

Classroom Pragmatism Considered

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Abstract

Pragmatism in education stems from John Dewey's experimentalist philosophy of education, aiming to allow children to grow in understanding of subjects by trial and error. An education where failure and relearning are valued over memorization to meet standards is behind the pragmatic theory of education. While this education style is beneficial, the philosophy underlying it can lead to some questionable ideas, such as an ever-changing basis for morals, which stands in direct opposition to a biblical worldview. If the experience driven aspect of a pragmatist philosophy like Dewey pioneered could be paired with a biblical life framework there could be great potential for classroom success, and the growth of a generation of students confident in their knowledge and morals alike.

As we look at the educational system in the 21st century, there are aspects of pragmatism that are favorable and still evident today. The student-centered, hands-on approach to learning has become more of a priority in student's academic achievement. We can thank John Dewey for his introduction to pragmatism in the United States and those who came after him that continued to make this philosophy relevant and impactful in classrooms and other fields today. This paper seeks to expound on the advantages, critiques and implications that pragmatism has in the educational setting. Additionally, my personal beliefs are supported through a pragmatic lens.

Summary and Historical Context

To understand pragmatism as an educational theory, we must begin with those who developed and popularized the theory and why. Charles Sanders Pierce was the founder of American pragmatism in the late 19th century. Instead of probability, Pierce applied the scientific method to support his ideas (Ornstein, 2017). In this paper, the focus will be on John Dewey as he applied the pragmatic philosophy to his work in education. Dewey propelled the experimentalist philosophy forward into the 20th century throughout the United States and his influences are still evident in education today. The foundation of pragmatism as an educational theory is built upon the idea that individuals develop problem solving skills through experiences and engaging with their environment. These learning experiences give individuals the skills they need to succeed as they grow through ever-changing environments. This new way of teaching and learning was a shift from traditional methods that emphasized universal truths and acquiring knowledge of a vast array of subjects and disciplines. Dewey believed that there was much more to discover about ideas and concepts where idealists believe that ideas about reality have always existed set forth by our Creator (Ornstein, 2017). As it pertains to education, pragmatic approaches invite individuals to reach a deeper understanding of topics and subjects through

many perspectives and solutions to problems. Through facilitating a deep understanding of complex issues, one would be able to go through life with the skills needed to overcome challenges, collaborate with others, engage in learning communities and become contributing members of society.

Critical Analysis

As a Christian I reflect on the philosophy of pragmatism through the lens of a biblical worldview and what God has to say about these developed concepts. Modern philosophy says that the brain just knows how to figure it all out, but a pragmatist view claims the individual learns to make connections that it did not previously possess. The way the individual makes these connections is through the means of communication. Not through communication that one would initially think of, by means of speaking, listening and absorbing the information, but rather through engaging in common behaviors. Biesta (2010) explains, “It is not, therefore, that meaning is transmitted from one person to another. It is because people share in a common activity, that their ideas and emotions are transformed as a result of and in function of the activity in which they participate” (p. 714). This thought is supported by Romans 12:2. It says, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (NIV). This requires an individual to avoid blindly following, alternatively we are called to renew our minds. We should put these ideas to the test in order to determine God’s will. Putting it to the test by analyzing through the living Word of God. Similarly, Dewey sought to put ideas to the test using the scientific method for inquiring knowledge. One does not come into the world with the ability to communicate and reason. These are learned behaviors that we gather by observing and

engaging with others. In support of pragmatism, humans need to learn and grow as the ages change.

A pragmatic approach searches for knowledge and understanding until it is found. Individuals should continually seek to grow and better themselves. Today we have so much at our disposal in terms of accessibility to new information, technology, resources and opportunity. There is little stopping one from reaching success, whatever that may look like for each individual. In education, pragmatics don't assess success based on achievement standards and the ability to regurgitate knowledge on a particular subject. This means there is no limits on what a mind can inquire and achieve. Ormerod (2021) states, "Dewey defines inquiry as the transformation of a puzzling indeterminate situation into one that is sufficiently unified to warrant assertion or coherent action; it starts with doubt and ends with belief or knowledge" (p. 800). While there may be content areas in which one can reach certainty and assert definitive statements, our entire human existence is built upon the concept of faith. Dewey's pragmatics take on altering doubt to knowledge contradicts the essence of the Christian faith, trusting in things unseen. Hebrews 11:1 says, "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" (NIV). Not all information and knowledge can be a tangible, proven reality. At some point, faith has to enter the equation and with faith comes a peace that surpasses all understanding. An endless pursuit of knowledge will only leave an individual unsatisfied and wanting more.

