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THE CONCEPT OF EXPERIENCE IN JOHN DEWEY'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION²

Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the concept of experience, an important component of John Dewey's philosophy of education, within the framework of Dewey's educational views. Document analysis was used for data collection in the study. John Dewey, one of the foremost representatives of the American pragmatism, is especially well known for his ideas about education. The most outstanding aspect of his educational ideas is the principle of learning based on experience. In this respect, he criticizes the insufficiencies of the traditional education and puts forward a new conception of education. The functions of the school, the purpose of courses, and the roles of the teachers are radically changed in this new student-centered conception of education which is based on direct experience and learnings by doing.

Key Words: Experience, Philosophy of Education, Dewey.

JOHN DEWEY'İN EĞİTİM FELSEFESİNDE DENEYİM KAVRAMI

Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı John Dewey'in eğitim felsefesinin önemli unsurlarından birisi olan deneyim kavramını, Dewey'in eğitim görüşleri çerçevesinde incelemektir. Çalışmada veri toplamak amacıyla doküman inceleme yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Amerikan pragmatizminin önemli temsilcilerinden birisi olan John Dewey, özellikle eğitim konusundaki düşünceleri ile tanınmaktadır. Onun eğitim düşüncelerinin en öne çıkan yanı ise deneyime dayalı öğrenme

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prensibidir. Bu bakımdan o, mevcut eğitimin bu konudaki yetersizliklerini eleştirerek yeni bir eğitim anlayışı ortaya koymaktadır. Öğrenciyi merkeze alan, doğrudan deneyimlere bağlı olan yaparak öğrenmelere dayanan bu yeni eğitim anlayışında, okulun işlevleri, derslerin amacı ve öğretmen rolleri de köklü değişimlere uğramaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Deneyim, Eğitim Felsefesi, Dewey.

INTRODUCTION

Mentioning the educational views of pragmatism would be important for better understanding this study which aims to explain, within the framework of John Dewey's views of education, the concept of experience and how to deliver education through experience.

Pragmatism considers utility as the basis in daily life, and the measure of such utility can be expressed in terms of usefulness that indicates a disposition to action (Bakır, 2006: 53). According to this thought, the knowledge is true only if it is useful. However, there is no absolute and constant knowledge as the reality is constantly changing. Therefore, educational objectives are open to change, as it addresses an ever-changing life. To buttress the fact that there are no stable content or subject, this idea places more emphasis on practice than the theory, and argues that learning is actualized through experience (Sönmez, 2014: 95-102). Knowledge is achieved through life experiences of the student according to Dewey's idea, and therefore, experience becomes useful in the student's life (Bakır, 2012: 27). In this respect, for Dewey, experience is a useful factor to consider in taking various decisions, ranging from the subjects to be delivered in the courses, down to the methods, materials and equipment to be used, and to the social organization of the school (Bal, 1991: 30). Therefore, it is clear that the high importance of experience in Dewey's educational thought is not coincidental.

There are some studies carried out in Turkey, which focus on various dimensions of John Dewey's educational views and his influence on Turkish Educational System (Turan, 2000; Özsoy 2009; Ata, 2001; Yıldız, 2014; Kahraman, Baran and Saatçı 2011; Bakır, 2012; Bal, 1991; Öztürk, 2008). Besides Turkey, there are also a number of studies addressing Dewey's educational views which are carried out in other countries (Miettinen, 2000; Ord, 2012; Talebi, 2015; Karafillis, 2012; Jayanandhan, 2009).

Apart from these, there are some studies carried out inside and outside Turkey, which focus on the concept of experience in John Dewey's philosophy. In the study carried out by Eroğlu (2011), concept of aesthetic experience within the context of John Dewey's art/aesthetic views was focused on. Within this framework, Dewey was intended to be demonstrated as a philosopher who generated ideas on art ontology. Educational dimension of experience was partially/at a certain extent given place in the study.

With reference to semantic distinctions in the concept of experience in John Dewey's view, such as primary/ordinary and secondary/aesthetic experience, in his study, Hohr (2013) tried to clarify the meanings of this concept carries in terms of feeling, enlivening and conceiving. He also addressed the importance of this distinction for education.

Aydın (2015) touched upon the meanings of the concept of experience in the history of philosophy in his study and he mainly discussed this concept in terms of epistemology. In this

context, the concept of experience in John Dewey's thought was analysed in terms of epistemology in relation with his naturalist understanding.

