CHAPTER VI

EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE

Dewey is not merely an academic philosopher, he is also known for his contribution to the theory of education. In his autobiographical essay, 'Democracy and Education', Dewey raises the question as to why so many philosophers, although themselves engaged in education work, have not taken education with sufficient seriousness, for it to occur to them that any rational person could actually think it possible that philosophizing could focus about education as the supreme interest in which, moreover, other problems, cosmological, moral, logical, come to a head. 1.

For this purpose of philosophy the affairs of the nursery and the Kindergarten seem to him as significant as those of physical laboratory. Education has always been a primary interest in his philosophy, primary in the sense that both practice and theory of education should take vital role for the development of his own most basic ideas.


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In his philosophy the naturalistic outlook is as fundamental as the empirical method. Experimental naturalism signifies the unqualified acceptance of the principle of organic evolution. It seems to him to be the necessary starting point for the fruitful study of any aspect of human experience.

If biological developments be accepted, the human subject of experience is at least an animal, continuous with other organic form in a process of more complex organization. An animal in turn is at least continuous with chemico-physical processes which, in living things, are so organised as really to constitute the activities of life with all their defining traits. An experience is not identical with brain action, it is the entire organic agent patient in all its interactions with the environment, natural and social. 2.

Human traits, capacities and interest in Dewey's opinion are not less real because they are the produces of a natural evolutionary process. The traits

2. Ibid, P. 36.
in all fields are not to be eliminated by any theory about man's origin and psychological affairs. For Dewey, evolution denotes emergence. Emergent events are not to be simply explained by a metaphysical dogma. They are to be taken for whatever they are found to be. He says,

The term "naturalistic" has many meanings. As it is here employed it means, on the one side, that there are not breach of continuity between operation of inquiry and biological operation and physical operation "continuity", on the other side, means that rational operation grow out if organic activities, without being identical with that from which they emerge. 3.

But this naturalistic continuity has no bearing on philosophy and education what is important is that it is conditioned by mind.

For Dewey mind does not denote any transcendental or cosmic consciousness, it regulates the interaction of the organism with environment. Dewey regards mind as a quality, behaviour, a function. The organism


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"is part and parcel of the course of events".

It becomes a mind in virtue of a distinctive way of partaking in the course of events. The significant distinction is no longer between the knower and the world; it is between different ways of being in and of the movement of things between a brute physical way and a purposive intelligent way. 4.

Mind is not an endowment given at birth. The child acquires man—a rational nature as he masters the meanings of affairs in his environment. It is through learning by participation in the way of his community that an organism become a mind, person. So to have mind, we must have knowledge which is the grasp of the behaviour of actual event.

Important consequences for the practice of education flow from his theory of mind. Reflection is linked with behaviour. It is an indirect response to environment. The act of reflection begins in a situation of difficulty; it develops through observation, the

4. Creative Intelligence, P. 59.

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gathering of data, the making of inferences, and which ultimately leads to an action and puts the plan to the actual test.

Deliberate education including school education should provide the opportunity for the young group of activities by means of reflective thought.

The important things is that thinking is the method of educative experience. The essentials of method are therefore identical with the essential of education. 5.

Dewey rejects the view that child should know by things but not with words, and advances the theory learning through activity. We learn to think as we connect what we do with the consequences that follow from our doing. The first principle of rationality is to learn, to think in terms of action and in terms of those acts whose consequences will expand, revise, test, your ideas and theories. 6.

6. The Educational frontier (W.H.Kilpatrick, Editor), P. 305.

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This kind of thinking requires an environment where the activity of the child is to be tested. Dewey has suggested two changes in the traditional school. Firstly, the traditional process of learning should be replaced by a form of community life within the school. Secondly, there should be an interaction with the natural surrounding and social environment in school.

Although Dewey's philosophy of education is consistently naturalist i.e. it is widely known for its emphasis on the social. His most distinctive contribution to educational theory is due to emphasis on social interpretation of education. On the other hand, Dewey's emphasis on the social aspect is the correlative of his emphasis on the natural. Thus social relation is the end for life and end for education.

Our net conclusion is that life is development, and the developing, growing is life. Translated into its educational equivalent, this means -

1) that the educational process has no end beyond itself; it is own end; and that
2) the educational process is one of continued recognizing reconstructing, transforming.


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Dewey's experimental naturalism requires the principle of continuity between man and the rest of nature.

It also requires

the extraordinary differences that mark of the activities and the achievements of human beings from those of other biological forms. 8.

