

John Dewey And The Development Of Reflective Teachers

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Abstract

John Dewey is considered one of the most significant philosophers of education and one of the founders of pragmatism as a philosophical approach. His progressive ideas influenced teaching-learning processes, teacher education, and educational systems in various countries. However, his theory is still weakly understood and not improperly applied in current education. This study aimed to analyze Dewey's philosophy and its application in the training and reflective teachers' development, enabling learning experiences in a transforming and democratic way and stimulating students to think critically. This qualitative, theoretical, and exploratory article addresses the contextualization of Dewey's theory, directed toward the of reflective teachers' development. The study highlights that democracy for Dewey is indispensable ethical in education and teaching and that progressive education and the pragmatism concepts and experience are fundamental in the teacher training process from a reflective perspective.

Keywords: *John Dewey; philosophy of education; teacher education; reflective teachers.*

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I. The Importance Of Dewey's Thought For Education

John Dewey is considered one of the most significant thinkers in education, especially in the first half of the 20th century. As a philosopher and educator, he transformed the fundamental approaches to the teaching-learning process that constituted the progressive process of educational reform in a variety of contexts around the world. In Brazil, his ideas inspired the movement for the renewal of education, known as Escola Nova.

Throughout his life, he worked tirelessly to advance our understanding of what an educational system should look like and function in which the focus is on the student. Although this concept was developed over 100 years ago, Dewey's thinking fits into the current reality of transformations, being contemporary and applicable to the education system.

Dewey's concept of education values the meaningful activity of learning and democratic participation of students in the classroom, with the student as the protagonist, but "made it clear that the crucial role should be played by teachers, linking students' interests in order to ensure intellectual development with educational experiences" (Apple; Teitelbaum, 2001). Unlike previous models of teaching, based on teacher authority and passive and mechanical learning, progressive education allows students to participate in the educational process, and not just watch it as mere spectators.

For Dewey, the curriculum must be relevant to students' lives. He saw learning by doing and the development of life skills as cruciais to children's education. However, many aspects of his theory have been relatively poorly understood and applied haphazardly to this day. Some critics have assumed that Dewey's system would be anti-intellectual, since students would not be able to acquire basic academic knowledge and skills. Others believed that classroom order and teacher authority would disappear (PBS.ORG, 2020).

It is worth noting that, for Apple and Teitelbaum (2001), the key to intellectual development and, consequently, social progress, was schooling. They believed that the moral and social nature of school could serve as a "miniature community, an embryonic society". This view contrasted with the "factory system" model, adapted by school planners (and "efficiency experts") who were supposed to prepare students as relatively passive raw material to be molded by teachers, in which teaching methods were based on the repetition of school content divorced from social content. For Dewey (1976), this context required not only universal schooling as crucial for rapid social transformation, but a new education, which would be vital when guided by the perspective that school is life and not a preparation for life, involving teachers and students in a way that actively engages them in democratic life. Therefore, the discussion of Dewey's approach in current education first involves understanding the social role of the school and the teacher, because before considering this approach in the classroom with

students, we must think about the one who will make it possible: the teacher, and more importantly, the reflective teacher. Therefore, discussing teacher training would be one of the ways to understand and apply this important educational philosophy in a comprehensive way.

It is worth noting that in initial teacher training courses, the theories and thoughts of several important authors are addressed, Dewey being one of them. However, in most cases, this learning is merely theoretical, presenting generalized values and terms, even due to the models of the curricular matrices of the Undergraduate Courses, established with loose curricular components and with a short workload, making integrated and in-depth learning difficult. The integration of these concepts and philosophies must be constant in the daily practices of the university, permeating the entire educational base, and even in the internships, in which the practical approaches of the theories would find a place for application in a consolidated and critical way. It is known that reflective training of future teachers can significantly improve students' learning conditions and even increase their interest and retention in school. Dewey's theory is highlighted here for this educational context.

Therefore, there is a great need to rediscover and reconsider Dewey's thinking, especially in teacher training and in the organization of educational practice in schools. Thus, the objective of this article is to analyze John Dewey's philosophical principles and their application in the training and development of reflective teachers. The main concepts of Dewey's theory are discussed below: democracy, pragmatism and experience, and fundamental elements for discussing the teacher training process from the perspective of developing the reflective teacher.

II. Democracy

Democracy is one of Dewey's founding concepts, much more than a form of government, but above all a way of life associated with shared experiences. From this perspective, a democratic education implies sharing experiences between teachers and students, in an environment of cooperation in which teachers are responsible for bringing together students' interests to ensure intellectual development through educational experiences (Apple; Teitelbaum, 2001).

