

# The centrality of the learners in the light of John Dewey's philosophy of education

Ester P. Canillo  
Alan A. Bendanillo

**Abstract:** John Dewey is the most significant philosopher of education. This article provides a thorough analysis of John Dewey's philosophy of education and his theory on experiential learning in the educational process. It also offers a closer look of the speculative case suggesting the visionary child-centered education underlying Dewey's educational philosophy. The article consists of two sections: (1) John Dewey's philosophy of education and the centrality of the learner (child), and (2) the term 'experience' through the lens of Dewey's philosophy of education. The method used in this research is a library study, in the form of research whose objects are literature works, namely scientific journals, books, articles in the mass media, and other net from different websites. While John Dewey who was considered as an exemplar proponent in education and philosophy of his time, the researchers conclude that still today Dewey's ideologies have a place in educational curriculums across the globe for sheer reason that John Dewey elucidates the idea that students learn from human experiences, in which it simply boils down to a certain idea of "putting ideas into action" or, it simply means "learning-by-doing."

**Keywords:** John Dewey, education, centrality of the learner, learning by doing, experience

## INTRODUCTION

In Philippine society, education has been given an important stature in every Filipino within the family. When the child reaches to an age requirement standard to properly send him in school, the parents being a "loco parentis"<sup>1</sup> would take responsibility in order to educate the child. No wonder education begins first at home. However, this is not the end of child's journey in the learning process. There's an imperative need for a child to continue in the public education as what Immanuel Kant, a German educator and philosopher posited "public education is the best school because it is a preparation for the duties of every citizen. How far, then, has home education an advantage over public education, or vice versa? Regarded not only from the point of view of developing ability, but also a preparation for the duties of a citizen, it must, I am inclined to think, be allowed that, on the two, public education is

<sup>1</sup> The word "loco parentis" was a Latin coined terminology which simply means "in the place of a parent" and it refers to the legal responsibility of a person or organization to take on some of the functions and responsibilities of a parent (Freedman et al., 1993).

the best" (Kant, 26). However, in a long run, the good quality of education is what matters most in the sphere of educational system. Shwartz, Y., Ben-Zvi, R., & Hofstein, A. (2005) believes that in order to attain a quality education, it requires quality teachers. Good teachers create a shining light into the learning environment. They become ideal companions of learners (Mangila, 2022). But the question is "what makes teaching effective?" There's a need then to evaluate the methodological teaching strategies along with the experience of the teachers. This might become a problem if the teacher is newly hired and no experience at all in the field of teaching.

This phenomenological problem in educational system has been tackled in the study conducted by Kalande (2006) titled on The Influence of Science Teacher Preparation Programs on Instructional Practices of Beginning Primary School Teachers in Malawi that beginning teachers experience problems as they go through the process of learning to teach. It should be noted that experience is required in order to gain knowledge and necessary in the field of education. In the learning process, while learning takes place teachers should not just be the ones who are given the opportunity to learn and in need for improvement but it also requires the active participation on the part of the child. The child is also considered to be an active participant in the process of education. It is because education is considered to develop a child for the future (Dar, 2021). For child's development, in education, experience has direct influence on the mind, physical ability of an individual or student.

There's no other way by which to develop the potentialities and skills from the experiences of the child but only through education. John Dewey, who was considered as the most influential American philosopher and educationist of the 20th Century has a great contribution to education. In fact, Dewey put highly emphasis the centrality of the learner in the educational process because Dewey believed that at the centre of the whole academia was the child, and Dewey's educational philosophy and reforms were concerned primarily with the child (Sikandar, 2015). Essential to John Dewey's philosophical approach to life called 'pragmatism', and his approaches to education which means "experiential education" and learning in which it simply means "learning-by-doing" have been influential across globally and remained effective in school curriculum even in the contemporary period of time. Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand better the nature of John Dewey's educational philosophy and to come up with a descriptive analysis on his approaches to education which theme is to put the child at the center in the educational process.

#### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problem under investigation reads as under: "Educational Philosophy of John Dewey and his main contribution to the education that involves the engagement of child as the center in the educational process."

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following objectives were formulated for the present study:

1. To understand the "Educational Philosophy of John Dewey."
2. To come up with descriptive analysis about the idea of John Dewey's nature of education putting emphasis the centrality of the learner in the educational process.
3. To study the relevance of his educational philosophy to contemporary society.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research will make use of qualitative research method. The researcher gathered materials from various research papers, journals and books from websites, net and other related sources that profoundly expound Dewey's philosophy of education. The materials gathered were presented in the paper to expose Dewey's philosophy of experience. In this manner, the researchers hope make a systematic presentation of Dewey's experience that is understandable to the readers, especially to those who are beginning to understand one of the greatest American thinkers in the name of John Dewey whose legacy has left popular and gained good reputation in the realm of education since during his generation and up until this modern times.

## JOHN DEWEY'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION AND THE CENTRALITY OF THE LEARNER (CHILD)

Dewey's philosophy of education is rooted on the understanding with an account of the development of child's capacities as a human being who lives in the society. Education is an embodiment of social process towards the development of the experience of the child.<sup>2</sup> The child must be able to develop his capacities and potentialities through education. In other words, it takes always advantage the need of the young children which is the goal of education. Nevertheless, Dewey's idea of education focuses on the development of the capacities and potentialities of the child. He says that education is the guiding and nourishing process of the child to develop his potentialities and capacities (Ratner, 1939). In other words, education offers a development to the child.

Dewey (1987) suggests, "Indeed the starting point should be the internal condition-the child's own instincts and powers furnish the material and give the starting point for all education" (p. 44). Dewey further emphasizes the idea that the child is simply the immature being who is to be matured; he is the superficial being who is to be deepened; his is narrow experience which is to be widened. It is his to receive, to accept. His part is fulfilled when he is ductile and docile (Dewey, *The Child and The Curriculum*, 12). Dewey would mean that there is always a need to develop the nature of the child. It is attained through education. Education helps the

<sup>2</sup> Dewey uses the term "child" because for him the easy thing is to seize upon something in the nature of the child. The child is the starting-point, the center, and the end. His development, his growth, is the ideal. For details, see John Dewey, *The Child and The Curriculum* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1902), 9.

child as an immature being to develop only in some point in which he is undeveloped. This principle is undeniably part of the educational process of the child as learner (Brubacher, 1970).

John Dewey (1897) in his book *My Pedagogic Creed* says: "Education is not preparation for life, education is life itself, and thus education is process of life and not preparation for facing life." In this sense, the concept of education is viewed as life-long process by which the learners being as one of the elements in the sphere of Dewey's education are also lifelong learners. Learning and education occur continuously in one's life, learning experiences in everyday life are inseparable from the partition of time, space and context. Learning is interrelated between one object of knowledge and other knowledge takes place continuously (Tung, 2013). Dewey strongly argues that the centre of gravity needs to shift whereby the learner is at the center (Dewey, 1910). Dewey is often referred to as a child-centered educationist (Bantock, 1963; Darling, 1994; Entwistle, 1970; Pring, 2007; Woods & Barrow, 2006).

Moreover, John Dewey in developing his knowledge and practice in the world of education cannot be separated from the great influence of the two schools of philosophy that became John Dewey's own way of life, namely the philosophy of pragmatism<sup>3</sup> and progressivism<sup>4</sup> (Woenardi, et. al., 2022). These two significant features in Dewey's conception of education play a vital role both in the world of philosophy and education. In fact, pragmatism is seen in the context of empirical study that merely focuses on putting thoughts of the learner into action.

