

CHAPTER – 6

Dewey's Philosophy of Education

Dewey : the Exponent of the School Ideal in Education

Dewey, being the son of an ordinary shopkeeper and a puritan by faith, got the chance to interact with his rural community. From there he realized quite early in life the strength of group consciousness in the manifold activities of the village community. Dewey's experience of boyhood days brought to his mind two outstanding convictions which practically acted as the base of his philosophy of life and also his educational ideas and views in future. Those convictions were : (i) The traditional methods of schooling were futile and fruitless, (ii) The human contacts of everyday life provide unlimited natural, dynamic learning situations.

In his early professional career Dewey got the opportunity to take lesson of philosophy, psychology, political history from many eminent teachers of those days. He also in his professional career worked in many famous institutions. In this course he joined the University of Chicago as Chairman of the combined Departments of Philosophy, Psychology and Pedagogy in the year 1894. In this place he formulated all his doctrines and theories of education. In 1896 Dewey established the famous University Elementary School which was also called Laboratory School or Experimental School or Active School. Dewey's educational theory and practice actually have their origin in the Experimental School where he carried out all his tests and experiments in Pedagogy.

In the year 1916 when Dewey was working as a Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University and was also teaching at Teachers' College in the same University his world famous work 'Democracy and Education' was published. It

revolutionized the current educational theories and practices and brought about an innovation in the domain of education.

Dewey experienced rapid changes in the fields of science, technology, agriculture, and so on and realized the gravity of all these social and industrial changes that had been taking place in American life. To keep pace with the 'extraordinary changes wrought in the structure of society' as a result of Industrial Revolution, he wanted to provide the children a first-hand acquaintance with the world in which they lived and with this end in view 'he undertook to bring the children to his Experimental School into touch with the real situations in life'. Dewey, therefore, thought that industrial activities are most useful for social advancement and economic development and hence he insisted on the inclusion of such activities in the school curriculum.

Dewey's philosophy of education originated in the application of the doctrine of evolution to child study and also in his pragmatic thinking which subordinated 'intellect' to 'practical ends' or goals. For Dewey there are no fixed beliefs; the quest for certainty on which philosophers and men of science have been engaged in ever since the time of Socrates is an illusion diverting men's attention and a..... from the possible and practical realities within his comprehension.

Dewey himself cannot remain faithful to the principle of change. In *How We Think**¹ he refers to 'securely established facts and principles', and recognises that if thinking is to be possible at all 'the standard of reference must remain the same to be of any use. The concept signifies that a meaning has been stabilized, and remains the same in different contexts. In *Freedom and Culture* *², referring to Jefferson's speech and letters Dewey explains that it is the ends of democracy, the rights of man--not of men in the plural ---which are unchangeable.

Dewey's philosophy of education originated in the application of the doctrine of evolution in child study and also his pragmatic thinking which subordinated 'intellect' to 'practical ends' or goals. His doctrine may also be called experimentalism. In *Democracy and Education* *³ dealing with the development of the experimental method he says: "It means that we have no right to call any thing knowledge except where our activity has actually produced certain physical changes in things, which agree with and confirm the conception entertained". In *Human Nature and Conduct* he maintained that the act comes before the thought, and that a motive does not exist prior to an act and produces it. In *The Quest for Certainty* he declared that the experimental procedure is one that instils doing at the heart of knowing, that the validity of the object of thought depends upon the consequences of the operations which define the object of thought; and he repeated that the test of ideas, of thinking generally, is found in the consequences of the acts to which the ideas lead.

John Dewey attaches great importance to 'experience'. Education, according to him, must be conceived of as 'a continuing reconstruction of experience', whose process and goal are one and the same. Or, in other words, education is of experience by experience, and for experience. The educational process, in Dewey's opinion, has no end beyond itself. The aim of education, therefore, is more education. Dewey observed that to set up any end outside of education, as furnishing its goal and standard is to deprive the educational process of much of its meaning, and it tends to make us rely upon false and external stimuli in dealing with the child. The school, according to him, is not preparation for life. It is life or living.

