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Learning for democracy: some inspiration from John Dewey's idea of democracy

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1 Introduction

Citizens in a democracy must be educated because it is they who steer the ship of state (Dar, 2021). Therefore, for a country to progress toward democracy, people need to be nurtured with democratic literacy through education. The ideas of John Dewey, a 20th Century American philosopher, are highly influential on our contemporary understanding of this relationship between education and democracy. He was born on October 20, 1859, in Burlington, Vermont, in the United States. After graduating from the University of Vermont in 1879, he taught in Vermont until 1881 and in high school in Pennsylvania until 1882. He received a doctorate from Johns Hopkins University in 1884. He died on June 1, 1952. Dewey is known for his views on the relationships between philosophy, education, democracy, the society, and the individual (Özkan, 2020).

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey criticizes dichotomies such as those between reason and experience, intelligence and physical strength, liberal education and practical training, the sciences and the humanities, and the spiritual and the material. He believed that history had affirmed the former at the expense of the latter of these dichotomies, and such an imbalance hinders social progress. Thus, Dewey adopted an empiricist foundation and argued that ideally, science and labor ought to carry both practical and humanistic value in a society. In the preface of *Democracy and Education*, Dewey explored and explained the various ideas constituting a democratic society and the application of these ideas to various issues in education (Dewey, 1916; Tampio, 2024).

Dewey's writings continue to influence discussions on a variety of subjects, including *democratic education*, which was the focus of Dewey's famous 1916 book on the subject (Dewey, 1916; Tampio, 2024).

Dewey believed that democracy means that every human being, independent of the quantity or range of his personal endowment, has the right to equal opportunity with every other person for development of whatever gifts he has. Dewey's vision of education is teachers nurturing each child's passions and not using tests to rank children. School curriculum develop talent in every student—nurture by nature. However, some schools are far from realizing that vision (Dewey, 1916; Shih, 2024; Tampio, 2024). Therefore, this article explores John Dewey's idea of democracy and his conception of the role of learning in developing a democratic learning atmosphere, and emphasizes a democratic education allows students to participate in the problem-solving process, that continuous use of real social issues enhances democratic literacy for students (Ye and Shih, 2021).

2 Research method

This study uses a critical hermeneutic approach to understand Dewey's idea of democracy, which is a key pillar of his thought. Many scholars have studied his earlier and well-known works, *The School and Society* and *Democracy and Education* (Dewey, 1899/1976; Shih, 2018; Saito, 2020).

3 Dewey's idea of democracy and how it inspires learning for democracy

3.1 Students are socialized into a democratic way of life through education

In the preface of *Democracy and Education*, Dewey states that he aimed to provide "a critical estimate of the theories of knowing and moral development which were formulated in earlier societies, but still operate... to hamper the adequate realization of the idea of democracy." He argues that the realization of democracy is closely related to epistemic and moral development, upon which the society and its educational system are based. Dewey implied that for education to be truly democratizing, the theories of knowledge and moral development underpinning education must be aligned with a democratic way of life (Dewey, 1916; Lind, 2023). In addition, students must be socialized into a democratic way of life (Shih, 2020).

3.2 Students gain opportunities and resources to realize their potential by participating in political, social, and cultural life

Dewey fiercely advocated for participatory democracy: the belief that democracy as an ethical ideal calls upon men and women to build communities in which every individual has the necessary opportunities and resources to realize his or her potential by participating in political, social, and cultural life. This also extends to students (Dewey, 1916; Peters and Jandrić, 2017).

3.3 Teachers should respect diversity in their students' way of being

Dewey's vision of democracy challenges us to adapt our global communities and educational systems according to the needs of our historical moment for all citizens to benefit. Dewey called on the citizens of democratic societies to imagine new ways of association and interaction that foster respect for freedom, equality, and the diversity in our ways of being in the world. Similarly, teachers should respect diversity in their students' way of being for students to flourish as human beings (Dewey, 1916; Gordon and English, 2016; Ye and Shih, 2021).

