

## J. Dewey's educational philosophy and physical education

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to discuss Dewey's educational philosophy in connection with physical education. His educational philosophy is considered in this study as part of his social theory. Dewey's social theory is a discussion of the concept of freedom based on criticism of liberalism and a discussion of gaining intelligence to achieve liberty. In his philosophy, the concept of liberty consists of three elements : " power," " relativity," and " control." That is, liberty involves social problems, and one must gain intelligence to solve them. Therefore, one of Dewey's educational aims, based on his social theory, is to gain intelligence to achieve liberty.

The process of gaining intelligence is the process of a continuing reconfiguring of experience. This is why Dewey focused on the constitution of experience in his own philosophy. He specifically focused on the physical activity of children as a reflection of their spirit (mindset), i.e. " spiritual" activities in the form of play or sports. Such a situation produces mutual cooperation and emulation and, then, the experience that occurs as a result of that situation has some " meaning." According to Dewey's theory, amassing meaning is what constitutes intelligence. The process of gaining experience in settings where others are present is the process of gaining intelligence, and that process is predicated on the presence of others. Thus, intelligence is the key to the achievement of liberty.

Accordingly, Dewey's educational philosophy was connected to physical education. In other words, the potential for the concept of physical education to develop is a recognition that intelligence is gained through physical activity in a setting where others are present. Actively identifying the meaning of physical activity by children leads to opportunities to foster their intelligence so that they can achieve freedom. Doing so will lead to their growth and the growth of society itself. Such a stance is a pragmatic one, and it represents the progressivism in Dewey's philosophy.

*Key words: Dewey's educational philosophy, progressivism, liberty, intelligence, physical education, physical activity*

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## 1. Introduction

After World War II, Japan accepted American educational philosophies as a basis for educational reform. One of those philosophies was Pragmatism<sup>1)</sup>. Recently, studies have tended to re-evaluate Pragmatism, and this is particularly evident in disciplines following social practices such as environmental ethics and political science in parallel with pedagogy ; this tendency is based on the stance that Pragmatism takes with respect to social problems<sup>2)</sup>. In the current tendency to re-evaluate Pragmatism, great interest in the philosophy of John Dewey (1859–1952), a pragmatist, may have relevance to the current educational problems.

Historically, educational philosophy has been child-centered. This philosophy was inspired by Progressivism seen in early 20th century America. As a pragmatist, Dewey is regarded as a central figure in the child-centered educational philosophy, backed by Progressivism, and he is often emphasized as a counterpart to traditional educational philosophy, which is not a legitimate understanding of his educational philosophy. Of course, Dewey's educational philosophy has a special view of children, but it demands a restructuring of attitudes towards educating children in diverse circumstances. Therefore, Dewey's educational philosophy is a pragmatic stance that empirically and actively deals with diverse educational problems with ideals.

In order to understand Dewey's attitude toward education, his entire philosophy needs to be understood. Dewey devised his philosophy as a hierarchy of three key concepts : "the individual," "the community," and "society"<sup>3)</sup>. Dewey's concept of growth runs through these concepts. He viewed "growth" as visible changes in society and human beings living in it as well as an invisible transformation, i.e. "constructive growth through liberty on the road to the future."<sup>4)</sup> Dewey's thoughts on "freedom" have been discussed as a social theory beyond the scope of educational theory. "The theory of democracy," which is the thrust of Dewey's philosophy, is a vast topic that includes educational philosophy and social theory. In these ways of thinking, Dewey explored the nature of society<sup>5)</sup>. Divining Dewey's theory of society should help understand the educational philosophy contained therein. It should also help understand the "theory of democracy" that he devised.

Therefore, Dewey's progressivism should be regarded as "a request for a stance on a way of life with an eye toward the growth of society" rather than "advocacy for an educational philosophy that differs from traditional educational philosophy." As Pragmatism is being reevaluated, Dewey's educational philosophy must be discussed with respect to current educational problems.

## 2. Purpose of study

The purpose of this study was to examine Dewey's educational philosophy, and especially his idea of a child-centered educational philosophy, in connection with physical education.