<sup>3</sup> Pragmatism is primarily conceived with the knowledge process, the relationship of ideas to action. The well-known common ground for three pragmatic philosophers of naming a few – Peirce, James and Dewey – is the emphasis of practical usefulness and consequences of ideas and statements. The founding father of pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce, presented truth as an understanding of reality from an empirical point of view. He described the term pragmatism as a method of using scientific logic to clarify the meaning of concepts or ideas through investigating their potential relationship with the real world. Pragmatists believe that reality must be experienced. From Dewey's educational point of view, this means that students must interact with their environment in order to adapt and learn. The word pragmatism was formed to express a maxim of logic intended to deliver a method for the analysis of concepts, where the 'conceivable practical consequences' were traced out (Peirce 1905, 494; Nowell, L. 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Dewey makes use of the concept "progressivism" to relate it to its nature of education. Progressive education is essentially a view of education that emphasizes the need to learn by doing. Dewey believed that human beings learn through a 'hands-on' approach. This places Dewey in the educational philosophy of pragmatism. Moreover, Dewey explains that in "progressive education" there should be a social progress from within and, in doing so, there must be a unity of theory and practice. It also stresses the child's needs and therefore child-centered. Its aim is to provide the child the necessary skills to be able to interact with his environment. It is more on activity and experienced centered on life functions. The teaching methods being employed are cooperative learning and reflective strategies. The taking on of a position in effective education is one that provides the learners with a future better than the past. Progressive education is focused on the learner's interest and impulse, unconstrained by the educator. The progressive education has exalted the learner's impulse and interest and the current problems of changing society. Progressive education is a means in bringing up the child his stimulus power in order to develop and understand better his existence through exercising freedom. Dewey entails that there is a need of a progressive education because it essentially directs the child towards development (Cahn, *Classic and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Education* 328; Dewey, *The School and Society*, 4; Bendanillo, 2022).

## THE TERM 'EXPERIENCE' THROUGH THE LENS OF DEWEY'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Dewey's notion of "experience" evolved over the course of his career. Dewey describes this as essential framework in the field of education. Dewey refers it as learning experience of the child by which the educator has a responsibility for its development. In essays in experimental logic, Dewey described experience as "the manifestation of interactions of organism and environment." Dewey used the term "dynamic" to explain experience. Experience isn't entirely derived from introspection however instead from a transaction with nature. It is apparent right here that Dewey rejects any dualistic view among individual and the world. Dewey has even remarked "an organism does not stay in an environment however it lives through an environment." In other words, experience is an interaction or transaction between organism and environment such that a state of satisfaction or equilibrium is achieved. In this sense, it is not purely formal, that is it does not deal with things that go on exclusively in the mind, and it arises out of concrete situations. A positive quality runs through all elements of experience giving it unity and settlement. For Acampado, A.G. (2019) posited that experience significantly connotes space and time which are necessary preconditions of human activity. As he wanted to recover the true spirit of philosophizing he saw experience as the point of departure. Empiricism has already put experience into the center of attention.

However, the criticism of Dewey is that experience was just made as the basis of knowledge and experience became compilations of thought. Relevant points were highlighted by him to be evaluated. First, experience, as he observed it is regarded first as a knowledge affair. This he could not accept because if one looks into the depth of it, surely it will be that it is an intercourse of a living being with its physical object. The use of intercourse here by Dewey would imply that there is an active unity within the person and the object. Second, experience is understood in the confines of subjectivity and physicality. He then, countered for its objectivity which is true to every human endeavors. Third, experience is essentially tied up with the antecedent event. In this kind of understanding he sees nothing or little openness of experience towards the future. Experience must then be understood with being essentially experimental. In this way experience will lead us to look ahead and change what is given. In this way, he understood experience as not something passive but active. Fourth, experience is usually seen in terms of particular events. The way Dewey understood experience is in terms of connexions. As the subjects engages in the environment there could never be one but a continuous engagement. The environment continually offers new settings where the subject strives to take control. Lastly, experience and thought were understood to be always in contradiction. It was

overshadowed by the idealism and empiricism. However, experience also needs inference. It is, in fact, full of inference (Sthur, 2000).