Dewey harshly criticized the American school system of the time. For him, schools were based on individualism, competition between students and their submission to teachers, thus reproducing the concepts of the dominant class (Gauthier; Tardif, 2014). To change this reality, he describes that school spaces should be completely reconstructed. In this reconstruction, students would be the center of the process, encouraged to think for themselves, in a cooperative and democratic way, transforming society.

The philosopher argued that the essential ethical principle in education was democracy. He stated that the formation of a certain character is the only true foundation of moral conduct, which would be a preparation for exercising democracy (Dewey, 1897). Thus, the decisive function of education in a democratic society was to help the child acquire character (Gauthier; Tardif, 2014). Each school, as Dewey writes, must become an embryonic community life, active with types of occupations that reflect the life of society in general and permeated by the spirit of art, history and science. When the school introduces and trains each child of society to become a member of such a small community, saturating him with the spirit of service and providing him with instruments of effective self-direction, we will have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society that is dignified, lovable and harmonious (Dewey, 2002, p. 44). This thought brings a sense of cooperation, we are social beings, and learning must start from an approach and discussion in a democratic way. For Dewey (1979), learning happens when we share experiences, in which there are no obstacles to the exchange of ideas, and this is only possible in a democratic environment.

School is a suitable place for children to act as social beings, where, through their shared experiences with others, in cooperative activities, they understand their responsibilities and thus build a sense of democracy. It is worth reiterating that Dewey's studies influenced the ideas of the philosopher Kilpatrick, who developed Project Pedagogy, highlighting that this approach is also based on the concept of democracy.

For Dewey (1976) and Kilpatrick (1978), democracy is more than a form of government; it presupposes that each person should have the opportunity for individual development and expression. Their ideas suggest a profound transformation in school education, and one of them translates in a practical and simple way how to learn democracy: to experience it. However, this expression often carries more the meaning of jargon than that of a concept demarcated politically and historically.

Therefore, considering Dewey's democratic perspective as one of the policies of reflective teacher training shows us the importance of listening to the teacher, giving him/her a voice, and thinking about training with him/her and not for him/her (Nóvoa, 1992). The individual expression of this subject should constitute the training and, thus, the being also in the initial training, in which future teachers should experience the democratic principle in the day-to-day of their training process. The proposal of working with projects, as already pointed out, can be one of the practices that enables dialogue, cooperation and choices in a democratic way, because as Dewey himself tells us, learning about democracy only occurs when we experience it. In this cycle, the students

will come, because teachers trained in a democratic way will also be trained in their teaching practices, promoting democracy in their classes.

III. Pragmatism

Dewey is a thinker who is affiliated with the philosophical thought of pragmatism, initially developed by Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, considered the founders of this philosophical movement that emerged in the United States at the end of the 19th century. Peirce was the first to propose a new role for philosophy and its relationship with science. The word “pragmatism” has its origins in the Greek term *pragma*, which means action, work, business. In general, philosophers of the pragmatic line argue that the truth of a situation is obtained by analyzing its practical utility, its application (Placides; Costa, 2021).

The premise of this educational theory is based on an education that is built from the experiences of the subjects, based on the solution of real problems, and in a community way for contextualized, shared and meaningful learning. John Dewey argued that school was a social institution and that classrooms should facilitate learning experiences, allowing students to engage in appropriate social activities, interacting with their peers.

Therefore, Dewey's ideas about education emerged from a philosophical system and were central to the Progressive Movement in schooling, which also became known as the Pedagogy of Pragmatism. For him, there was a need to prove thought through action and, thus, the possibility of transforming it into knowledge.

His idea was that the purpose of education would be practical learning and the solution of real problems, preparing the child to face the reality of everyday problems. Education is a social process, it becomes development. It is not preparation for life, but life itself (Dewey, 1976). Dewey's pragmatism or instrumentalism, also called this, involves solving problems related to children's lives and interests through the practice of manual and creative activities, stimulating the experience of research and discovery, and also developing autonomy. It is worth noting that at the end of each practice performed, *praxis* (action + reflection) is necessary, in the proposal for a later improved practice.

Dewey brings this perspective to teaching practice, in which teachers were seen by this author as creative professionals, demonstrating not only an understanding of the subject, but also a passion for knowledge, intellectual curiosity, understanding of the learning process and an interest in the children under their care (Stobie, 2016).

The understanding of these authors and their theories can explain how deep learning happens. And in the same way, how we can apply their concepts in teacher training with a view to promoting a reflective pedagogical practice. In this sense, it promotes students' knowledge in an engaging, meaningful and challenging learning process, relating it to experience and listening to the voice of these subjects, to understand their thinking and redesign the teaching-learning process.

