

Theories of Childhood

An Introduction to

Dewey

Montessori

Erikson

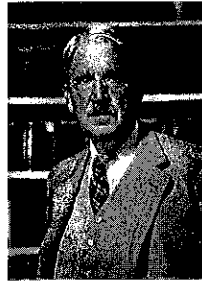
Piaget

&

Vygotsky

Carol Garhart Mooney

Chapter 1: John Dewey



[T]he fundamental issue is not of new versus old education nor of progressive against traditional education but a question of what, if anything whatever, must be worthy of the name Education.

John Dewey

Biography

Born in Burlington, Vermont, in 1859, John Dewey is truly the American educator who has most influenced our thinking about education in this country. Dewey's family had farmed in Vermont for three generations. He attended the University of Vermont, where he studied philosophy. In 1884 he received a Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins University, which led to a teaching position at the University of Michigan. While serving as a professor of philosophy there, he became friends with one of his students, Alice Chipman. They were married in 1886, and it was largely the influence of his wife that brought Dewey to the study of education. Chipman was interested in social problems and their relationship to education. Her interest was contagious, and soon she and Dewey were working together to determine the best ways to support the education of children in America.

In 1894 they moved to the University of Chicago, where Dewey took a position teaching philosophy.

Photograph: John Dewey Papers, Special Collections/Morris Library, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

Chapter 1

He found the position desirable because it was intended that he blend the teaching of philosophy with both psychology and educational theory. Within two years he had established the famous laboratory school that attracted attention around the world. Dewey's Laboratory School established the University of Chicago as the center of thought on *progressive education*, the movement toward more democratic and child-centered education. Progressive education was a reaction to the rigid, more formal style of traditional education during the nineteenth century. It was considered genius by many and criticized as too radical by others. Dewey's involvement with the lab school was relatively short-lived but created, in a few years, a wealth of educational research and theory that continues to drive many of our best practices today.

In 1904, arguing with administrators over education budgets, Dewey resigned his position at the University of Chicago. He took a post at Columbia University in New York City where he continued to teach and write for another four decades. Dewey has contributed volumes of work to our knowledge base in educational psychology and theory. Much of his work is as relevant to the struggles of American educators today as it was nearly a half century ago. His writings cover a broad range of topics relevant to teaching. Dewey continued writing and revising manuscripts until his death in 1952 at the age of ninety-three.

In 1899, John Dewey gave a talk to the parents of children in his school. The parents were worried about the changing times. On the edge of the industrial age, these parents of one hundred years ago were old enough to remember the "agricultural era" in America. They remembered when children were educated at home by

watching their parents do meaningful work. They thought the new generation lacked character and values. Dewey agreed with parents that the home was no longer educating children in the way it had in the past, but he gave them good counsel. "We cannot overlook the factors of discipline and of character building involved ... but it is useless to bemoan the departure of the good old days of children's modesty, reverence, and implicit obedience, if we expect merely by bemoaning the exhortation to bring them back" (*The School and Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1899).

What Dewey was trying to get his parent group to understand was that change brings new problems but also new opportunities. He urged parents to think of new ways they could all find to help children learn to be socially responsible people, without trying to cling to times gone by.

At the turn of another century, teachers struggle with the very same issues. In her 1997 publication, *Dewey's Laboratory School: Lessons for Today*, Laurel Tanner points out that a century ago Dewey asked the questions we still seek answers to in the twenty-first century: How do we best introduce children to subject matter? Should we have multiage classrooms? How can we best plan curriculum? How can supervisors support classroom teachers? How should thinking skills be taught? Significant answers to these and similar questions about teaching can be found in Dewey's many volumes. Dewey's work is echoed in the writing of many contemporary educational theorists. As we speak today of dispositions for

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Chapter 1

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Dewey is most associated with the progressive education movement in America. He played a central role in its development in the United States. In Europe, Maria Montessori and Jean Piaget were spreading the same message. These early theorists all agreed that children learn from doing and that education should involve real-life material and experiences and should encourage experimentation and independent thinking. These ideas, now quite common, were considered revolutionary in Dewey's day.

Dewey's Theories

John Dewey wrote so many volumes on the philosophy and practice of education that an introductory text cannot begin to cover his contribution to our field. As a progressive educator he shared with Vygotsky, Montessori, and Piaget the central ideas of that movement: education should be child centered; education must be both active and interactive; and education must involve the social world of the child and the community. In 1897 Dewey published his philosophy of education in a document called *My Pedagogic Creed* (Washington, DC: The Progressive Education Association, 1897). Here's what he said about education:

- "[T]rue education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself."