Dewey repudiated the traditional idea of experience found in modern empiricism precisely because he was loath to believe that intelligence could be driven for long by bad or silly intentions. Instead of defining experience as being composed of our private sensations, he defined it as a psycho-physical process of doing and undergoing. We do something, then we undergo and reflect on the consequences, and this process is the internal dynamic of learning that, in Dewey's view, works to undermine unsavory and stupid motives as much as to help us decide what we should do next. We use our intentions to interpret our experience and guide our actions. But our intentions will usually be assessed and transformed in the light of their results. At least for Dewey, this is what happens when we trust and use intelligence (Pocock et. al., 1994). In the words of Hohr (2013), "Dewey's concept of experience allows a holistic approach to education, in the sense that it is based on the interaction between the human being and the world. It takes all sides of human existence, its being in the world, as the methodological point of departure. Experience is a central aspect of this interaction and thus a communicative, historic and cultural phenomenon rather than an individual or mental one. It was not in the mind of Dewey to just let the children experience for the sake of experiencing. They are not left alone to do things.

#### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

John Dewey, an American philosopher, educator and social critic was born on October 20, 1859 in Burlington, Vermont (Bendanillo, 2022). His greatest contribution can be observed in the field of pedagogical sciences. After completing his studies at the University of Vermont, he himself gave lectures at several colleges. He is considered to be a significant personality of pragmatic pedagogy. At the 20th century, this field of pedagogy dealt with a significant change in the understanding of the learner as a subject of education (Votava, 2018). In 1882, Dewey enrolled in the recently formed graduate philosophy program at Johns Hopkins University. He was taught there by the founder of pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce, and he was introduced to the writings of the other great pragmatism, William James. It was at Hopkins that Dewey came under the writings of Hegel, the philosopher who along with Peirce and James had the most profound effect upon Dewey's own philosophical development.

Dewey was the most systematic exponent of the distinctive American school of the philosophical thought known as pragmatism. His philosophical pragmatism, concern with interaction, reflection and experience, and interest in community and democracy, were brought together to form a highly suggestive educative form. And Upon completion of his graduate studies in 1884, Dewey accepted a teaching position

at the University of Michigan. He moved on to become chair of the Department of philosophy, psychology, and education at the University of Chicago in 1894.

In his Chicago years, Dewey founded what came to be known as the Dewey school, a laboratory school in which his educational theories could be implemented and tested. He became an outspoken advocate for social reform and for his liberal political agenda. Nevertheless, Dewey has made the most significant contribution to the development of educational thinking in the twentieth century.

In 1937, Dewey chaired the famous commission that vindicated by Leon Trotsky of the charges made against him at the Moscow trials. In November 1951 after his ninety-second birthday, Dewey suffered an injury that made his life miserable. He fell and broke his hip when he played with his grandchildren. However, despite his physical injuries, Dewey got his type writer and continued his philosophical works. John Dewey had also a pneumonia that was occurred on May 31, 1952. Late in the afternoon of June 1, 1952, in New York, He was gasping for breath until he died at 7 o'clock in the evening of the same date. His teachings and philosophy continue to thrive in his institution up to present times.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In John Dewey's 1899 lectures, the concept of experience evolved. It was on this year when the concept of experience became the master term of his philosophy. And on his twelfth lecture, he used experience and incorporate it in his definition of education which is "the process of remaking, or reconstituting, experience, so as to give more socialized content." Before this year the concept of experience there was not yet a wide discussion of experience in his writings (Crick, 2004). Frank Ryan (1994), in his discussions affirmed about Dewey's primary experience. He started with the background as others would do, that Dewey's philosophy is a reaction to the classical notion that experience is a matter of cognition. In *Democracy and Education*, first published in 1916, Dewey described education as the "process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow men" (p. 349). In this sense, for Dewey, how human beings learn is based on how they experience the world.