The social, according to Dewey, provides natural bridge between behaviour that is organic and behaviour that is distinctively human. We can better appreciate the significance of his social theory of education if we believe the natural outgrowth of the relation of man and nature. Dewey's insistence on growth implies that personality is something to be achieved, and something in the making. But human being is not like an isolated atom. An individual being is to be considered under the obligation of his social environment.

And all his actions bear the stamp of his community as assuredly as does the language he speaks. 9.

It is a man's relations with his fellow-men which provide him both with opportunities for action and with the instrument for taking advantage of such opportunities. At the same time the social environment, with its institution has to be organised and modified in such a way that individual can develop the desirable capacities needed in society. On the one hand the individual is conditioned by the existing social environment in regard to his habits of action and his aims, on the other, if the social environment is changed or modified, it can be shared only by the individual when a problematic situation arises, such as a clash between man's developing needs on the one hand and existing social institutions.

The function of political philosophy is to criticize existing institutions in the light of man's development and changing needs and to point out practical possibilities for the future to meet the needs of the present. Dewey looks on political philosophy as an instrument for concrete action. The process of criticizing existing social institutions requires some standard to which man can refer. And for Dewey, the test for all such institutions, whether political, judicial or industrial.

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is the contributions they make to all round growth of every number of society.\textsuperscript{10}

It is for this reason he favours democracy founded on faith in the capacities of human nature, faith in human intelligence and in the power of polled and co-operative experience. \textsuperscript{11}

yet,

the prime condition of a democratically organised public is a kind of knowledge and insight which does not yet exist. \textsuperscript{12}

Democracy is thus the setting for the free use of the experimental method in social enquiry and thought, which is required for the solution of concrete social, political and industrial problems. Dewey preference for the democratic way of life is not arbitrary but due to his conviction that democracy is the best of all social institution. \textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{10} Reconstruction in Philosophy, P. 186.
\textsuperscript{11} Problem of men, P. 59.
\textsuperscript{12} The Public and its Problems, P. 166.
\textsuperscript{13} Experience and Education, P. 25.
He is convinced that any society which offers the all round opportunity to its members will be led or organize its affairs along democratic lines. Democratic conception implies a society in which individuals enjoy the status of ends, and institutions the status of means that society has no good other than the good of its members. The concrete individual is the only centre of experience and hence the ultimate locus of all value Dewey believes that the growth of individual is only possible through social arrangements.

Democracy has many meanings, but if it has a moral meaning, it is found in resolving that the supreme test of all political institutions and industrial arrangements shall be the contribution they make to the allround growth of every member of society. 14.

Democratic principle that each individual be treated as an end signifies that individual must be so educated that he is competent to judge values and ideals prevailing in society. Dewey's interest in democracy has considerably influenced his view of the method of education.

14. Reconstruction in Philosophy, P. 186,
Dewey concludes that both democracy and education demand that anarchy of the present competitive profit economy be supplemented by planning society in which production is democratically controlled for the good of all.

An identity, an equation, exists between the urgent social need of the present and that of education society in order to solve its own problems and remedy its own ills, need to employ science and technology for social instead of merely private ends. This need for a society in which experimental inquiry and planning for social ends are organically contained is also the need for a new education. 15.

Explaining the need and role of democracy in education Dewey says,

Democracy has great need for a method for the resolution if conflict caused by the members of society. It seeks to make its adjustment by inquiry, discussion, conference, and the principle of majority rule.

15. Dewey: The Educational Frontier(W.H. Kilpatrick, Editor), P. 64.
Dewey believes that by co-operation, peaceful, economic and political means social transformation is possible if education can be kept free from all imperialism. 16,

It should be noted that Dewey's social interpretation of education is a distinctive contribution to educational theory. He holds that education should be considered a social process, because it is by participation in the activities of society that the child can acquire the characteristics of personhood. It is the society with the established modes of action and thought which functions as the great educator.

As Dewey says,

Because the activities of the children today are controlled by these selected and charged stimuli, children are able to traverse in a short lifetime what the race needed slow tortured age to attain. 17.

A cultural environment is also to be regarded as charged stimuli because it is an environment of physical thing. The aim of education should be to help the child act as a member of his group, and to be aware of

17. Democracy and Education, P. 44.

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the meaning inherent in action. Education is also to be interpreted as a social process because the aim of education requires the child to be acquainted with the prevailing conditions of the existing society. The organic needs of the child, are growing, not fixed; the needs for food, for protection, for reproduction, for example, are always the same in the abstract, but in the concrete they and the means of satisfying them change their content with every change in science, technology, and social institutions. 18.

