student creativity. Furthermore, she noted that in an effort to get students on-task, teachers in traditional schools relied heavily on reward and punishment schemes in order to force children to pay attention (Montessori, 2013). She believed that perhaps an approach that focused on the interests of the students would be more successful.

According to Schiro (2013), learner-centered educators support the needs and interests of the children attending the school as their primary focus, not the interests of educators, administration, or politicians. According to Peng & Md-Yunus (2014), Montessori teachers stay with the same group of students for three years at a time, to ensure that they fully understand their students' need, interests, progress, and development. Additionally, the Montessori classroom is an environment that encourages physical activity and the freedom to choose learning activities, to allow for a more student-centered approach than traditional classrooms may offer (Peng & Md-Yunus, 2014).

Today there are over 3,000 Montessori schools around the world (Thayer-Bacon, 2012). Many additional characteristics set Montessori education apart from traditional classroom environments. According to Lillard (2013), age ranges, not grade levels, group students enrolled in Montessori schools, so that teachers get to know their students' interests better over a period of time. Students have access to all materials in the classroom and are expected to use the materials freely, ensuring that they have a choice in their learning tasks. Materials are sequential and designed to be self-correcting, so students can learn to recognize their mistakes without the need for constant adult intervention. This allows students to work more independently, giving them freedom to choose learning activities most appropriate to their needs (Lillard, 2013).

According to Lillard (2013), Montessori education allows young children to engage in playful learning, which is a developmentally appropriate alternative to the traditional pedagogical methods that are often used with young children in classrooms today. Playful learning is encouraged in Montessori education because it is engaging and intrinsically motivating. By using play as part of the curriculum, Montessori teachers do not resort to the use

of extrinsic rewards in their classrooms (Lillard, 2013). With Montessori education, children are learning important academic, social, and life skills through active and playful experiences (Peng & Md-Yunus, 2014; Lillard, 2013). These components make it clear that Maria Montessori was one of the pioneers of the emerging learner-centered movement and her ideas, as they align with John Dewey's ideas, continue to be influential in 21st century classrooms.

Place-Based Education

Because of over 30 years of a very basic foundation for environmental education in the United States, place-based education has emerged in 21st century classrooms. Place-based education began in earnest, with the formation of The Place-Based Education Evaluation Collaborative (PEEC). PEEC was formed with the goal of using place-based education models for the purposes of professional development, resulting in school improvement (Powers, 2004). Place-based education is grounded in the notion that we must use the resources, issues, and values of the local communities in our classrooms first and foremost, and that using the local community should be used as a basis for context for learning at all levels. The term place-based education is used interchangeably with similar terms such as community-based learning, service-learning, sustainable education, and project-based learning (Powers, 2004). John Dewey was a proponent of project learning, constructivism, and community building in classrooms.

Due to the era of high-stakes testing in the 21st century, students are spending less time on learning activities that incorporate project learning and other meaningful educational activities such as taking field trips (Sobel, 2004). Rather, there is a lot of textbook-based learning going on in traditional classroom settings in an effort to practice and prepare students for success on high-stakes tests. Important environmental issues, such as pollution and environmental degradation, are not being taught about in classrooms, as “there is very little serious environmental education in American schools” (Graham, 2007). Place-based education attempts to remedy this concern in classrooms across the United States.

The ideologies of John Dewey are present in place-based education. According to Graham (2007), place-based education draws on the progressive idea that education should be multi-disciplinary in nature and that learning activities should be authentic and “seek to extend learning beyond the walls of the school” (p. 377). One of the goals of place-based education is to have students effectively build relationships with each other, which shows evidence of John

Dewey's social learning theory. The other goals of place-based education are to strengthen students' relationships to their region and the land; to create relationships between humans and their natural communities (Graham 2007). Graham (2007) points out that "by connecting learning to real-world experiences, students can construct meaningful connections among cultural, political, and social issues" (p. 377). Dewey was a proponent of making learning experiences centered around student interests and developing socially responsible citizens; all of these real-world, meaningful connections that occur in place-based education, contribute to creating educational experiences that result in socially responsible citizens.

Philosophy for Children

Philosophy for Children (P4C) is an innovative teaching method that was initiated by American philosopher Matthew Lipman in the 1990's (Murriss & Thompson, 2016). P4C was designed to elevate critical thinking skills in classrooms and create a community of inquiry among students (Hopkins, 2007; Lim, 2006; Murriss & Thompson, 2016)). P4C "creates a culture of critical thinking, inquiry and open-minded discussion" in classrooms in the 21st century (Lim, 2006, p. 67). P4C is a program that contains specially written passages and short stories, designed to introduce students to philosophical issues that improve and promote their critical thinking skills, resulting in improved higher level thinking skills and increased literacy achievement (Lim, 2006; Murriss & Thompson, 2016).

P4C is designed to address deeper and sometimes sensitive global issues with students, such as but not limited to, poverty, war, freedom, and pollution (Hopkinson, 2007). Often the dialogue about the discussion topics presented in P4C, is initiated by student questions, as opposed to teacher-directed questions (Murriss & Thompson, 2016). Students are able to begin the discussions with their own background knowledge and sets of beliefs, which is aligned with learner-centered ideology. Students learn and take on appropriate social behavior by becoming engaged and reflective listeners, who respect and challenge the different opinions of their peers (Hopkinson, 2007). This is a skill that is certainly crucial to the goal of appropriate social learning in ideal classrooms as presented by John Dewey. In classrooms that use P4C, teachers are not directing the conversation, but rather are seen as skilled facilitators of the discussion taking place among students (Lim, 2006). Once teachers have modeled and facilitated P4C frequently enough, these discussions look more like student-led conversations.

Very much aligned with John Dewey's beliefs and theories about school being an institution that should promote social and moral development, P4C is designed to foster "mutual co-operation, trust, tolerance, fair mindedness and a heightened degree of sensitivity to their peers (Flinders & Thornton, 2013; Lim, 2006, p. 67). P4C has been an invaluable program in some schools to raise awareness of global and moral issues when introduced at the appropriate cognitive and emotional level of students. This program encourages students to think for themselves and take responsibility for their own learning, behavior, and decision-making (Hopkinson, 2007). These concepts of student-led responsibility, as opposed to teacher-directed decision-making, continue to align with John Dewey's preference for learner-centered educational decision-making.

Conclusion

The emphasis on implementing Common Core standards across the United States, has changed the dynamic in classrooms today for both students and educators. The main focus in traditional classrooms today is on preparing students for passing standardized exams and state assessments. John Dewey has been perhaps the most influential philosopher to impact education to date (Theobald, 2009). Finding evidence of John Dewey's theories and beliefs in action in 21st century classrooms is certainly becoming more and more infrequent, however, it is possible, as shown by the various teaching models presented here. In some schools and classrooms throughout the United States and in other countries around the world, John Dewey's theories are still quite present. These schools and classrooms are still placing an emphasis on the importance and relevance of building community, building strong relationships, developing higher level thinking skills for real-life application, and following student interests when planning for instruction. Students who are participating in academic programs such as the ones presented here, will likely be critical thinkers and significant, positive contributors to their local communities and to society as they mature into adult citizens.

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