John Dewey and Progressive Education
Sheldon Clark

An American Educational Philosopher
John Dewey, born in 1859, is considered by many to be one of the most important American educational thinkers. As a faculty member of the University of Chicago in the 1890s, Dewey started a lab school for young children through which he explored his ideas on child development and education. Much of his work developed into what is now referred to as child-centered learning, and forms the heart of what has been called “progressive” education. Dewey later moved to Columbia University where he wrote and taught for another four decades, composing many books which remain important to educational thinking. He died in 1952.

Through his work, Dewey asked many questions that remain relevant today: How do we best introduce children to subject matter? Should we have multiage classrooms? How can teachers most effectively plan curriculum? How can we help children learn the skills of critical thinking? Dewey’s answers to these questions, like those of his European contemporaries Jean Piaget and Maria Montessori, were simple and firm in their orientation. Children learn from doing, Dewey wrote. Education should involve real life materials and experiences, and should encourage children’s experimentation and independent thinking. Dewey’s thoughts also echoed the ideas of the Russian born educator Lev Vygotsky, believing that education should be child-centered, both active and interactive, and that it should involve the social life of the child.

Dewey believed in the importance of both the child and the adult in the learning environment. The key element of the teacher’s role, he wrote, is to determine curriculum based on knowledge of the children and of their abilities. Dewey believed that children benefit from the teacher’s role in deciding what may or may not be developmentally and individually appropriate for each child. At the same time, however, Dewey also believed that a teacher’s curricular decisions should be based upon what the children themselves show about their own interests and abilities. Dewey saw the teacher as an observer, writing that the best path to education is for the teacher to know the children well, and to build curriculum on the students’ experiences of past learning.

Within this context, Dewey believed that when children are engaged in meaningful, relevant work, their learning is exciting and enjoyable in and of itself. But he also saw a difference between what he simply called “experience” and what he termed a “learning experience”.

Dewey believed in the importance of both the child and the adult in the learning environment.
In Dewey’s thinking, education and experience are certainly related, but are not necessarily equal. To be “educative”, he believed, an experience should have purpose and organization.

Educators should ask questions such as these of educational experiences which are offered to children:

- How will this activity expand on what the children already know?
- In what ways might the activity help children to grow?
- What skills are being developed through the experience?
- How will the experience help children to know more about their world?

In Dewey’s mind, an activity is “educative” when it builds on children’s interest and prior learning, advances their skills and development, and connects children’s interests to their own expanding knowledge of the world.

**Dewey’s Pedagogic Creed: 1897**

**Children and Teachers as Curricular Co-Authors**

Before the 20th century had even begun, Dewey was expressing thoughts on education that now seem decidedly modern. In an 1897 document titled simply “My Pedagogic Creed”, Dewey spoke of several fundamental aspects of his thinking, including his belief in the strength and importance of children’s own academic and social powers. “The child's own instincts and powers,” he wrote, “furnish the material and give the starting point for all education.” Dewey believed that it is through observation of the children that teachers should make curricular and educational decisions, aiding the development of children by providing experiences for which they themselves demonstrate readiness. “Save as the efforts of the educator connect with some activity which the child is carrying on of his own initiative… education becomes reduced to a pressure from without.” This simple thought presented a radical departure from the other educational thinking of its time, and continues to challenge much of the American educational landscape of the early 21st century. Children themselves, Dewey believed, can guide their own educational path by demonstrating their own naturally occurring interests, and their own developmental readiness to engage an expanding range of skills and activities.

Yet Dewey also recognized the importance of the adult in the educational life of the child. The vital role of the teacher, Dewey felt, is to help children come into a more full understanding of their own strengths, a necessary component to the advancement of their own lives in a changing world. “To prepare (the child) for the future means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him so that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities.” Toward this end, Dewey believed that teachers should bring a strong base of general knowledge to their work, as well as the willingness and ability to increase their own knowledge of their children. Dewey believed that teachers can and should help children make sense of the world, using their mature knowledge and experience to help children to gain an expanded understanding of their own surroundings and experiences.
Children and Teachers as Social Constructors

Just as important to the core of Dewey’s philosophy, however, is his thinking regarding the social aspects of a child’s educational experience. “I believe that the school is primarily a social institution,” he wrote in his 1897 Creed. “Education being a social process, the school is simply that form of community life…which will be most effective in bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of the race, and to use his own powers for social ends.”