John Dewey

Dewey believed that children learn best when they interact with other people, working both alone and cooperatively with peers and adults.

"The child's own instinct and powers furnish the material and give the starting point for all education."

According to Dewey, children's interests form the basis for curriculum planning. He believed that the interests and background of each child and group must be considered when teachers plan learning experiences.

"I believe that education, therefore, is a process of living and not preparation for future living."

Dewey believed that education is part of life. He believed that as long as people are alive, they are learning, and that education should address what the person needs to know at the time, not prepare them for the future. Dewey thought that curriculum should grow out of real home, work, and other life situations.

"[T]he school life should grow gradually out of the home life ... it is the business of the school to deepen and extend the child's sense of values bound up in his home life."

Dewey thought teachers must be sensitive to the values and needs of families. The values and culture of families and communities should be reflected in and deepened by what happens at school.

"I believe, finally, that the teacher is engaged, not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of a proper social life."

Dewey believed that teachers do not teach just subject matter, but also how to live in society. In addition, he thought that teachers do not just teach individual children, but also shape the society.

the last piece of Dewey's pedagogic creed that is the
ngboard for some of his most provocative ideas. He
eved that teachers needed to have confidence in
r skills and abilities. He believed teachers need to

Chapter 1

trust their knowledge and experience and, using both, provide appropriate activities to nurture inquiry and dispositions for learning in the children they work with.

The Teacher's Role

In *Experience and Education* (1938), Dewey said that teachers should have more confidence when planning children's learning experiences. He said teachers were too afraid that instruction would infringe upon the freedom and creativity of their students. Dewey thought

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that children need assistance from teachers in making sense of their world.

What should this assistance look like? Dewey thought it was important for teachers to observe children and to determine from these observations what kinds of experiences the children are interested in and ready for. He thought that the educator has a serious

responsibility to invest in planning and organizing for children's learning activities. In other words, he believed that it is the teacher's job to determine the curriculum based on knowledge of the children and their abilities. He felt that suggestions and guidance coming from thoughtful teachers, who after all have more life experience and more general knowledge than children, could not possibly be less useful to children than the ideas they arrive at by accident.

When progressive education was criticized for allowing children too much freedom without appropriate guidance, Dewey agreed. "It is a ground for legitimate criticism when the ongoing movement of progressive

education fails to recognize that the problem of selection and organization of subject matter for study and learning is fundamental," he responded (Dewey, 1938, 78). Dewey was saying that children need teachers to decide what is safe and also developmentally and individually appropriate for them.

Dewey was concerned that many teachers of his time were claiming to be part of progressive education merely because they departed from more traditional approaches. He recognized the danger in moving away from one direction without clearly understanding the new direction one wanted to follow. He also thought this was a very common pattern among educators. He believed there were teachers who were drawn to progressive education because they thought it would be easier. He knew that some teachers used the new ideas as justification for improvising or allowing children to choose their experiences, uninhibited by teacher planning or direction.

Dewey believed that the path to quality education is to know the children well, to build their experiences on past learning, to be organized, and to plan well. He also believed that the demands of this new method make observing, documenting, and keeping records of classroom events much more important than when traditional methods are used.

Dewey believed that in order to provide educational experiences for children, teachers must

- have a strong base of general knowledge as well as knowledge of specific children
- be willing to make sense of the world for children on the basis of their greater knowledge and experience
- invest in observation, planning, organization, and documentation

Chapter 1

How can Dewey's theory about the teacher's role in education guide teachers in early childhood programs?

- Observe children closely and plan curriculum from their interests and experience.
- Don't be afraid to use your knowledge of the children and the world to make sense of the world for children.

Plan Purposeful Curriculum

When visiting a group of four year olds recently, I noticed a child who spent most of her free time crawling about the room. She would say "meow" to anyone she passed. She did not play with other children. She did not seek interaction from her teacher. She simply roamed around, meowing.

I asked the teacher about this child. "She likes to think she's a cat," the teacher said.

"Why is that?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," the teacher said.

"Does she have a cat at home?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," the teacher said again.

"Do you ever wonder what makes her do it?" I pushed.

"She really enjoys it ... and that's enough for me," the teacher said, smiling confidently, and added, "Learning should be fun!"

