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## **An Analysis of John Dewey's Conception of the School as a Special Environment of Formal Education: Its Relevance in this Era of Globalization**

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**Abstract:** This study aims to analyze Dewey's statement about the functions of school as a special environment of formal education in the context of globalization. This article focuses on the need to rethink about the most important functions assigned to the school. It highlights the necessity to improve and adapt the functions of school according to the issue of individual creativity and development in the context of mass education, multiculturalism, and the multiplication of training environment.

**Keywords:** Functions of the school, Formal education, Environment, Globalization

### **Introduction**

John Dewey was a prominent American philosopher of the first half of the twentieth century (Westbrook, 1993) who influenced and continues to impact the philosophy of education. Dewey was born in Burlington (Vermont) in 1859 and graduated from the University of Vermont in 1879. After his PhD degree on "Kant's Psychology" in 1884, he had assumed the leadership of the philosophy department at the University of Michigan (Westbrook, 1993). In 1910, he was elected to the National Academy of Science as a Psychologist (Pillsbury, 1957).

Dewey made great contributions in several areas such as philosophy (pragmatism), pedagogy (progressivism), logic (instrumentalism), psychology (functionalism), aesthetic (aesthetic naturalism), axiology (empirism cognitivism), etc. (Radu, 2011). His writings are related to metaphysics, epistemology, logic, aesthetics, ethics, social and political philosophy, philosophy and education, and philosophical anthropology issues (Gouinlock, 2005). He published a huge number of books and articles (Noddings, 1998); and made for this purpose an unusually wide range of theoretical contributions to human knowledge and societal progress (Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, 2007). His educational thought had had a significant influence across the globe.

In his book, *Democracy and Education*, a classic on philosophy of education, Dewey provides a theoretical foundation of democratic education (Waks, 2007). This book which was drawn up during the First World War (Hansen, 2006), is still actual today. In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey outlines the social role of education and presents his conception of educational aims, methods, democracy, values, teaching and subject matters, etc. He notices the necessity of balancing theory and practice, experience and knowledge, work and leisure, interest and effort. Some features like the role of the teacher, the necessity to improve the participation of students and ideal school are recurrent in the book.

In the theoretical part of the text, more precisely in chapter 2, John Dewey talks about the necessity of providing a good environment for formal education. According to him, education is a continuous process of adaptation to the environment. An environment which is constituted by the "conditions that promote or hinder, stimulate or inhibit, the characteristic activities of a living being" (Dewey, 1922). The present study is guided by the following questions: what are the functions of the school according to John Dewey? What could be the limits of his perception concerning the functions of the school? How to improve these functions? Through this study, we are trying to present on the one hand Dewey's conception of the functions of the school, and on the other hand, the necessity to improve and adjust these functions in this century of globalization.

## **Dewey's Conception of the Functions of the School**

According to Dewey, education is a process of growth and acquisition of culture, and it appears that social environment educates its immature members. Thus, the social environment has an educational character. Dewey considers that most of the time, society focuses on the activities through which the immature members can learn good habits. That is why he argues that we always use the environment to educate indirectly. Therefore, it is necessary to provide a special environment of training for immature members of society, and school constitutes this particular environment. It is the only way that allows adults to control the type of education received by their children (Dewey, 1922). School is created expressly to influence the mental and moral dispositions of its members. It is used by communities for the complete transmission of their acquirement. Dewey identifies three main functions of this special training environment: 'simplifying and ordering the factors of the disposition it is wished to develop; purifying and idealizing the existing social customs; creating a wider and better balanced environment than that by which the young would be likely, if left to themselves, to be influenced' (Dewey, 1922).

### **Simplification and Gradual Classification of Important Skills**

Dewey notes that the first social function of the school is to provide a simplified environment which selects the fairly fundamental features and easy to learn by the young people. Because of the complexity of society, the school can establish a progressive order to facilitate the comprehension of our social life (Dewey, 1922). A complete civilization is too complex for entire assimilation; it is necessary to divide it into portions and assimilate it gradually. For this purpose, school permits the choice of the fundamental characteristics of the learning process. It includes the special selection, formulation and organization of subject matter (Dewey, 1922). The choice of the study curriculum is an important function of the school, which determines the professional orientation of the children.

The issue of curriculum selection raises some questions because of its importance, especially since Dewey's ideal of democratic education is not being applied. It is within the school structure that training curricula are certainly developed, but they pursue very specific objectives. Those objectives are not only educational but also political and industrial. As noted by Dewey, the curriculum must be related to the needs of the existing community. Nevertheless, it appears that school curricula somehow kill the talent and genius of young children who study and follow a school curriculum that they did not truly choose. How to be sure that the programs chosen and developed by educational leaders are in accordance with the real needs of parents and children as they are not associated with the process of decision making? It needs to take into account and put into application Dewey's idea of introducing democratic principles in education. Otherwise, the pupils will remain passive consumers of the package delivered by the distributor-teacher and designed by the technocrats (Illich, 1971).