Lastly, Dewey believed that values could change as the environment changes. Ornstein (2017) explains, "A constantly changing and pluralistic world means that values, too, are not universal and eternal as idealists and realists assert but are changing and relative to time, place, and circumstance" (p. 174). Teachers then have a role in educating students in their exploration

of societal issues, identity, equality, gender, human rights, etc. Ye, & Shih (2021) state Dewey's perspective, "He noted that teaching is not just about educating people; it involves taking responsibility for shaping social life forms, maintaining social order, and developing society" (p. 887). While some might argue for teachers to hold this role in a student's overall education, I would argue against this claim. It is the parent's right and responsibility to instill the values and ideals that they want their child to possess. A biblical worldview argues against the pragmatic take that values change based on the time and place. Especially in present day, there are many ideas that lead away from the solid truths of the Bible. Psalm 119:89 says, "Your word, LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens" (NIV). As a parent myself, I don't want teachers to be educating my children on social topics that I fundamentally and biblically disagree with. Dewey would encourage a student to search and decide for themselves, but parents are called to raise up a child in the way they should go.

Comparison of Educational Philosophy with Personal Educational Beliefs

Despite the shortcomings of pragmatism described above, there are aspects of the educational theory that align with my personal education beliefs. I have been a teacher in the public school system and have put my educational philosophies to the test firsthand. Now as a mother, I have further solidified my views on education and the way I hope for my children to learn and grow. My main hesitation with the current educational system is the emphasis on achievement standards. Yes, I believe that students need to learn language, mathematics, history, science, etc. but, I do not appreciate the expectations put on young children to sit still for many hours in a day, taking in information and then proving their ability to repeat the information. Especially for grades Kindergarten through second grade. There is so much academic pressure for children at such a young age. I appreciate this approach, explained by Biesta (2014): "For

Dewey, education is neither about getting the curriculum into the child nor about the child just doing anything, but about establishing a productive and meaningful connection between the two” (p. 31). A child should be able to interact with and explore their interests. If a child is dedicated and motivated by an interest, they are likely to continue working through a problem until it is solved. So often, I see students tune out and easily give up on working through content area problems because they have no personal goals related to the skill. Students would benefit from teachers who incorporate a pragmatic approach of self-exploration and fostering intrinsic motivation with accomplishing mastery of competencies.

Implication for Today’s Education and Classroom

As far as education in the classroom today the expected learning taking place comes with little to no movement aside from limited outdoor recess. The overall health and habits of a student correlates to the health and ability of their mind. This was an important focus for Dewey as he believed that the two were very much connected. Thorburn (2017) writes, “...Learners’ wholehearted engagement with health and well-being could connect more closely with whole school improvement aims...” (p. 317). Students should have the opportunity to not just develop academically during the school day, but socially, physically, mentally and holistically. There are ways in which teachers can incorporate ideals derived from Dewey’s framework. One of these ways is through encouraging a responsive classroom (Williams, 2017). This includes facilitating morning meetings, energizers, and closing circles (2017). These classroom techniques foster a close-knit community of learners built upon trust and respect which lends way to a positive learning environment.

Conclusion

Despite the downfall of pragmatic educational theory as it pertains to subjective morals, the pragmatic approach has many other positive pieces. A whole picture look at students which seeks to develop thinkers and students who truly grasp the connections between concepts is always a positive direction to move in education as a whole. For our society, it would be much more beneficial to educate children with a pragmatic approach in order to develop young people into strong intellects as well as experienced individuals. Looking forward, further research into ways to combine pragmatic education with Christian morals and virtues could be an excellent way to nurture children through their time in school.

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