This is not what Dewey meant by "teacher confidence"! He said that confidence should spring from the base of knowledge that the teacher applies to classroom situations. That knowledge includes knowing the child (Does she have a cat?); individualizing curricula (Does she need to work through the death of a pet?); understanding the social nature of learning (How can the teacher or peers help or join her?); and preparation for life (What is

the point of this behavior? How and what is she learning from it that she can use as she goes through life?).

Dewey certainly believed that when children were engaged, learning was fun and exciting in and of itself. However, in this example, the teacher was content to accept "fun" as a justification for aimless activity, without trying to understand the meaning of the experience for the child. She did not build on the child's preoccupation with being a cat to extend the girl's knowledge of the world, to advance her skills, or to support her development. She did not connect the child's interest to her own broad knowledge of the world, or to learning that had gone before. Using Dewey's criteria, this would be termed a *mis-educative* experience.

Here's a very different example. In a classroom where five year olds were at work, I observed some children playing with glue. At first glance this activity seemed aimless as well as wasteful. The children had taken empty thread spools from the art area. Placing a finger under the bottom hole, they filled the spool with glue. Quickly turning it sideways, the children blew the glue out of the hole. "Wow, you did it, just like yesterday!" one child shouted exuberantly as the glue spread across the art table.

Fascinated, I was wondering what kind of curriculum the school followed when the teacher quickly intervened. "You must be showing our visitor what you did with eggs yesterday," she said. She explained that the children had been looking at decorated eggs from around the world. The teacher had shown them how the artists prepare the eggshells by blowing out the raw egg inside. Now the children's behavior made sense to me. Then the teacher said, "You really understood that process with the eggs. You have done the same thing

with the spools and glue. We can't use up all of our glue, though, so I want you to put that away now. Then we can go check on our eggs from yesterday and see if they are ready to decorate."

This teacher knew her students well. She knew exactly what they were doing and why. She affirmed the connection between the eggs and the glue and then redirected the children to the original project. She wasn't afraid to say, "I see what you are doing. It makes sense, but let's not do it with glue. Let's get back to our eggs." Her guidance assured that the experimenting was turned from mere *experience* to *learning experience*. This is the confidence Dewey speaks of. It is based on knowledge of both specific children and the learning process.

Make Sense of the World for Children

Dewey also said that beyond their knowledge of children, teachers must be willing to tap their general knowledge of the world to help children make sense of their surroundings and experiences. This is a challenge for many early childhood teachers, who have often been discouraged from sharing their knowledge with children.

For example, I was recently at a statewide gathering of Head Start teachers who were working toward their Child Development Associate credential. As part of the seminar, teachers were reflecting on the project work they were doing with children. One teacher, Kathy, talked about her class's investigation of winter birds. The children had observed and commented on the V formation of birds flying above the play area. Their teachers explained that the birds were going south for the winter. The children knew that not all birds left New England because there were birds coming daily to their bird

feeder, and this launched the class into a project studying the birds that remained in the area during the winter.

Kathy showed the group some cardinals that the children had made. They were so realistic that at first no one guessed they were made from paper plates, painted and feathered. Several teachers also commented that they looked as if they had been made by older children.

Some of the teachers were disturbed by Kathy's presentation. "Did you use a model?" one asked.

"No," Kathy responded. "We had the children carefully observe the cardinals in the yard. We brought in lots of books with pictures and photographs, and when we set up the activity, we only set out materials and paint appropriate to making cardinals."

The discussion got more heated. "You actually did this with five year olds? I can't believe you would only set out red and brown paint! What if someone wanted theirs to be purple or green? Isn't this whole thing infringing on the children's creativity?" There was an explosion of questions and comments.

Kathy was tentative. Her head teacher had warned her that some of her peers might not understand or approve of the work they were doing with the class. Quietly she shared their approach. "We didn't put green paint out because there aren't green cardinals. There has been a lot of painting and drawing in other areas of the classroom, but we think of this project as scientific investigation, not creative arts. We are studying birds, what they look like, what they eat, where they live. We want the children to know more about some of the birds that live in their backyards and we thought it was important to share accurate information. Restricting the colors they painted with for this project has actually made their study more interesting. Last week I overheard a child tell her classmate, as

Chapter 1

they stared out the window, "That must be a blue jay. It can't be a cardinal because they are all red!"

This was followed by another burst of comments:

"Isn't it inappropriate to tell children what color they should use on a project?"

"If children are painting, shouldn't they use whatever color they want?"

"Well, but bird watching is different from easel painting."

"Do we really want children pointing to a pigeon and saying, 'There's a cardinal?'"