Dewey also believes that education should be viewed as a basic social need, society keeps its own continuity through the education of its young group. As he says, what nutrition and reproduction are to physiological life, education is to social life. 19.


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His faith on democracy is due to his conviction that democratic conception implies a society in which individual enjoy the status of ends, and institutions the status of means. Dewey also believes the growth of individual is the supreme test of social arrangements and the final end of all educational activity.

Dewey's interest in democracy also emphasizes the importance of method in education. So democracy has great need for a method for the resolution of conflict. It cannot make adjustment by external authority, or by the application of fixed standards and remain a democratic society. Educational methods, therefore, not only have to be criticised and raised but they must be related to one another and to the future. So the philosophy of education is to be tested by experience. Thus Dewey argues that an experimental notion of inquiry as well as operational conception of all knowledge can only lead more and more to the same result of unending development. This means that democracy and education are completely complementary to one another. Dewey also believes that educational growth cannot be fully realized apart from social conditions which promote free inquiry and generalized knowledge. So education

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is getting from the present the degree and kind of growth there is in it. 20

In fact, the educational process has no end beyond itself; it is its own end; and that the educational process is one of the continued recognizing, reconstructing transforming. 21.

Dewey considered a proper and healthy environment to be natural condition for acquiring knowledge. Students should be helped to learn while engaged in useful work. The so called liberal education was not what Dewey was in favour of. He has consistently opposed any programme of vocational education which emphasized the achievement of mechanical skill to the neglect of genuine intellectual and cultural interest. Dewey wanted that the creation of a real environment in the school should not only aim at promoting activity in the student, but all education should be a by product of the student's activities. Nothing will be forced on the student. It is to be seen that the body and the mind of the student have complete freedom to work. The inquisitive mind of the child will fly from object to object, ask questions, make experiments and express doubts, freely. He will handle construct and

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break object with his own hands. In his project method, he successfully made use of the student's natural interests, his constructive impulse and the delight in working in community with others.

Dewey's theory of interest struck at the root of prevalent educational methods, which compelled the students to learn difficult subjects by rote. Dewey's method was called "Soft pedagogy" by traditionalists who considered it to be of no use in the struggle for life. Dewey, however, demonstrated that their idea was wrong. He stated in My Pedagogic Creed,

education is a process of living and not a preparation for future things. 22.

He said that individual effort and endeavour spring from the natural interests. It is extremely wrong to compel the child to do something in which he has no interest. The child should learn through his natural interest only.

Dewey thinks that school must reflect the life of the child in all its aspects as a social institution. The life in the school should be as real and as vital for

22. 'Creed' reprinted by National Education Association as personal growth leaflet number nineteen, P. 12. Contd...P/110.
the child as his life at home or among his neighbours. The development of the school as a social institution would take place through the simplification of social life and the simple social life would gradually grow out of the home itself. He says that school then as

simplified social life should grow gradually out of the home life, 23

and,

take up and continue the activities with which the child is already familiar at home. 24

It is the responsibility of the school to make the experience of the child pleasant and delightful. If education is the living development and nourishment of an individual experience, it must be the function of the school to enrich the experience of the students. To serve a torch for the social life of the individual, it should be a society in miniature. The school should aim at providing a proper atmosphere in which the student can engage himself in different activities of life,

24. Ibid, P. 26
encounter problems and makes efforts to solve them. It is in the nature of the child to work. The teacher should try to make the child's experience pleasant and delightful. It is he who is to direct the mind of the child and his curiosities towards a purpose, make his efforts successful and give him freedom.

The discipline of the school should proceed from the life of the school as a whole and not directly from the teacher's business. The teacher's business is simply to determine, on the basis of larger experience and riper wisdom, how the discipline of the life shall come to the child. 25.

So Dewey says that

The moral education centers upon this conception of the school as a mode of social life. 26.

and that

Education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience. 27.


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There is a lack of real purposive element in the kindergartens of Froebel who has advocated construction of beautiful things in mechanical ways. So Dewey has emphasized the importance of the real ordinary activities and practical experiences of life in the method of education and is regarded as the father of the project and problem methods. The project and problem methods are the practical outcome of Dewey's educational philosophy, through the activities of real life they seek to make the school a society in miniature.

