

An Analysis of John Dewey's

Educational Philosophies

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John Dewey's educational philosophies have had perhaps the most profound influence on the field of education. That may be an arguable position, but allow me to explain my rationale for that statement.

While it is true that so many have influenced the debate for the hearts of stakeholders (Harris, Hall, Thorndike, Sneddin, Bode, Eliot, Counts, etc.) and many have advanced their philosophies into practice, Dewey's ability to seize the middle ground can clearly be seen as having the longest and most weighty affect on today's American schools.

The elements of Traditional education and Progressive education tend toward polar extremes. Dewey was clear in his writings that those advocating for their position ended up with an "either/or" position. In Dewey's writings, it can be seen that he found positions on either extreme were questionable. His philosophy of moderation can be seen in the actual school culture today. What we see is a blend of Progressive and Traditional

educational philosophies that has created what I like to call the “Other” philosophy. “Other” meaning a place other than either end of the philosophical spectrum. Our policies, while vacillating tend to be rooted in the reality of budget constraints, an ever diversifying population, and a variety of real world challenges. In my opinion, educational programs and real world applications in place today are reflective of Dewey’s approach to educational policy.

As I have read Dewey’s philosophies, I have noted 5 big ideas that I would like to highlight.

They are:

1. Traditional and progressive education align themselves on opposite ends of the educational philosophy spectrum. As a result, the advocates for each philosophy present an either/or mentality for choosing between the 2. Dewey rejects that in favor of a balanced look at the positive and negative characteristics of each.
2. A flaw in Progressive education is that while it may be true that all genuine education comes about through experience, not all experiences are educative. In fact, some may be mis-educative.

3. Traditional education is ineffective because it doesn't account for the gap between the experiences and abilities of students and the adult oriented content and teaching methodology that is based on adult skills.
4. A weakness of Traditional education is that it (the curriculum) is fixed and doesn't change to meet the changes happening in society and therefore doesn't effectively teach our children.
5. Advocates of the Progressive theory discount Traditional education based on the accusation that the entrenched, rigid, status quo, establishment characteristics of Tradition is inherently flawed. Dewey points out that as Progressive education becomes established as an accepted philosophy, it too takes on those flawed characteristics.

Dewey's thoughts on educational philosophy are complicated and nuanced. Their true value is their apolitical nature. I would hope that more leaders would take his honest approach to policy making. In doing so, perhaps more workable, pragmatic solutions to the challenges facing America's schools would be found.