### 3. Dewey's philosophy and the child-centered educational philosophy

The child-centered educational philosophy is as an educational philosophy that promoted the progressive education movement in the United States from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century. At the time, the child-centered educational philosophy was a progressive movement that aimed to transition from traditional education to progressive education, and that philosophy garnered attention as "New Education"<sup>6)</sup>. The child-centered educational philosophy was based on the idea of ascertaining the current state of children and developing education that is appropriate for children<sup>7)</sup>. The child-centered educational philosophy originated from the educational theories of Pragmatism, and particularly Dewey's philosophy<sup>8)</sup>. The child-centered educational philosophy also appeared from the 18th century to the early 19th century. The child-centered educational philosophy was developed by proponents such as J. Rousseau (1712–1778), J. Pestalozzi (1746–1827), and F. Fröbel (1782–1852)<sup>9)</sup>. Dewey's educational philosophy has a special view of children, and child-centered education in the United States is said to have begun at the laboratory school where Dewey's educational philosophy was practiced (1896-1904)<sup>10)</sup>. E. Kay (Ellen Karolina Sofia Key, 1849–1926) was also a prominent proponent of a child-centered educational philosophy. As Kay explained :

But the end of all instruction in college, as in the school, should not consist in examinations and diplomas : these must be obliterated from the face of the earth. The aim should be that the scholars themselves, at first hand, should acquire their knowledge, should get their impressions, should form their opinions, should work their way through to intellectual tastes, not as they now do, taking no trouble themselves, but being supposed to acquire these gifts through interesting lectures given by the teacher on five different subjects, heard every morning while the students are dozing, and soon forgotten.<sup>11)</sup>

"New Education" based on the child-centered educational philosophy also affected the philosophy of physical education, and it created a movement known as "New Physical Education." New Physical Education aimed to transition from nation-centered physical education to physical education based on child-centered educational perspectives<sup>12)</sup>. New Physical Education was organized by three people, T. D. Wood (1865–1951), C. W. Hetherington (1870–1942), and L. H. Gulick (1865–1918)<sup>13)</sup>.

The introduction of "New Education" from the United States into Japan was the beginning of postwar educational reform. The physical education movement revised educational methods such as standardized classes and the emphasis on vertical relationships between teachers and students, and it provided a basis for the philosophy of "New Physical Education" that recommended a democratic system of education<sup>14)</sup>. However, the child-centered view of education was evident in physical education before the physical education movement arose. As an example, the child-centered physical education movement resisted physical education based on nationalism in 1917 (Taisho 6)<sup>15)</sup>. At the time, however, the methodology of child-centered physical education was incomplete and child-

centered physical education could not be put into practice. Child-centered physical education garnered attention again as a result of educational reforms after World War II. The philosophy of “education of the body” was dismantled, and the concept of “education through physical activity” was introduced<sup>16)</sup>. As the concepts of education and physical education swung back and forth, the child-centered educational philosophy again garnered attention from time to time. Physical education that reflects the child-centered educational philosophy has been influenced by Dewey’s philosophy. However, understanding the educational philosophy in Dewey’s philosophy as simply a child-centered educational philosophy may not be a legitimate interpretation. In order to examine Dewey’s educational philosophy, Dewey’s social philosophy must be examined since it is the context for Dewey’s educational philosophy.

According to Dewey, the society of the 1920s and 1930s seemed to “consist of various conditions that would adversely affect all democratic freedoms.” Social change meant the disruption of a philosophy, the concept of liberty (i.e. the disruption of economic individualism) that contrasted to liberalism at the time<sup>17)</sup>. The reason why Dewey criticized the liberalism of the time based on history was because of the dominant belief that “enterprises pursue profit,” substantiating the capitalist system at the time. In addition, “certain societal conditions” for liberty, which as the supposed goal of liberalism, were not considered important. Dewey insisted on the need for humans to change through an understanding of humanity itself and education, rather than altering the social systems that tend to garner attention during social transformation<sup>18)</sup>. The next section examines the social theory found in Dewey’s philosophy. The focus of Dewey’s rethinking of liberalism as a social theory was to explore how to achieve liberty in one’s life, rather than to question the concept of liberty itself<sup>19)</sup>. In other words, the focus of Dewey’s rethinking of liberalism was how to actually achieve freedom<sup>20)</sup>. In general, liberalism is defined as follows :

- ① Liberalism : The holding of liberal opinions in politics or theology ; the political tenets characteristic of a liberal.<sup>21)</sup>
- ② Liberalism : liberal opinions or principles, especially with regard to social and political matters.<sup>22)</sup>

The concept of liberty in Dewey’s philosophy can be examined while setting aside the concept of liberalism as it is generally understood. Dewey explains “liberty” as follows :

Well, in the first place, liberty is not just an idea, an abstract principle. It is power, effective power to do specific things. There is no such things as liberty in general ; liberty, so to speak, at large. If one wants to know what the condition of liberty is at a given time, one has to examine what persons *can* do and what they *cannot* do. . . . (omission) . . . .