In his concept of 'education through experience' or 'progressive education', Dewey criticized the traditional system of education. The imposition from above in

the traditional education is opposed to experience and cultivation of individuality; external disciplines are opposed to free activity. In traditional education we find learning from texts and teachers, learning through experience and acquisition of isolated skills and techniques by drills. These are opposed to acquisition of them as means of attaining ends which make direct, vital appeal. The preparation for a more or less remote future of traditional education is opposed to making the most of the opportunities of present life. These static aims and materials of present system of education are opposed to acquaintance with a changing world. Dewey wanted to offer his pupils wide opportunities for the practice and experience of self-investigation or 'purposeful enquiry' and exploration. To him, therefore, the growing, transforming, revising or reconstituting of experience is education. His belief in all of life at education has had a vast influence on curriculum and teaching methods. The most marked present day tendency in education consists in the process of relating the individual to society, so as to secure both personal development and social welfare, to harmonize individual rights and social duties. Both individual and social factors have been emphasized and harmonized by Dewey who has defined education as the process of remaking experience giving it a more socialized value through increased individual experience, by giving the individual better control over his own powers.

For Dewey 'Philosophy' and 'Education' are not words conveying altogether different meanings. According to him, each of the two words means the study by man of man himself and of the society, the world he lives in, through practical experience and not through some general notions or principles known or accepted on the authority of others. He goes so far as to treat philosophy and education as identical. If education is conceived as the process of forming fundamental

dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellowmen, philosophy may even be defined as the general theory of education. Hence according to Dewey, philosophy is nothing by *Education* in its most general terms, or, philosophy is a generalized theory of education. *4

Dewey's philosophy views life as a whole and not in discrete or separable parts. Consistently, Dewey's constant object in education has been to establish a close contact and relationship between the classroom and the world around. The school should be a place not for learning from books and teachers only but for learning through actual living, through personal experience. The school is a simplified, purified and better balanced society. Books and teachers should be there just to help in the effective establishment of close contact between the life lived by the pupils in the school and the life lived in the larger society, the larger world outside the four walls of the school. The fundamental principle underlying Dewey's educational theory is not that the traditional wisdom should be discarded altogether and the progressive education should proceed quite freely independent of any control. He has just raised the problem of progressive education as opposed to traditional education and has not claimed to have solved it finally, as the process of education being an ever continuous process can never be finally solved.

According to Dewey, the general principles of the new education do not themselves solve any of the problems of the actual or practical conduct and management of progressive schools. In presenting his theory of education through experience or experiment, Dewey has sought to solve four fundamental problems of education :

1. How to establish closer contact between the school and the home and the world at large;

2. How to introduce the subject matter that has a positive value and real importance in the child's own life to harmonized or reconcile the Hegelian idea of conflict between interest and effort by bringing in a purposive element in education;
3. How to carry on instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic, the elementary subjects through everyday experience and occupation so that the child can feel their worth or necessity for himself by their relation with the common pursuits of his actual life at home or abroad.
4. How to provide adequate opportunities for individual powers and needs so as to ensure both personal development and social welfare.

Dewey's approach to the problem of education is significant, as it indicates his belief in the whole of life as education. He stresses the fact that education is a natural process whereby life renews or makes itself on the social plane. The more civilization advances, the more complex life becomes, and the greater the need for education to bridge the gulf between the infant and the adult, between the immature and the mature. Education is thus an ever developing process determined at a particular situation by the needs of that situation. And it follows that education has no meaning apart from the social environment. Education is, no doubt, meant for the fullest development of the individual powers but, while Dewey admits this, he believes that such development is possible only because the individual lives in a social institution. He has thus stressed the sociological aspect in education. Dewey has regarded education as the means for 'social continuity of life'.

Dewey's Laboratory School or Experimental School in the University of Chicago made the most fundamental contribution to educational theories and practices. Dewey noticed that enormous changes had come about in every sphere of life as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution. The old family life broke down and changed, and the self-sufficient simple rural communities yielded place to 'complex townships'. The child of today finds himself in the midst of finished manufactured goods not at all knowing how these goods have been actually produced, and consequently he lacks in motives as well as opportunities for learning, while these were so much available in the ordinary life of the child who was born half a century ago were of greater educational value than in the case of the modern child. The influence of his home and social environment exerted a powerful influence on increasing the boundaries of his knowledge and on forming his character, without any conscious effort strain. The motive for learning, now conspicuous by their absence, were present in abundance in the daily routine. Dewey, therefore, insists that the educational institution called the 'school' should take into account this change in the social structure and its effects on the conditions of living.

There should be close resemblance between the classroom and the world around. The school should be a 'society in miniature' representing real life through simplified experiences reduced to the child's plane of comprehension. The school curriculum must look to the needs and requirements of real and practical lives. We should try to bridge the gulf between school and home, school and society, school and the world. The school should be a place where the child can learn cooperative and mutually helpful living through activity and behaviour instead of being a passive receptacle there. In the classroom the child should be helped to come into real touch with life, to feel active participation in actual living.