More specifically, there are also studies carried out inside and outside Turkey on the concept of experience in John Dewey's view of education. In a study on the importance of the concept of experience in John Dewey's educational thought, Aedo (2002) primarily analysed the meaning which Dewey attributed to the concept of experience and intended to bring the importance of interaction and continuity, on which the concept of experience is based, to the light. Then he discussed Dewey's experiential education concept in relation with Paulo Freire's views and addressed the roles of the teachers and the relation of the concept of self-control with these roles.

Oral (2012), in his study which was carried out within the scope of John Dewey holistic concept of experience, exhibited the meaning of this concept and tried to determine the importance of this concept for teacher training programs. In this regard, an educational experience a teacher gained with a student was examined by means of story analysis method in the light of phenomenological method and the way of use Dewey's concept was tried to be demonstrated.

This study considers Dewey's criticism of the traditional schools, mentions the required functions of the school with re-established ties with life, and addresses how experiential education should be. In addition, the roles of teachers in the process of education are also mentioned.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the document analysis method was used as a scientific research method. The document analysis method includes the analysis of written materials that include information on the subject of the research. In this method, written materials are considered as valuable sources of information and the researcher can collect the necessary data without observations or interviews. This way, it provides savings in terms of time and cost (Yıldırım ve Şimşek, 2011: 187-188). For this research, translated and original books and articles related to the subject of the research were analyzed, the problem was examined in the light of the collected data, and the concepts and ideas were clarified.

FINDINGS

1. Mission of the School and Criticism of Traditional Education

According to Dewey, education does not only cover or entail the school life. Therefore, one of the main duties of the school is to provide conditions that will ensure the continuation of the education, after the school life. A school yields its best products only if it pays attention to learning from life itself and bringing the living conditions to a level at which, everyone can learn throughout his/her life time (Dewey, 1996: 57). This implies that the education provided in the school should not be separated from the life, and that the individuals can more easily adapt to the community life if the tie between the life and the school is stronger. Because Dewey's conception of education "...is formally summed up in the idea of continuous reconstruction of experience, an idea which is marked off from education as preparation for a remote future, as unfolding, as external formation, and as recapitulation of the past." (Dewey, 2004: 86).

Since the school transfers the community's heritage to the child and the child uses his/her individual qualities for social purposes, the education is not a preparation for future life, but it is the life itself. For this reason, the school should represent the real life as much as possible and continue the activities that the child is familiar with; this is the only way to ensure the continuity of the child's development and to add on his/her existing experiences (Dewey, 1897: 7-8). However, traditional schools are far from giving priority to experience and providing education based on students' own experiences, and they have been extremely separated from the real life (Dewey, 2010: 30). Then, the first thing to do would be to re-establish the tie between the life and the school. Because according to Dewey; "...there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education." (Dewey, 1997: 20). When this tie is re-established, it can be said that the deep separation between those knowledge gained in the school and those acquired in real life will also be eliminated. As Dewey puts it, "When nature and society can live in the schoolroom, when the forms and tools of learning are subordinated to the substance of experience, then shall there be an opportunity for this identification..." (Dewey, 1990: 62).

According to Dewey, the education provided in schools according to the classical idea of education is not only far from the life and the society, but it is also based on rote learning which restricts students' exploration and brings a limitation to their lives. Another negative aspect of these schools, which make the students passive listeners and prevent their experiencing, creativity and participation in the work, is the lack of workshops, laboratories and equipment that would include the students in the process (Dewey, 2010: 39-40). So it can be asserted that the students themselves are the main thing that is being neglected in such schools. In this type of school, which Dewey criticizes, "As a consequence of the absence of the materials and occupations which generate real problems, the pupil's problems are not his; or, rather, they are his *only as* a pupil, not as a human being." (Dewey, 2004: 169). In this respect, one of the basic functions to be fulfilled by the school is not to turn the students into passive receivers, deposits of knowledge, but to bring them up as active persons that learn by doing. For "The slogan 'Learn by Doing' was not intended as a credo for anti-intellectualism but, on the contrary, was meant to call attention to the fact that the child is naturally an active, curious, and exploring creature." (Berstein, 2006: 48).