When considering the role of the school in relation to a child’s social interactions in the world Dewey again made a radical postulation, stating his belief that “Education is a process of living, and not a preparation for future living.” Education, Dewey wrote, can help children learn to forge connections with one another and with their society in a way that represents what he called “present life”, that which is real and vital to the lives children lead in their homes, neighborhoods, and in the school as a place of community.

Dewey wrote that a child’s experience in school should “simplify existing social life to an ‘embryonic form’, taking up and continuing the caring, supportive, and communicative aspects of the home and family life.” In Dewey’s mind the social aspect of school has several goals, including helping the child learn the full meaning of home and family, to learn to play an active role in relation to them, and to expand that role into the broader community. “I believe that much of present education fails because… (it) conceives of the school as a place where certain information is to be given, or where certain habits are to be formed. The value of these is conceived as lying largely in the remote future… they are mere preparation. As a result they do not become a part of the life experience of the child and, so, are not truly educative.” Dewey went on to state, “I believe that moral education centers about this conception of the school as a mode of social life, that the best and deepest moral training is precisely that which one gets through having to enter into proper relations with others in a unity of work and thought.”

To arrive at this “unity of work and thought” was Dewey’s vision for children as they relate with one another in the social and academic contexts of school life. “I believe…that the primary basis of education is in the child’s powers to work along the same constructive lines as those which brought civilization into being,” he wrote, and that “The only way to make the child conscious of his social heritage is to enable him to perform… those activities which make civilization what it is.” To achieve this, Dewey called for what he called constructive, or expressive activities to be at the heart of children’s school work. Experiences such as cooking, sewing, and working with the hands, he wrote, are more than simply relaxing breaks from “academic” tasks. Rather, they are fundamental social activities which can be integrated into more formal curricular subjects. In the book “The School and Society”, Dewey called for children to be involved in activities that “reflect the life of the larger society, and (which are) permeated with the spirit of art, history and science.”
Ideas such as these are found today in educational environments which are considered to be alternative to the mainstream. Often referred to as “child-centered”, these learning environments are generally structured quite differently from more traditional educational settings where information and skills are simply handed down from teachers to students, whose role is to be primarily receptive. In his book “Education and Experience”, Dewey compares the traditional and progressive educational paths: “To imposition from above is opposed expression and the cultivation of individuality; to external discipline is opposed free activity; to learning from texts and teachers, learning through experience; to preparation for a more or less remote future is opposed making the most of the opportunities of present life.”

Dewey cautions us, however, against a too simplistic rejection of education as an organized process of subject matter being handed down to children. While he supported the idea of children’s academic freedom, Dewey was also concerned that freedom not become an end in itself. “When external authority is rejected”, he wrote in 1938, “it does not follow that all authority should be rejected, but rather that there is need to search for a more effective source of authority.” In the book “Education and Experience”, Dewey challenges us to consider what might be the place and meaning of subject matter and organization within children’s experience. He sought for an educational structure valued “as a means to a freedom which is power: power to frame purposes, to judge wisely, to evaluate desires by the consequences which will result from acting upon them; power to select and order means to carry chosen ends into operation.”

John Dewey advocated strongly for the role of those with mature experience in the education of young people, and sought for ways to base education upon the contact between children and adults. While he recognized the problem inherent in establishing these contacts without violating the principle of children learning through experience, Dewey did not see a contradiction between the two. Rather he saw the answer in a careful definition of experience, and a “positive and constructive development of purposes, methods and subject matter on the foundation of a theory of experience and its educational potentialities.”