This recent study has been conformed with the study conducted by Aliya Sikandar titled *John Dewey and His Philosophy of Education* that concurred with what Dewey strongly supported experiential learning, as it offers students a hands-on, collaborative learning experience, which helps them to "fully learn new skills and knowledge" (Haynes, Sakai, Rees, Gilbert, Frith & Passingham, 2007). In this reaction Dewey has attempted to make idealism and empiricism reconcile in the continuous play of having and knowing. The disposition of John Dewey not just simply limits the ideas that experience entails both the process of comprehending and affecting the world around us, as well as the process of being impacted and

transformed by that experience. Yet, for Dewey an inclination becomes a plan of action as a result of the encountered experience. This is where Dewey's theory of humanism comes into play wherein the child is expressly recognized as the key actor of the entire learning process as he or she finds by doing. This premise has been conformed with the study done by Hassen, (2021) that fundamental to Dewey's philosophical creed which places the child at the center of education, focusing on the development of child who is a useful part of society; a society that believes in fairness and freedom, and implements democratic traits and principles wherein it deeply rooted in democratic ideals, which promoted equal voice among all participants in the learning experience.

### CONCLUSION

Although Dewey's considerable innumerable contributions and works are in the realm of education, thereby granting the limitation of the scope of this study that merely focuses on giving emphasis the elucidation of Dewey's advocacy which is the child- or learner-centered education. Essentially, Dewey's philosophical creed in education pointed out to its focus on the development of a child who plays a significant role in the society which Dewey believes that as children should be raised in such a way that will enhance their usefulness in society. By this, education should gear towards grooming the child towards societal growth and development.

The principles of Dewey being a pragmatic educationist as it relates to learning are still relevant to modern education, as it provides a more conducive, pedagogical, practical, and constructive approach toward teaching and learning. According to him, the curriculum should be relevant to students' lives. He saw "learning by doing" and the development of practical life skills as crucial to children's education. Dewey argued that rather than placing the curriculum and institution at the center, learning should be learner-centric, thus learning by a "hands-on" approach.

Thus, this recurring principle of Dewey in education by which he remarkably believed that students' experiences shape the future decisions that a learner engages has significant impact and even met the needs in the school of experience of every child as a learner in educational process and, thus it promotes a positive global change in this contemporary times.

### References

- Acampado, A. G. (2019). Understanding experience: Dewey's philosophy. *International Journal of Educational Research and Studies*, 1(1), 1-6.
- Aliya Sikandar. (2020). John Dewey and His Philosophy of Education. *Journal of Education and Educational Development*, 2(2). Retrieved from <http://jmsnew.iobmresearch.com/index.php/joed/article/view/214>.
- Bantock, G.H. (1963). *Education in an industrial society*. London: Faber.



Bendanillo, A. (2022). Education in Immanuel Kant and John Dewey: A Comparative Analysis. Available at SSRN 4249493.

Bradshaw, P., Cartwright, M., & Wise, C. (2012). Leading professional practice in education. *Leading Professional Practice in Education*, 1-304.

Cahn, Steven. *Classic and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Education*. New York: McGraw Hill Companies, 1997.

Craig, C. J., You, J., Zou, Y., Verma, R., Stokes, D., Evans, P., & Curtis, G. (2018). The embodied nature of narrative knowledge: A cross-study analysis of embodied knowledge in teaching, learning, and life. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 71, 329-340.

Crick Nathan. (2004). John Dewey's aesthetics of communication: The Southern Communication Journal; Memphis. 2004; 69(4):303-319.

Dar, R. A. (2021). Educational Philosophy of John Dewey and His Main Contribution to Education.

Darling, J. (1994). *Child centered education and its critics*. London: Paul Chapman

Dewey, J. (1944), *Democracy and Education* (Original Work Published 1916), Myers Education Press, Gorham, Maine, Reprinted in 2018.

Dewey, J. (1910). *How we think*. New York: Prometheus Books.