While the classical education does not take into consideration the needs, interests and desires of the child, it gives a central role to the books or to the teachers. Therefore, one thing to be changed in the new conception of education is the book-or teacher-centered education which should be replaced by the child-centered education. Calling this shifting of education's focus to the child as Copernican revolution, Dewey suggests that everything should be planned and arranged according to the child and the child should be an active being in the process of education (Dewey, 2010: 41-43). As a result, it can be said that the education will break away from its structure which is based on rote learning and it will turn into a structure that enables discovery. Because "The occupation supplies the child with a genuine motive; it gives him experience at first hand; it brings him into contact with realities." (Dewey, 1990: 22).

Apart from the idea that the traditional conception of education ignores the characteristics of students, Dewey suggests that the expectations from the students are also well above their levels and current experiences. It is impossible for the students to be active in this type of education since the subjects are simplified through various tools used by the teachers, then they

are imposed on the students, and the students are only responsible for learning from the book and doing what is requested from them (Dewey, 2011: 21-22). According to Dewey and Dewey, the textbooks and the lessons in such education deliver the discoveries of others, and they seem as if they shorten the way to acquire the knowledge. In reality, however, this way is not shortened and the ideas are not properly understood. Therefore, the aim of education is not to load the knowledge, but to teach how to use the knowledge as necessary (Dewey J. ve Dewey E., 1938: 29-30). For the knowledge of others (teachers or books) does not contribute to the students' abilities to cope with current problems and it prevents them from thinking properly because it is ready knowledge/solution on which the students do not contemplate (Dewey, 1996: 178). It can be stated that the ready knowledge causes the students to become passive and it prevents them from perceiving the nature of the knowledge and performing meaningful intellectual activities. Therefore, the process of education should ensure that the student goes through experiences where they can use the knowledge as necessary and understand the ways that lead to the knowledge as stated above. Because the student does not only learn in this process, but "He learns to learn." (Dewey, 2004: 49) at the same time. And the student's experience is the main element that enables him to learn how to learn.

2. The Relationship Between Experience and Education According to John Dewey

According to Dewey, "Experience is now an emancipatory power. Experience means innovation that calls for distancing from dependency on the past and explains the unusual phenomena and realities." (Dewey, 2008: 163). In this respect, it can be stated that the precondition for the person to produce new meanings and to acquire knowledge that is more meaningful to himself is to go through liberal (free) experience. Because "To refuse to try, to stick blindly to tradition, because the search for the truth involves experimentation in the region of the unknown, is to refuse the only step which can introduce rational conviction into education." (Dewey, 1990: 104). Besides, one of the basic conditions for delivering meaningful things to the student in education is the action which they perform or in which they are engaged. In this way, the knowledge gained through direct participation in work supports participation in social life more permanently and substantially. And this relieves the students of being slaves in the works they perform and makes them persons that fulfill meaningful activities by using their own goals and methods (Dewey, 2010: 34). Therefore, it can be asserted that John Dewey's philosophy of education envisages radical changes and practices from the bottom to the top. Dewey describes the possible changes to be brought about by this idea of education which aims to make students more active, freer and more conscious persons: "To imposition... is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality; to external discipline is opposed free activity; to learning from texts and teachers, learning through experience; to acquisition of isolated skills and techniques by drill, is opposed acquisition of them as means of attaining ends which make direct vital appeal; to preparation for a more or less remote future is opposed making the most of the opportunities of present life; to static aims and materials is opposed acquaintance with a changing world." (Dewey, 1997: 19-20).

However, it would also not be appropriate to think that in the new conception, the education will be completely delivered through experience. Not every type of education is adequately educative, and it is also not possible to consider education equal to experience. The experiences to be included in the education are educative experiences to the extent that they are supportive of other experiences. In this respect, the separated experiences independent of each

other provided by the traditional education are improper and non-educative experiences, and this is the basic point criticized by the new conception of education (Dewey, 2011: 30-31). Therefore, the way to enable the students to get the best out of the process of education is directly connected with ensuring the interrelatedness of the experiences. It can be said that for the discontinuous experiences independent of each other are in stark contrast to the new conception of education which adopts learning through experience as the basic principle. As Dewey puts it, "...the principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after." (Dewey, 1997: 35).