In the second place, the possession of effective power is always a matter of the *distribution* of power that exists at the time. . . . (omission) . . . . There is no such thing physically as manifestation of energy or effective power by one thing except in relation to the energy manifested by other things. There is no such thing as the liberty or effective power of an individual, group, or class,

except in relation to the liberties, the effective powers, of *other* individuals, groups, and class. . . . (omission) . . . .

In the third place, this relativity of liberty to the existing *distribution* of powers of action, while meaning that there is no such thing as absolute liberty, also necessarily means that whatever there is liberty at one place there is restraint at some other place. *The system of liberties that exists at any times is always the system of restrains or controls that exists at that time.* No one can do anything except in relation to what others can do and cannot do.<sup>23)</sup>

Liberty is power. Liberty is manifested in the community, and thus relative. That power is accompanied by control. According to Dewey, intelligence is the key to securing liberty :

Of course, there *are* conflicting interests; otherwise there would be no social problems. The problem under discussion is precisely *how* conflicting claims are to be settled in the interest of the widest possible contribution to the interests of all—or at least of the great majority. The method of democracy—insofar as it is that of organized intelligence—is to bring these conflicts out into the open where their special claims can be seen and appraised, where they can be discussed and judged in the light of more inclusive interests than are represented by either of them separately.<sup>24)</sup>

In other words, liberty is controlled by and achieved through intelligence. In Dewey's philosophy, "intelligence" is explained as follows :

In its large sense, this remarking of the old through union with the new is precisely what intelligence is. It is conversion of past experience into knowledge and projection of that knowledge in ideas and purposes that anticipate what may come to be in the future and that indicate how to realize what is desired.<sup>25)</sup>

The relationship between intelligence and experience as Dewey described it has great significance in Dewey's philosophy, and this point will be discussed later. Dewey believed that education is needed to achieve freedom through intelligence (a renascent liberalism) :

Its work (\*the work of Liberalism) is first of all education, in the broadest sense of that term. Schooling is a part of the work of education, but education in its full meaning includes all the influences that go to form the attitudes and dispositions (of desire as well as of belief), which constitute dominant habits of mind and character.<sup>26)</sup>

Dewey's educational philosophy is typified by the following passage :

When, then, I say that the first object of a renascent liberalism is education, I mean that its task is to aid in producing the habits of mind and character, the intellectual and moral patterns, that

are somewhere near even with the actual movements of events.<sup>27)</sup>

Thus, Dewey's social theory is connected to his theory of education for children. Therefore, the next section will examine Dewey's educational theory.

#### 4. The theory of education for children in Dewey's philosophy

The philosophy of education for children in Dewey's philosophy was evident in the philosophy of Dewey's educational efforts at the laboratory school (1896 – 1904) of the University of Chicago from 1896 to 1903. For example, Dewey states that :

The school is a special social community in which the too complex social environment is reduced and simplified; in which certain ideas and facts concerning this simplified social life are communicated to the child; in which, also, the child is called upon to undertake not all kinds of activity, but those specially selected on the ground of peculiar adaptation to the child.<sup>28)</sup>

Thus, in Dewey's educational philosophy there is a link between children and society, and a special view of children is apparent. This article will now look at a passage that readily identifies the philosophy of education for children in Dewey's philosophy. This passage is why the educational philosophy found in Dewey philosophy is so readily perceived as a child-centered educational philosophy :

It (\*the old education) may be summed up by stating that the center of gravity is outside the child. It is in the teacher, the textbook, anywhere and everywhere you please except in the immediate instincts and activities of the child himself. . . . (omission) . . . Now the change, which is coming into our education, is the shifting of the center of gravity. It is aching, a revolution, not unlike that introduced by Copernicus when the astronomical center shifted from the earth to the sun. In this case the child becomes the sun about which the appliances of education revolve; he is the center about which they are organized.<sup>29)</sup>

In other words, Dewey sought to develop a form of education that encourages children to actively inquire rather than a form of education that deals with them passively and that treats them en masse as an aggregate of units<sup>30)</sup>. The reason is expressed in the following words from Dewey :

The moment children act they individualize themselves; they cease to be a mass, and become the intensely distinctive beings that we are acquainted with out of school, in the home, the family, on the playground, and in the neighborhood.<sup>31)</sup>

Children are very active beings, and in the blink of an eye they become individuals. Children's

actions are related to their instincts. According to Dewey, children like to express themselves by means such as form (e.g. body work) and color. When left to their own devices to pursue their own interests, children will grow in some manner. However, this growth is "merely accidental"<sup>32</sup>. "But let the child first express his impulse, and then through criticism, question, and suggestion bring him to consciousness of what he has done, and what he needs to do, and the result (as growth) is quite different"<sup>33</sup>.