3.4 The ability of students to exercise their judgment is honed through democratic education

Dewey stressed that education must prepare students for an uncertain future. Indeed, we face such a future given the speed of economic and technological change today. Thus, students must develop effective habits, be adaptable, and learn how to learn. This contrasts with a traditional, industrial model of education where individuals are trained to fulfill a single occupational niche for the rest of their lives (Dewey, 1916; Stobie, 2024).

Dewey expanded the concept of democracy to mean something abstract to something that encompasses the entirety of human life. Correspondingly, education became increasingly entwined in such a conception of democracy. As noted by Dewey, most people think of democracy as a political institution, made most visible by the act of voting. However, voters ought to make an informed choice, and they can only do so through keen judgment, which is cultivated through education (Dewey, 1916; Ye and Shih, 2021).

4 Discussion

Maintaining democracy and freedom is key to the future of the post-totalitarian countries that emerged 30 years ago from their isolation from the West to reclaim the place where they had historically belonged (Strouhal, 2020).

The dialectical relationship between democracy and education for democracy reflects the fluid natures of both democracy and education. Fluctuations within the internal dynamics of democratic institutions and relations between democracy and society can reflect progress, a deepening of democracy, or setbacks. As a result of such flux, the relationship of democracy to education evolves as does democracy itself, necessitating periodic reexamination so that efforts to align educational institutions with democratic goals remain relevant (Reimers, 2023).

In addition, the sustainability of a country depends on the quality of the next generation, which plays a vital role in various aspects of life, ranging from education, culture, economy, politics, and religion. Education can build a new generation of a nation toward a better direction. All nations worldwide are trying to prepare the next generation of good and smart citizens. Carrying the spirit of democracy, all nations worldwide emphasize organizing a good governance government and focusing on the involvement of its citizens (Fuad, 2023).

Dewey's "*Democracy and Education*" is commendably guided by the vision of a democratic society. He contrasts the democratic society with an undesirable society "which internally and externally sets up barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience". By contrast, a democratic society "secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life" and "makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms". Dewey proposed two metrics "to measure the worth of a form of social life" by: "the extent in which the interests of a group are shared by all its members, and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups" (Dewey, 1916; Papastephanou, 2017).

Finally, Dewey defined education in *Democracy and Education* as “that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience.” (Dewey, 1916). Hence, education must be based on experience, developing and expanding the growth of experience from individuals’ real-life experiences. Since each experience can have either a positive or negative impact on each person, the attitudes formed can lead to preferences or aversions, and the value of an experience can be inferred from the direction it drives. The transformation of experience has educational significance only when it develops positively. Therefore, teachers should promote education in a democratic manner, allowing students to gain experiences of democratic education. In this way, students are more likely to develop democratic literacy. And, our society is more likely to become a democratic society.

5 Conclusions

Autonomous citizens participating in a free society (i.e., a democracy) cannot be cultivated in a regimented, one-size-fits-all classroom. Students should thus be given enough space to continually experience life and establish their values. Dewey argued that education, both formal and informal, should be organized to promote individual and social growth. These ends are most likely to be achieved when learners work together and focus on crucial problems relevant to their lives (Harbour, 2023).

Such education is the bedrock on which a democracy thrives, where democratic processes and practices extend beyond the political into the social and economic (Harbour, 2023). Such education can also only function in a society where democratic ideals (that every young citizen ought to be socialized into becoming thinking participants of a free society) are cherished. Thus, education and democracy are parasitic on each other in Dewey’s worldview (van der Ploeg, 2019).

Through the decades, Dewey’s focus increasingly shifted toward the importance of learning to think critically, including interrogating existing social structures and dynamics (van der Ploeg, 2019). We glean the following points from Dewey’s conception of democracy and education. (1) Education should socialize students into a democratic way of life. (2) Students should

be given opportunities and resources to realize their potential by participating in political, social, and cultural life. (3) Teachers should respect the diversity in their students’ ways of being. (4) Democratic education should hone the ability of students to exercise their judgment. (5) Education in a democracy should aim to “continuously reorganize and transform the experiences” of students. We hope that, through our article, educators and stakeholders can appreciate the centrality of democratic education in a democratic society.

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Y-HS: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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