The Dewey laboratory school differed from the conventional school in the use of subject matter. Dewey was against the inclusion of separate subjects in the school. It is a society of adults that has introduced the system of separate subjects according to its own reasons: The child's mind does not distinguish between subjects, neither does it treat its experience in pieces.

Dewey wanted the school curriculum to be an embodiment of the wonder of discovery, the pride of self-cultivation and the brimming joy of the flux of life. The subject of study will not be ordered as literature or science but by the child's own activities. Life is a social affair. To live is to live with other. So for...
Dewey, Democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living. 23.

Dewey centred teaching in his primary school round the familiar experience of activities of the child. These include collection of food, search of a dwelling place and clothing, which the children are both familiar with and take interest in. Dewey thought that they make for the fullest development of the child's personality. The old opposition between interest and effort was based on a fallacious view. Dewey rightly insists that interest and effort are correlatives, not two opposed things but the same thing, the same on-going activity now receiving one name when with one aspect in mind predominates and now the other when another aspect is emphasised. For Dewey, we ascribe 'interest' to this child so possessed of a purpose and feels on the inside and as an agent directs his attention to effecting his purpose. In order to gain an end the child puts its efforts. Interest, as Dewey points out, is the state of an affair when the organism is unified within as it faces the outer world.

23. Democracy and Education (1916) P. 101

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On Dewey's theory, knowledge results from man's effort to deal with the actual world of affairs.

Dewey thought of including in school curriculum certain common subjects i.e. arithmetic, general science, ordinary language training, music, geography, woodwork, drawings, sewing, history and gardening. But in fact in Dewey's school those subjects were not actually taught and in fact, teachers were advised not to teach these subjects. Dewey expected that the students would learn them from the real situations and problems relating to food collection, dwelling and clothing. Teachers must be always learning ever better how to run such a school. There is no end to the experimenting, and so no end to the learning. Life is a life of continuous study of which these can be no end.

The Dewey school was alive with study.

Every child should spontaneously engage himself in the creative art and gain education through joy. The school life should be a source of joy and instrument of the true, the good and the beautiful. Every child is to be accustomed to a simple and easy life through a series of delightful activities. The dawning of varying consciousness and the awakening of a sense of duty would occur naturally without calling for any effort. The student should

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be accustomed to work in unity with others and have a feeling of common interest.

Dewey firmly maintains that education must be based on and applied to experience, if life implies growth, and if education is necessary to the full and continued growth of human beings, then education can not be simply a prelude to adult life or the attainment of some narrow vocation. Education in the good sense continues for an entire life time. Therefore, the problem for any theory of education is not how it will be brought to a conclusion, but how it may better serve and continue to serve all the processes of living that contribute to their widest possible growth. Dewey also points out that education is just as much in need of general philosophic guidance as it is in need of practical techniques to solve particular problems.

Nothing is more important than education in remoulding a society. If man is a creature of habit, education should provide the conditions for developing the most useful and creative habits. Dewey regretted that in the past progress was achieved only when some major social change uprooted the spell of long standing habits. He would prefer
a more controlled approach to change which would provide man with more power to control his knowledge. Change should be achieved not through revolution but through the skillful alteration of habits through education. The spirit of education should be experimental because the mind is fundamentally a problem-solving instrument, and it is therefore more important to try alternative means for successfully solving problems than to pursue neat theoretical formulations. Dewey's instrumentalism was governed by the presupposition of science. As science, education should recognize the intimate connection between action and thought, between experiment and reflection. Achieving knowledge is a continuous process.

Since the realm of meaning and values is created and conserved by the organized life of society, the materials of education—its content and purposes, are social in nature.

John Dewey has tried to unify the conflicting ideals of education viz. individualistic and socialistic. According to him 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.

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Individuality finds its food and nutrition in social supplies. 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 individual and of the society is ensured. Modern education is being highly influenced by the unifying idea.

Dewey's highly influential writings on education set out to destroy the view that liberal and vocational education are opposed to one another. Education is training in intelligence — training, that is, ability as to assess a situation as to be able to change it for the better. This necessitates an education which is at once practical, since we must know how to change the world, and liberal because we must know in what the better consists. But this too, can only be discovered experimentally, not by pure contemplation.

Thus, we find that Dewey gives not a static but a dynamic conception of the aim of education which is supposed to be a universal process aiming at all round development of body, mind and character. Educational
method and activity should be based on the instinctive activities of the child and not on the presentation of the external materials. So, education, according to Dewey must be conceived 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.

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