"If a child brought you a picture of an octopus and it only had six tentacles, would you correct her? Would

you say, 'That's wrong; go back and add two more tentacles?'"

We decided that, as teachers, our responsibility includes making sense of the world to children even if it means having them take another look at the color of birds or their two-legged horses.

Kathy responded slowly and thoughtfully. "We wouldn't say 'It's wrong, go back and fix it!' but we might say some other thought-provoking things. We would have many books about sea life with drawings and photographs. We

might say something like, 'Let's look at your drawing of the octopus and the pictures in *National Geographic*.' We might call attention to the fact that these creatures sure have more legs than we do! Many children would then begin counting and would realize that a 'real' octopus has eight tentacles. This is the kind of discovery that learning is all about!"

The other teachers were not all convinced. There was a long discussion, with comments such as these:

"Process is what is important to young children."

"Each child's work should look the way she wants it to."

John Dewey

"his whole approach seems manipulative."
"We NEVER tell children how to draw."
"his doesn't seem very developmentally appropriate!"
Cathy explained to the group that the teachers at her
school had visited the Hundred Languages of Children
project. They had been amazed at some of the work
done by preschoolers in Reggio Emilia, Italy. After
attending project seminars, the staff had reflected on
their current work with the children. Their new learning
experiences convinced them that they had been underestimating
the children were capable of. "We decided that, as
educators, our responsibility includes making sense of the
world for children even if it means having them take
a closer look at the color of birds or their two-legged
friends!" she concluded.
Cathy's story is a good example of what Dewey
advocated by teachers using their greater knowledge to help
children make sense of their world. Children in her
classroom have ample opportunity for unfettered cre-
ative expression, but in the study she described, chil-
dren were using art as a tool for scientific investigation.
By helping the children look closely at the birds they
were studying and giving them the tools to make accu-
rate representations of them, these teachers built on the
children's knowledge. They helped them learn more
about the birds. They also gave them skills they could
use for future investigations. This, according to Dewey, is
what teachers should use their knowledge of the world to
build children's knowledge.

Education versus Mis-Education

...avoided the either/or discussions so common to

Chapter 1

not a matter of new versus old approaches to education, but rather what conditions make any experience worthy of being called "educational." Dewey insisted that education and experience are related but not equal, and that some experiences are not educational at all. He called these *mis-educative* experiences. Dewey believed that an activity is not a learning activity if it lacks purpose and organization. He criticized the more traditional formal teaching environments of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in which children learned information by rote and spent days reciting facts out of context. He also criticized situations in which teachers set up the learning environment and then turn children loose to explore without offering any guidance or suggestions, or randomly set up experiences without providing any unifying theme, continuity, or purpose. Dewey thought that rather than saying, "The children will enjoy this," teachers need to ask the following questions when they plan activities for children:

- How does this expand on what these children already know?
- How will this activity help this child grow?
- What skills are being developed?
- How will this activity help these children know more about their world?
- How does this activity prepare these children to live more fully?

From Dewey's perspective, an experience can only be called "educational" if it meets these criteria:

- It is based on the children's interests and grows out of their existing knowledge and experience.
- It supports the children's development.
- It helps the children develop new skills.
- It adds to the children's understanding of their world.
- It prepares the children to live more fully.

John Dewey

How can early childhood teachers be guided by Dewey's criteria for educational experiences?

Do not accept "it's fun" as a justification for curriculum, but ask how an activity will support children's development and learning.

Invest in organization and documentation of the children's work.

"Fun" Is Not Enough

Dewey believed that when people are engaged in learning something that interested them and is related to their experience, the process of learning is enjoyable. However, he also said that enjoyment on its own is not enough to make an experience educational. Teachers must use Dewey's criteria to make sure the experiences they plan for children are not just "fun" but also build on children's learning.

For example, last year I visited a classroom where the children were having a make-your-own sundae celebration. There was much excitement in the room. Children told me they could choose frozen yogurt or ice cream, toppings like M&Ms, chocolate syrup, or strawberries. The teacher did a survey at the end of the day asking the children which flavor was their favorite. She had carefully prepared a poster. It said "Our Favorite Ice Cream!" and had cut out ice cream cones in brown, white, and red. The children chose cones and put their names on them. When the teacher called their names, they placed their cones next to the word *chocolate*, *vanilla*, or *strawberry*. As Zachary taped his brown cone to the chart, he looked up and said, "My favorite is Cherry Garcia."