Children experience various things in their daily lives. Therefore, this article will consider the concept of experience in Dewey's philosophy. According to Dewey, experience consists of an active element, i.e. a "trying" or experimenting, and a passive element, an "undergoing" or consequence<sup>34</sup>. When, for example, a child thrusts his finger into a flame, this action alone cannot be considered experience. Experience occurs when the child's action ("trying") is linked to his suffering its consequences ("undergoing"). In other words, an action that has "meaning" is considered an experience<sup>35</sup>.

Dewey is focusing on the human "mind" as he considers finding meaning from an experience<sup>36</sup>. Dewey classifies education into two categories, providing children with rich experiences and the direct absorption of knowledge. According to Dewey, the latter severs something which is called mind or consciousness from the physical organs of activity, resulting in mere bodily action. Instead, Dewey thinks that directly ascertaining knowledge through "spiritual" activity is worthwhile. At least in part, the following passage expresses Dewey's view of the mind-body relationship :

It is, I repeat, the split between the latter as they have externally occurred and the ways of desiring, thinking, and putting emotion and purpose into execution that is the basic cause of present confusion in mind and paralysis in action. . . . (omission) . . . . Thought, desire and purpose exist in a constant give and take of interaction with environing conditions. But resolute thought is first step in that change of action that will itself carry further the needed change in patterns of mind and character.<sup>37</sup>

The "mind" is directly linked to instincts, impulses, and interests, and a child's "mind" is expressed through activity. That is, activity is a reflection of the mindset of children, and activity is how children express their own inner world. According to Dewey, the nervous tension and fatigue that can develop in children and educators are inevitable consequences of an abnormal situation in which bodily activity is separate from the perception of meaning.

In light of the points identified thus far, when children concentrate on something they are merely expressing the concept of liberty, which is the "effective power to do specific things." In other words, the activity through which children express their interests, mindset, and instincts is the public expression of power, i.e. liberty, by children. When children do so, they learn the "meaning" of being part of society through their interaction with their environment. As Dewey explained :

The fundamental factors in the educative process are an immature, undeveloped being ; and

certain social aims, meanings, values incarnate in the matured experience of the adult. The educative process is the due interaction of these forces. Such a conception of each in relation to the other as facilitates completest and freest interaction is the essence of educational theory.<sup>38)</sup>

Thus, Dewey is not looking solely at the body and its superficial physical interaction with the environment. Instead, he has focused on “the meaning” of activity, i.e. what occurs in the child’s invisible spiritual world. This article will now attempt to connect Dewey philosophy as it has been described thus far to physical education.

When attempting to connect Dewey’s educational philosophy and theories to physical education, one should imagine what children are thinking and how they should behave. Thus, one should look at the following passage from Dewey :

Upon the playground, in game and sport, social organization takes place spontaneously and inevitably. There is something to do, some activity to be carried on, requiring natural divisions of labor, selection of leaders and followers, mutual cooperation and emulation.<sup>39)</sup>

Therefore, the various activities that children engage in may be casual, but they should not be disregarded. Children engage in various activities with their bodies, and that action is educationally significant. Dewey’s views on play and games warrant attention :

Play is not to be identified with anything which the child externally does. It rather designates his mental attitude in its entirety and in its unity. It is the free play, the interplay, of all the child’s powers, thoughts, and physical movements, in embodying, in a satisfying form, his own images and interests.<sup>40)</sup>

Children’s physical activity is directly connected to their inner world. In the community, children learn and gain intelligence by encountering various people, ideas, and surroundings. Dewey’s theory of society should be looked at once again. The existence of others is a prerequisite to achieving liberty, and intelligence is the key to its achievement. The way that children should behave, which Dewey focused on, was limited to settings where children sought to “control” the freedom of their playmates or teammates. However, the events that transpired in the settings that Dewey focused on were mostly accidental, as he also mentioned. Therefore, the mission of education is to consciously encourage experiences through such events and to make children aware that they are changing during those events and that they should seek to gain something from those experiences. In light of this educational philosophy and theory, what can physical education do? As Kimura explained :

Bring about events where people come into contact with one another between a person and a person and teach students about “co-existing.” Being aware of the existence of others allows one to be aware of one’s own existence, and one is enriched by accepting others. This does not mean



learning abstract moral codes but learning with one's body.....This opens the door to physical education<sup>41)</sup>.