The pragmatic aspect of his theory shows Dewey's concern with school, with an educational process that disconnects ideas from actions, that distances itself from the context, from the students' experiences, that does not transform it into practice, which, for the philosopher, all thought, and knowledge only have value if they are applicable.

IV. Experience

One of the most valued concepts in Dewey's thinking is that of experience in education. For our purpose, this part of the text discusses the work *Experience and Education* written by him in 1938. In this book, Dewey criticizes both traditional and progressive education, both of which are uneducated, as they do not apply the principles of the philosophy of experience or do not highlight the importance of the student's experience. These approaches suggested that students were like “blank slates” waiting to be filled with knowledge in school. In contrast, Dewey suggested that teachers organize the educational experience based on facts, preconceptions, and prior knowledge through the students past experiences. In this way, knowledge would be promoted by emphasizing experiment, intentional and meaningful learning, freedom, and other concepts of progressive education. Dewey argued that the quality of an educational experience is critical and emphasized the importance of social and interactive learning processes.

For Dewey, no concept or certainty is proven before experience. The philosopher contrasts two modes of education: the traditional one, based on the transmission of static cultural knowledge to essentially passive students, portraying the teacher as a divine authority, leading ignorant students to the truth; while the progressive mode seeks to teach not the content/knowledge of the past in a static way, but the ability to think critically about the experiences of the present and the future with information obtained in communities of research and practice, with the teacher portrayed as a facilitator.

In this sense, Cunha emphasizes that,

Dewey is not proposing any method of teaching, he is not talking about the thought of the student as a generic human being or of the subjects of study situated in one or another political space, but rather of the method

appropriate to a society that wishes to educate human beings for associated life, of thought as an instrument of freely shared experience and of teaching subjects as repositories of this same experience (2002, p. 2).

Another of Dewey's main points is that knowledge is not just theoretical learning, and is not limited to the domains of school, curriculum or teachers, but rather produced within the experience applied to the students' reality, that is, the interpretation of a real educational experience. For example, instead of reading about astronomy, celestial bodies, planets and stars, students should observe these phenomena through telescopes, celestial maps, understand the influence of the moon on our planet, in short, see astronomy in action, and not just theorize about learning. This interpretation of an educational experience produces relevant, continuous and renewable knowledge. For Anísio Teixeira (1978, p. 17), Educational experience is indeed treated as an intelligent and valid experience, in which thought participates, through which relationships and continuities that were not previously perceived come to be perceived. Every time that experience is thus reflective, that is, that we pay attention to the before and after of its process, the acquisition of new knowledge that is more extensive than before will be one of its natural results. Experience thus broadens our knowledge, enriches our minds and gives life a deeper meaning every day.

However, Dewey argues that not all experiences are educational and that, in fact, some of them can be uneducative, which "stops or distorts the growth of later experience" (Dewey, 1979, p. 28). The central challenge of learning based on this thinking is to create fruitful experiences and organize them in a progression to guide students' learning. An uneducative experience blocks the growth of other experiences. Thus, even enjoyable experiences can be uneducative if they are disconnected, scattered or of poor quality. Therefore, the educator's duty is to determine the quality of an experience and its impact on later experience.

In Chapter 4 of the book in question, *Experience and Education*, Dewey argues that in progressive education, social conventions would be applied by students as part of the community and not imposed on them by the teacher. Dewey uses the example of children playing or playing on the playground. These games involve rules that order the behavior of the participants. The games do not happen randomly or through a succession of improvisations. Without rules there is no game. But in the game the child is spontaneous and free to experiment. For the philosopher, the control of individual actions is affected by the entire situation in which the individuals are involved, in which they share and of which they are cooperative or interactive parts, because even in a competitive game there is a certain type of participation, of sharing a common experience. Those who participate do not feel commanded by an individual person or are subjected to the will of some external superior trying to impose his individual will on another person (Dewey, 1976). As happened in traditional schools, which did not depend on the establishment of a social learning community, they tended to lack this social control and, therefore, the teacher only had the option of "direct intervention" to "maintain order."

Dewey argues that experience can develop freedom of intelligence—the act of thinking, observing, and judging freely—and is the only freedom of lasting importance. Freedom of movement is also an integral component of physical and mental health. Teachers should allow students freedom of intelligence by empowering them to formulate purposes, judge wisely, and evaluate their desires (Dewey, 1976).