After I asked the teacher how she thought the activity had gone. Like so many teachers I speak with, she

asked why she had planned this particular activity, she smiled and said, "I knew they would love it!"

Dewey would say this teacher had not done enough planning for this activity. It's unclear whether the children had expressed an interest in ice cream, or how the activity built on any prior information they had. What did they already know about ice cream? What were they curious about? It's also hard to see how the activity supported children's development or helped them learn new skills. The documentation of the activity was limited to the chart, which was inaccurate—the only choices were chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry, which didn't reflect Zachary's favorite, Cherry Garcia, and his choice of a brown cone required no association of colors with flavors. In addition, by concluding an activity with a "My favorite ..." chart, the teacher has not left the children wondering or searching for more.

Invest in Organization and Documentation

A different teacher turned the same subject, ice cream, into a lesson Dewey would probably have identified as a learning experience. A kindergarten teacher had invited a parent to come in and share an old family recipe for peach ice cream. In preparing the children for this visit, she discovered that none of the children had ever tasted peach ice cream before. The teacher asked the children why they thought no one had ever tasted it, and she documented their answers. Here are some of them:

It's not at the store.
It's a fruit, not an ice cream.
I'm allergic!
Chocolate is best.

John Dewey

The teacher asked the children to talk to their families about ice cream. "Do you eat much ice cream? Does your brother or sister have a favorite flavor? Have you ever made ice cream at home?" she asked. The next day's worth of information was much longer: Tom's dad liked to go on a road; Heather had gone to the Ben & Jerry's factory to watch them make ice cream; Nina's grandmother had made orange sherbet, which is sort of like ice cream but not exactly!

When the parent came in to help the children make their own ice cream, she used an old-fashioned ice cream maker. It had been her grandmother's. Children took turns mixing the ingredients and turning the crank. The teacher asked the children if they thought this was how the ice cream they got at the store was made, and she recorded their responses. Here are some of the things they said:

—it's too slow.

—not big enough to make all those ice creams.

—they have to use gigantic bowls.

—they don't turn the handle like this; they use a huge mixer

—like when my mom makes cake.

The teacher observed from these responses that the children did not know how ice cream could be made in large quantities. She saw that they were unable to make connections between the ice cream they were making at home and the idea of an ice cream factory. She asked the children how they might find out how huge quantities of ice cream are made, and she wrote down what they said. Among their answers were:

—let somebody do it.

—go to the supermarket and ask them!

—ask the cook.

Chapter 1

The teacher tried to follow up on the children's suggestions. They visited an ice cream and yogurt factory. They talked to other people and each other about ice cream. The body of information kept growing. Grandparents shared stories of eating ice cream all day when they got their tonsils out as children. The children wrote stories, drew pictures, collected recipes, took field trips, and took photographs to document all this learning.

This class also had a "make your own sundae" party. Families were invited. The children served the peach ice cream. The room was decorated with their charts, graphs, stories, and pictures. This party was a celebration of weeks of learning about something familiar to everyone.

Meanwhile, the children were already talking about their next project for study: refrigeration! During the ice cream study, Emily's grandfather had told her about cutting ice from nearby New Hampshire lakes in winter to store and use for iceboxes in summer. Many of the children had never heard of pre-electricity refrigeration. They all swam in the lake where Emily's grandfather had cut ice in the "old days." They were fascinated by this story and curious about how food was kept fresh before electricity. Their learning was spiraling in new directions.

This story is an example of what Dewey would call an "educational" experience. The teacher observed and asked questions to find out what the children already knew. She set up experiences for them to discover things they didn't already know. She used her knowledge of development to plan curriculum that was age appropriate, and she documented the children's learning to support her understanding of their thinking. The success of

the project is measured by the fact that it led into the next area of study. The children were left curious, wanting more, and confident in their ability to dive in and satisfy their curiosity.

Discussion Questions

1. Progressive education has been called many different things. What are some of the misconceptions about it? Give a brief explanation that summarizes Dewey's ideas about progressive education.
2. There is a great deal of discussion today about *emergent curriculum*, or planning curriculum that *emerges* from the children's interests and experience. Is this consistent or inconsistent with Dewey's idea about education? Why?
3. Many parents want an overtly structured environment for their children and feel anxious if they think that the children play too much. Using Dewey's ideas, prepare a response for parents that illustrates the learning structure behind your program.

Suggestions for Further Reading

- Dewey, John. 1938. *Experience and education*. New York: Collier Macmillan.
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