The existence of "others" should be a major prerequisite of physical education, and physical education must begin with a renewed awareness of the existence of "others." Physical education is grounded in humans seeking to gain intelligence. "Physical knowledge" is on par with "professional knowledge," "practical knowledge," and "empirical knowledge," so physical education can be described as "teaching physical knowledge." Shinohara described a social framework that fostered "knowledge" as a "theater of knowledge." When gaining physical knowledge, the body is both the subject of study and the means with which to gain knowledge. Thus, Shinohara stated that linguistic knowledge held in the brain is not expressed solely through symbols and language. As he explained :

Physical knowledge must be embodied in a "theater of knowledge," i.e. being able to sense, feeling, and express knowledge with one's body. Discussion is an exchange of linguistic knowledge, and discussion provides a rich education. Similarly, physical activity and expression is an exchange of physical knowledge, and one receives a richer physical education through physical activity and expression.<sup>42)</sup>

According to Shinohara, the social framework that fosters "knowledge" is a "theater of knowledge," and this framework fosters an "intelligent mind" as well as an "intelligent body" (i.e. physical education) through transactions<sup>43)</sup>. That is, knowledge is used effectively by the intellect. This idea applies to activity involving the body as it does to use of language. This also leads to "the physical rebellion of contemporary children" mentioned by Kimura. As cited earlier, Dewey asserted that "the split between the latter as they have externally occurred and the ways of desiring, thinking, and putting emotion and purpose into execution that is the basic cause of present confusion in mind and paralysis in action." This passage warrants consideration today as well. Children live in a community where other people are present, and both have their own philosophies. Children have certain meaningful experiences as a result of sensing their surroundings with their bodies. Children also learn the significance of physical activity and how to interact with others. This is the basis for intelligence fostered through physical education.

The discussion thus far has sought to describe personal growth promoted by intelligence and the growth of a society consisting of individuals. The concept of growth in physical education refers to physical development and maturity, but it should also be regarded as transformation or growth of the inner spiritual world of a corporeal individual<sup>44)</sup>. As Dewey explained :

In every integral experience there is form because there is dynamic organization. I call the organization dynamic because it takes time to complete it, because it is a growth.<sup>45)</sup>

The concept of growth in Dewey's philosophy should be considered carefully today, given the

rapid and complex changes in society. The educational significance of physical education is not limited to encounters with physical exercise or promoting physical development and health. Instead, casual activities also have educational significance. Once one recognizes that there are invisible implications associated with the various activities of children (however casual they may be), one understands the unlimited potential for their growth and the growth of society. Dewey's philosophy is considered to be a humanistic theory of education<sup>46</sup>). Therefore, physical education predicated on Dewey's philosophy can be described as an educational endeavor to foster "humanistic intelligence." Dewey's progressivism is based on a pragmatic stance that actively looks to the future while ensuring the growth of children and society.

## 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine Dewey's educational philosophy based on his social philosophy and to consider the connection between his educational philosophy and physical education. Dewey's social philosophy specifically addresses "the issue of liberty," and Dewey stated that intelligence was needed in order to achieve liberty. In other words, he regarded intelligence as the ability to consider how freedom can be achieved in light of the existence of others. Dewey also contended that education was needed to gain intelligence. If the physical activity of children is viewed from an educational standpoint, that activity is important and cannot be overlooked. Experience is the basis for intelligence, so experience is needed to foster intelligence.

Dewey's educational philosophy and physical education were connected in the following manner. Physical activity is the basis for sensing the world firsthand and controlling the power, i.e. freedom, that one is able to exercise. Knowledge of how the world is constructed and how one must live and the ability to effectively use that knowledge are fostered through physical activity. This makes individuals aware of themselves and others, it teaches individuals what they and others want, and it allows an individual to grow in various settings.

Physical education is taught to children, and the physical activity of children changes each day. In such instances, teachers of physical education must be aware of the individuality of their students and they need to accommodate their teaching to the situation. Physical education must view people as they are at a given moment. This is a pragmatic stance that actively deals with issues in a given instance, and it truly embodies Dewey's progressivism.

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