### **Purification and Idealization of Existing Customs**

The second function of the school according to Dewey is to eliminate the shameful features of the pre-existing environment on the mental tendencies of the immature. In fact, every society gets encumbered with many shameful features from the past, so by selecting the best practices, school is the chief agency for the achievement of a better future society (Dewey, 1922). It enhances the choice of the best matter for learning and usage. School helps the society, not to transmit and preserve all realizations, but to transmit the realization which can permit the improvement of our future society (Dewey, 1922). The school institution promotes the transmission of societal myths and constitutes for this purpose a purified medium of action. The school environment facilitates the mastering of certain personal habits which are not necessary commendable. At the beginning of chapter 2, Dewey's notes that by his share in the associated activity, the individual appropriates the purposes, becomes familiar with its methods, subject matters, and acquires needed skills. The school is also an environment of children socialization. It should not be considered only as an institution that shares certain knowledge and skills to students.

However, in some cases, the school environment itself has been the context of instilling bad behavior in students. Modern schools are increasingly infested with social scourges such as juvenile delinquency, drug use, prostitution and all forms of social deviance. Indeed, some children come with certain bad behaviors acquired from their communities and instill it to their classmates. It is noted that several young children who were previously calm in nature, change their behavior and become unruly after a certain time spent in the school

environment. It is increasingly recurrent to see children who smoke, drink alcohol and drug themselves in the school campus even though it is formally forbidden. This issue constitutes a difficulty to the objective of creating an appropriate and balanced environment that school is pursuing.

### **Creation of an Appropriate and Balanced Environment**

Lastly, the school has to balance the various elements within the social environment and to ensure those children are not stuck with a certain stigma because of their birthright. Hence, 'each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitation of the social group' (Dewey, 1922). Therefore, the school permits the establishment of a balanced social environment, exempt from social group restrictions. A school is a meeting place of children from different background and culture. Thus, the school enables an intercultural exchange. The school environment also enables young children to escape from social determinism and offers them the opportunity to change their conditions.

However, it appears that the school system also contributes to create and maintain social inequalities. In our modern society, the inequalities are huge and even perceptible in schools. The cleavage remains present in the society, and sometimes the school participates to the perpetuation of the inequalities. The growing tendency to privatize education engenders social inequalities because not all social strata have the means to access to the school institutions. In some countries, formal education is reserved for some privileged that have the financial resources to afford it. Generally, the children of the proletarians do not go to the same schools as the children of the bourgeois. In developing countries, schooling participates to the creation of new elites with a consumerist mentality (Illich, 1971). The gap between some major world-renowned schools that provide top executives and ordinary schools is so considerable. It appears that obligatory schooling has inevitably polarized the society; and also grades the nations of the world according to an international caste system (Illich, 1971).

The existence of denominational and private schools do not also promote the rapprochement between different religious and cultural communities. This situation contributes to the disparities and the withdrawal of identity. Schooling creates thereby a new form of discrimination. For this purpose, it is necessary to improve and adjust the functions of the school following the circumstances of this century.

### **The Necessity to Improve and Adjust the Functions of the School in this Century of Globalization**

In this context of globalization and multiculturalism, the functions of the school must be closely connected to the realities. It is necessary to improve these functions due to the issue of individual creativity and development in the context of mass education, multiculturalism, and the multiplication of training environment.

### **The Question of Individual Creativity and Development in the Context of Mass Education**

The school environment can be assimilated to a learning setting where ritual elements are taught to students without any consideration of their skills. Students with different skills are thus enrolled in the same programs. In many countries, education consists largely of one teacher taking care of a whole class which comprises a great number of students. It is difficult to have the active participation of all students in these conditions. Consequently, children have very few possibilities and opportunities to express and develop their creativity. Even if the educational institutions enable and promote the participation of the students, their domain of expression and the duration are restrained.

Moreover, by the functions of defining the curricula of studies, the educational system does not promote the creativity of the child. It is clear that the curricula of studies are designed according to the political, economic and ideological thoughts. While as noted by Plowden Lady (1967), the school should be oriented 'on discovery, on first-hand experience, and on opportunities for creative work', quoted from (Barrow & Woods, 2006). The teacher should reveal to the students their ability to make the process by themselves, instead stupefying them by trying to transmit a knowledge that everybody should be able to get by himself (Rancière, 1991).