So, Dewey's conception of the aim of education is dynamic and it is supposed to be a universal process aiming at the all-round development of body, mind and characters. Educational method and activity should be based on the instinctive activities of the child. If the child is to make a good citizen capable of performing his duties and responsibilities, the complexities of modern living should be introduced in the school. This cannot be done by mere drill studies in memorization of text books and lessons prepared for them by their teachers. It is to be achieved through training based on the real pursuits of life, on the wholesome activities normally undertaken by the children in their day-to-day lives.

According to Dewey, the existing schools are aloof and isolated from the conditions and motives of real and ordinary lives. They do not reflect of real and ordinary lives. They do not reflect the life of the larger society. The children here are mere passive listeners. The immediate effect has been a paralysis of intellectual initiative and a moral failure. The mechanical amassing of facts, the rigid curricula, the unvarying fixed method, the treatment of the children as masses and not as individuals – all these indicate that 'the center of gravity in education lies elsewhere 'outside the child'. This state of aloofness and isolation causes a terrible wastage and consequent frustration in education. This system produces selfish individuals, misfits in society.

The great problem of education, as viewed by Dewey, is to harmonize the conflicting ideals of individualistic and socialistic education. He holds that 'the individual mind is a function of the social life'. As such, the individual mind requires for its harmonious development 'continual stimulus from social agencies'. Hence true education consists in harmonizing the individual and social factors, because,

only out of this harmony, the individual's inherent capacities develop to their fullest extent, and the highest welfare both of the individual and of the society is ensured.

According to Dewey, education must be viewed in terms of individual experience, and the child should be made to be active. His natural tendency and inclination of inquiry, constructiveness, communication, artistic expression, etc. should find ample scope in his school career. The child should be made to feel conscious that he is a member of the society and that his efforts are worth pursuing. For this purpose the school should be socialized and properly affiliated to life. Hence various forms of active occupations should find place in the school curriculum, the aim of these occupations being not economic value of the product but development of the child's latent abilities as well as creative interests through them. Dewey insists on presentation of the out-of-school activities in the occupations of the classroom in miniature, to provide healthy conditions of personal interest in studies.

Regarding the nature and kinds of active occupations that are to be introduced in the school curriculum Dewey is of the opinion that the typical conditions of social life are determined by the industrial activities. Through these activities the child's instinctive and impulsive urges can be harnessed to desired end both for personal development and for social well-being. These activities being as real as the tasks of actual life, the pupils will feel genuine interest in carrying them out and will easily attain the capacity for self-activity and self-direction which is so essential in life. Weaving, sewing, cooking, wood-work, shop work, etc. may serve as introduction to other kinds of industrial activities or manual occupations. Dewey has emphasized the importance of the real, ordinary activities and practical experience of life in the method of education and is regarded as the father of the Project and Problem methods which are the practical outcome of Dewey's educational philosophy. Instead

of leaving lessons passively under the directions of the teacher, the pupils are faced with some tasks to be accomplished and some problems to be solved; and in the course of accomplishing the task and solving the problem, they acquire considerable knowledge and skill.

The advocating learning through the real life activities, Dewey has not, in fact, meant 'incidental learning' or 'learning wholly by doing'. His idea is that instruction in the school should generally be carried out through the real activities which the children do themselves suggest. He insists that the children, whenever feasible, should be given intellectual responsibility for selecting the fittest materials and instruments and an opportunity to think out their own model and plan of work.

In Dewey's system of elementary education through the ordinary modes of activity, there is, indeed, the necessary balance of action and thought. Through these activities of ordinary life it is possible 'to secure a balanced interaction of practical and theoretical attitudes', which is the aim of education.

The three R – S e.g., Reading, Writing and Arithmetic, according to Dewey, grow out of and are connected with the children's real activities. The mind is made by society and depends for its development on the social environment. As the mind is a function of social life, the requirements of instruction cannot be met by merely bringing the child into direct relation with various masses of external facts labeled Geography, Arithmetic, Grammar, etc. These studies, it has to be remembered, have grown out of social needs. The children must be made to relive the situations out of which they grow, and re-discover them. A fine training in oral expressions is possible through industrial activities, because such activities provide children with manifold experiences about which they want to talk. Thus we see that Dewey advocates the establishment of vocational schools. For Dewey the curriculum is concerned with the

realities of child-nature and of actual life. Its content is to be selected from different activities of real life, the determining principle being the natural tastes, interests, aptitudes and inclinations of the child at the successive stages of his development. Dewey stresses the child rather than the book, or the subject matter, or the teacher.