Dewey, J. (2000). My pedagogic creed (1897). *Philosophical documents in education*, 2, 92-100.

Dewey, John. *The Child and The Curriculum*. London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Dewey, John. *The School and Society*. Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1900.

Dewey, J. (1987). The psychology of effort. *The Philosophical Review*, 6(1), 43-56.

Entwhistle, H. (1970). *Child centered education*. London: Methuen.

Freedman, B., Fuks, A., & Weijer, C. (1993). In loco parentis minimal risk as an ethical threshold for research upon children. *The Hastings Center Report*, 23(2), 13-19.

Joseph Ratner, *Intelligence in the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1939), 527.

John S. Brubacher, *John Dewey: His Thoughts and Influence*, ed. John Blewett, S.J. New York: Fordham University Press, 1970, p. 102.

Hassen, M. Z. (2021). *John Dewey's Philosophy of Education: A Critical Reflections*.

Haynes, J. D., Sakai, K., Rees, G., Gilbert, S., Frith, C., & Passingham, R. E. (2007). Reading hidden intentions in the human brain. *Current Biology*, 17(4), 323-328.

Hohr, H. (2013). The concept of experience by John Dewey revisited: Conceiving, feeling and "enlivening". *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 32, 25-38.

Kalande, W. M. (2006). The influence of science teacher preparation programs on instructional practices of beginning primary school teachers in Malawi (Doctoral dissertation, Virginia Tech).

Kant, Immanuel. *On Education*. Translated by Annette Churton. Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., Publishers, 1900.

Mangila, Benjamin (2022). Teaching Effectiveness and Work Performance of General Education Instructors in a Higher Education Institution in the Philippines. *Akademika DO* - 10.17576/akad-2022-9203-07.

Nowell, L. (2015). Pragmatism and integrated knowledge translation: exploring the compatibilities and tensions. *Nursing open*, 2(3), 141-148.

Peirce C. (1905) Review of Nichols' *A treatise on cosmology*. In *Meaning and Action: A Critical History of Pragmatism* (Thayer H.S., ed.), Hackett, Indianapolis, IN, pp. 493-495.

Pocock, S. J., Smith, M., & Baghurst, P. (1994). Environmental lead and children's intelligence: a systematic review of the epidemiological evidence. *Bmj*, 309(6963), 1189-1197.

Pring, R. (2007). *John Dewey: Continuum library of educational thought*. London: Continuum.

Ryan, f. Primary experience as settled meaning: Dewey's conception o. *Philosophy Today*, 1994; 38(1):29. Retrieved from <https://ezproxy.usjr.edu.ph:2293/docview/205391046?accountid=33262>.

Shwartz, Y., Ben-Zvi, R., & Hofstein, A. (2005). The importance of involving high-school chemistry teachers in the process of defining the operational meaning of 'chemical literacy'. *International Journal of Science Education*, 27(3), 323-344.

Sikandar, A. (2015). John Dewey and his philosophy of education. *Journal of Education and Educational Development*, 2(2).

Sthur J. *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy: Essential Readings and Interpretative essays*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 437-491.

Tung, K. Y. (2013). *Philosophy of christian education*. Yogyakarta: ANDI.

Votava, Pavel (2018). The Development and Understanding of the Concept of 'Experience' in John Dewey's Theory of Experiential Learning. Available at *Caritas et Veritas*. DOI: 10.32725/cetv.2018.040.

Woenardi, T. N., Supratno, H., Mudjito, M., & Putri, I. O. R. (2022). The Concept of Education According to John Dewey and Cornelius Van Til and Its

Implications in The Design of Early Childhood Character Curriculum. IJORER: International Journal of Recent Educational Research, 3(3), 269-287.

Woods, R.G. & Barrow, R. (2006). An introduction to the philosophy of education. London: Methuen. Vol. 2 No. 2 (December 2015) Vol. 2 No. 2 (December 2015) 200 201.