An experience-based model of education involves students finding a way to ground unfamiliar concepts and ideas within the scope of ordinary life experience (Dewey, 1976). Progressive education with its emphasis on experiential learning relies on the role of the educator to structure the material in a way that fosters learning experiences in which the student is the protagonist.

It is important to note that in this approach, collaboration between educator and student becomes fundamental, so that it occurs in an open and collaborative system, in a collective, coordinated and continuous construction with the purpose of improving teaching and valuing the construction of collective knowledge, aimed at the possibility of interaction and sharing of experiences (Behrens, 2005).

One of Dewey's prominent concerns was the role of the educator in creating an educational environment that provides continuity within this contextualized assimilative model based on the student's learning experience. The difficulty of this challenge lies in continually adapting the subject matter to the growing sphere of individual experiences as students' progress (Dewey, 1976).

V. Final Considerations

The objective of this study was to analyze Dewey's philosophy and its application in the training and development of reflective teachers, considered one of the most important philosophers of education. His progressive ideas influenced the teaching-learning processes, teacher training and educational systems in several countries.

Dewey died more than 70 years ago, but his thinking remains inexhaustible for the 21st century. In current times, his theory can be used in the search for an education for critical and democratic thinking. As we continue in the era of capitalist globalization that undermines the concept of freedom of critical thinking, Dewey's concern with the relationship between effective democracy and education is his most relevant lesson. It has never been so important to help children and adolescents deal well with uncertainty, learn how to learn for the rest of

their lives and understand that education is a moral enterprise that seeks to develop informed citizens, capable of making choices and taking conscious decisions. The premise of this educational theory is based on an education that is built through the experiences of the subjects, based on the solution of real problems, in a community way for contextualized, shared and meaningful learning. John Dewey argued that school was a social institution, and classrooms were spaces for learning opportunities, allowing students to take the lead and engage in appropriate social activities based on their experiences and in a democratic process of interacting with their peers.

Therefore, this educational proposal will only be possible through a teacher who is reflective in his/her training and practice. In this sense, it is worth noting that the objective of this study was achieved when Dewey's concepts: Democracy, Pragmatism and Experience were presented in such a way that they can be applied in the reflective teacher training process.

Democracy, one of Dewey's founding concepts, was discussed as being much more than a form of government, being above all a way of life associated with shared experience, with the opportunity for individual development and expression, and that we understand it when we experience it. Furthermore, the discussion on Dewey's democratic perspective as one of the policies of reflective teacher training highlights the importance of listening to the teacher, giving him/her a voice, and thinking about training with him/her and not for him/her.

Pragmatism was described as the need to prove thought through action and, thus, the possibility of transforming it into knowledge, through practical learning and the solution of problems related to the student's life and interests, preparing him/her to face the reality of real everyday problems.

The pragmatic approach shows Dewey's concern with an educational process that disconnects ideas from actions, that distances itself from the context and the students' experiences, and that does not transform them into practice, which, for the philosopher, all thought, and knowledge only have value if they are applicable. In this regard, it is important to consider how much this Deweyan ideology needs to find a place in teacher training, which, as a space for the construction of reflective subjects of their teaching action, needs to think of knowledge as a principle of social transformation, making the student dialogue with reality to understand and transform it. It was also seen that Experience should be promoted by teachers in an educational way, based on facts, preconceptions and previous knowledge through the experiences already lived by the students. Therefore, knowledge would be promoted, emphasizing experiment, intentional and meaningful learning, freedom and other concepts of progressive education. One of the most valued concepts in Dewey's thinking is the importance of experience in the educational process. The reflective teacher's conditions experiences and exploration of the world based on his/her teaching methods, providing students with opportunities to think, reflect and learn. Thus, teacher training should proceed from experiences in teaching practice to the analysis of the theory that underpins it and thus seek praxis.

The main concepts of Dewey's theory were proposed in the construction of the Reflective Teacher, as they can explain how this training process results in a teaching practice that promotes transformative educational experiences, generating rich and meaningful teaching-learning processes, promoting students' knowledge in an engaging and challenging learning process, relating it to problem-solving, in order to understand students' thinking and adjust the teaching-learning process. Thus, conditioning not only the reflective teacher, but also the reflective student, even at the beginning of their student life. As can be seen, Dewey shows us possibilities for an education that can revolutionize the teaching-learning processes, initially based on the experiences of educators in the proposal to reflect on their practice in order to think about training, which they will later do with their students, and thus, Dewey's education is established in which the training process is related to the lives of both. Therefore, based on this study, it is highlighted that democracy for Dewey is the indispensable central ethic in education and teaching practice, and that progressive education and the concepts of pragmatism and experience are fundamental in a teacher training process from a reflective perspective.

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