By pleading for vocational education, Dewey has not meant that particular line of occupation or profession has to be thrust upon the pupils. Only a vocational bias is to be given from an early age, so as to enable them to choose their own professions or vocations rightly in future when they become grown up citizens. By such education the children will gradually discover their own tastes, aptitudes and inclinations and will have scope for proper development of the artistic, aesthetic and expressional or creative aspect of their mind.

Dewey considers the mind as 'a process of growth' and it must be thought of 'as essentially in change, with the continuity of growth and yet presenting different phases of capacity and interest at different periods. This idea of mind as 'a unity in process of development' calls for a selection and grading of the courses of study at different periods by means of the courses of study at different periods by means of experience and experiment. Dewey's elementary school consists of the three following periods of life on psychological grounds.

1. The central theme of studies in the play period (From 4 to 8 years of age) should be the life and occupations of the home guided directly by social and personal relations. Reading, writing and systematic treatment of geography are to be introduced only in the last year of this period.
2. During the period of spontaneous attention (From 8 to 12 years of age) the child acquires different forms of technical skill to secure for himself

‘practical and intellectual control of such methods of work and inquiry as will enable him to realize the results for himself’.

3. The period of reflective attention comes with the mastery over the methods of thought, inquiry and activity and enables the child to specialize in distinct branches of studies and arts for remote technical and intellectual aims.

The most important feature in Dewey’s philosophy of education is democratizing education or putting education on a democratic basis. The democratic tendency has extended from the domain of Politics to education also, so that education in modern times is going to be adapted to the changing needs of the times. Dewey’s ideal is to prepare every member or individual as a complete and true citizen of the State which is democratic. The individual must have the power to exercise his right to franchise intelligently. Dewey’s ideal of complete citizenship implies also various other things of which mention may be made of the following :

(a) Rearing of children and educating them properly; (b) Earning livelihood; (c) Cultivation of social sympathy; (d) Development of the sense of self respect; (e) Cultivation of Arts, Science, Literature, Poetry, Fine Arts etc.; (f) Leisure-hour occupations; (g) Health and physical well-being; (h) Power to command and also to obey others.

For each of these operations a thorough scientific training is necessary. The school should provide opportunities for fashioning the faiths and practices of the democratic way or life.

Again, according to Dewey, teachers should have the explicit right to share in the shaping of the policies they are to execute in the administration of the school they are to look after. Education for being effective must be democratic, and in a truly

democratic system, the greatest benefit can accrue only when the greatest number can actively share in making the system run as it should run.

The educational philosophy propounded by Dewey is embodied in his little book, 'The school and society', published in 1899 and in 'Democracy and Education' published in 1916 we find a final statement of his educational philosophy. Dewey's little book 'Experience and Education' published in 1938, is a major contribution to educational philosophy and offers educators and teachers a positive philosophy of education. It contains a lucid analysis of both traditional and progressive education. It evaluates the principles and practices of both traditional and the progressive schools, pointing out the defects of each of them. Here the author has emphasized the value and importance of experience, experiment, purposeful learning, freedom, and other well-known concepts of progressive education. In 'Experience and Education', the meanings of freedom, activities, discipline, control and organized subject-matter have been expounded within the context of educative experience as a process implying both continuity and interaction.

The chiefest contribution of Dewey to educational thought lies in his enunciation of the aim of education as 'securing a balanced interaction of the theoretical and practical attitudes' of the educands. The industrial activities and occupations prescribed by Dewey were intended for liberalizing rather than technical purpose, and 'considerable time was given to an historical study of them'. The industrial history of man, according to Dewey, is not merely a utilitarian affair; it is a matter of intelligence and its record is the record of how men learned to think.

Dewey is the sponsor and forerunner of the movement known as 'progressive education', which is one of the most significant trends in modern education. The world will long remember the signal contributions of this great American philosopher-psychologist-historian-educator in the domain of philosophy, psychology, history and education. Whether in terms of democracy, or freedom, or experience, or education, John Dewey's concepts, doctrines, and seminal ideas have been, are, and will be tremendously influential in the life and thought of many generations of people in different parts of the world.

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1. John Dewey, *How We Think* (London : D.C.Heath & Co., 1909), PP, 95, 151
 2. John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (London : George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1940), P.157.
 3. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Macmillan Co. 1916), P.399.
 4. Ibid, P.383.