To deal with this issue, it is important, as proposed Ivan Illich, to create a learning society, where skills training is widely available and encouraged, and where citizens are really associated with developing a critical education (Illich, 1971). In this configuration, the learners and society have a great role to play. Also, the role of the master should be limited as noted by Jacques Rancière to guiding the students to progress towards the knowledge and

not to transmit to them a knowledge which they could acquire by themselves. The need to promote an environment conducive to the personal development and creativity of learners is particularly insistent in this context of multiculturalism.

### **The Necessity of Promoting a Multicultural Education**

Today's educational interests are configuring in large measure by responses to globalization and multiculturalism (Waks, 2007). If the school should take a more active role in teaching certain social functions that are traditionally learned at home, it is necessary to take into account and being careless about religious and cultural differences in the heterogeneous mixture of our society. With the intensification of globalization, there are changes in almost every area of life; even in the educational field, there is a growing internationalization of education. Indeed, globalization, a contemporary phenomenon which contributes to accelerating the circulation of goods, information, and people around the globe, has in many ways changed the shape of education (Gordon & English, 2016). It has played a significant role in the exposure of people to different histories, religions, and cultures (Gordon & English, 2016); but it also conducted to the marginalization of the culture of some communities. Thus, it seems judicious to rethink the functions of the school in this context of globalization.

While globalization has many advantages, it contributes awful to the alienation and acculturation of people. Foreign theories, Western cultures are promoted and taught at the expense of local cultures. The content of the teachings does not reflect the realities of certain societies. Thence, the school functions should be adapted to each context. Each society has its realities, its unique concrete needs, and purposes. Thus the school cannot perform the same functions in different societies. The needs of the Western countries are not the same as those of the African or Asian countries. The school environment should be more responsive to the ideals of each context because no one has a monopoly of knowledge. Even if according to Leonard J. Waks, 'Dewey would certainly reject the dominant version of multicultural education, especially when delivered to segregate groups, as pointless and divisive' (Waks, 2007). It is urgent to adopt the multicultural model of education if not with the multiplication of the alternative learning environment, the school risks losing its value.

### **The Multiplication of Alternative Training Environment**

As reported by Ivan Illich (Illich, 1971), the inverse of school is possible, and it can depend on self-motivated learning. Indeed, many people admit that they acquired knowledge and values, more often outside than inside the school. Moreover, in the formerly societies, the school in the formal sense did not exist; informal education played this role. From the earliest age, young people were trained to respect the customs, the moral, and the learning of certain works. Know-how was passed down from generation to generation (Illich, 1971). Society inculcates a certain number of fundamental values in the individual. Dewey also recognized that the society itself is an environment conducive to education.

Nowadays, real alternatives to conventional school exist and are preferred by many parents. Especially since the introduction of some curricula (such as the sexual education) that have not reached the consensus of all of them. These alternatives to conventional school are as reported by Peter Gray (Gray, 2013), self-directed homeschooling, resources centers, or even unschooling. Self-directed homeschool involves the pursuit by the children of their interests with the support of parents and others members of the family, while resource centers are related to that offered by community and support for self-directed learners (Gray, 2013). Recently, the percentage of homeschooled children in the United States are increasingly growing (Gray, 2013).

In this context of modernization and technological progress, we notice that school is not the only appropriate environment for learning and education. The information and communication technologies such as the internet, television, and radio are increasingly used as tools or even educational environment. The internet has become a new environment for learning, and it is more and more used by many people in the world. A person can stay in his room and take a course in another environment from his computer and an internet connection. This method of learning is increasingly popular because it provides more choices. Many institutions have established distance training through online courses. The increasing use of educational software also tends to decentralize the learning sphere.

## Conclusion

In chapter two of *Democracy and Education*, we notice that John Dewey discusses the necessity of providing a good environment for formal education. So, he is promoting the creation of an environment which is more appropriate for the study. An environment that could be more inclusive and focused on the participation of each student. However, we must recognize that the ideal of Dewey has a certain number of limitations. Despite the relevance of the functions of the school listed by John Dewey, these functions do not always produce the desired effects, but sometimes give rise to a large number of perverse effects. Especially since Dewey's much-desired democratic participation is not being implemented.

In this context of globalization and technological advances, the educational ideal promoted by John Dewey is being harmed. Firstly, the school environment itself, instead of facilitating learning and encouraging student participation, imposes a certain number of courses to follow. Secondly, instead of eliminating the bad practices and habits of society, the school environment is sometimes a place of initiation to social deviance. Finally, instead of promoting equality and create a balanced environment, the school sometimes promotes disparities and in some ways contributes to the perpetuation of social cleavages.

It is, therefore, necessary to rethink the primary functions assigned to the school. These functions could focus on the creativity of each learner and not on the quasi-religious respect of curricula; the promotion of multiculturalism; and the multiplication of learning environments. Dewey himself recognizes the risk of extent developing formal education, but he didn't give new issues for this problem. A solution to this problem can be the association of formal and informal environment for better learning.

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