There are various challenges in providing education based on experience. These are of course to know the effect of the environment in acquiring the experiences and to be aware of how the environment (physical and social) can lead to the acquisition of the experiences that are useful in the process of education. Therefore, the educators have increased responsibilities in the progressive education, which, unlike the traditional conception of education, does not find the classroom environment sufficient for the experiences (Dewey, 2011: 48-49). In this context, one of the most important duties to be assumed by an educator is to arrange the objective conditions (what the educators do, course materials and equipment, books, toys, etc.) in which the students will be engaged in interaction. However, arranging these conditions is not an ordinary task; it also means considering the interests, capacities and needs of the students and accordingly determining the environment in which the students will interact, so that the mentioned useful experiences can occur (Dewey, 2011: 54-55). This will make it more possible for the students to acquire useful experiences for themselves in an environment which they are familiar with and where they will be interacting with all materials or persons. Dewey emphasizes the importance of this conception as follows: "The principle of interaction makes it clear that failure of adaptation of material to needs and capacities of individuals may cause an experience to be non-educative quite as much as failure of an individual to adapt himself to the material." (Dewey, 1997: 46-47).

According to Dewey, one of the most important considerations of the progressive education is the fact that it needs an experiential philosophy of education more than those who wanted innovation in the past. This philosophy of education belongs to an education which gets all its sources from the experience, realizes through the experience and is received for experience (Dewey, 2011: 34-35). For this reason, it can be asserted that a conception of education that is not based on individuals' own experiences is outdated. Then, it can be said that all the things to be learned in the process of education, especially the courses, should be brought together under the umbrella of experience. As Dewey states, "It is a cardinal precept of the newer school of education that the beginning of instruction shall be made with the experience learners already have; that this experience and the capacities that have been developed during its course provide the starting point for all further learning." (Dewey, 1997: 74). Besides, regardless of their fields, all the courses should be associated with the daily life, because, for Dewey, the best course is the one that most strongly establishes the relationship between the daily life and the subjects of the course (Dewey, 1996: 183-184). However, it would also be inappropriate to think that only the science courses would be suitable for practice and experience, and the verbal courses which are seemingly non-practical will not provide any utilities. According to Dewey (2010: 50-51), the verbal courses have many functions, ranging

from social integration to sharing examples and to the development of speaking and linguistic abilities. Therefore, the importance of such courses is undeniable.

3. The Role of Teachers in Experiential Education

It was mentioned before that the new conception of education envisages radical changes. In line with these changes, the position or role of the teacher, which is one of the most important elements of the process of education, would also change. In this respect, "The teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator but takes on that of leader of group activities." (Dewey, 1997: 59). Therefore, the teacher will have to lose his role of being in authority, because in Dewey's new conception of education, "The teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child, but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these influences." (Dewey, 1897: 9). Considering this, it can be stated that the teacher has increased duties and responsibilities in this changed role, because the teacher will need to take into account many issues apart from the course subjects in this new student-centered and experiential conception of education. Aedo (2002: 10-11) states that, instead of expressing the realities as they are, Dewey wanted the teachers to present the information regarding these facts indirectly in a way to allow students to identify and solve the real problems. Therefore the students will have possibility to establish better connections with the course subjects. Dewey mentions these issues as follows: "The way is, first, for the teacher to be intelligently aware of the capacities, needs, and past experiences of those under instruction, and, secondly, to allow the suggestion made to develop into a plan and project by means of the further suggestions contributed and organized into a whole by the members of the group." (Dewey, 1997: 71-72). Therefore, it can be stated that the teacher will be in a position or play the role of a guide who, by considering the experiences of the students, helps them acquire new experiences and prepare learning opportunities for them. In brief, it can be said that the teacher plays a key role in the new conception of education mentioned above.

CONCLUSION

The concept of experience is certainly one of the most outstanding or the most important concepts of John Dewey's philosophy of education. It can be said that learning through experience brings knowing and doing to the same level, and as a natural consequence of this, it enables the things that are learned in the process of education to become concrete and useful and it brings the individual to the center. Things that are learned or gained through experience do not limit education to the school life, but they extend all through the entire life of the individual. In this conception of education envisaged by Dewey, it is emphasized that, regardless of its field, all the learning or the knowledge should be realized through experiences. It is for this very reason that the function of the schools, the position of the student, the qualities of the courses as well as the qualities of the teacher need to be changed in such an educational system. It would be appropriate to state that in this structure, the relation between the school and life is strongly re-established, the student becomes an active learner, the courses enable the student to add new experiences on his current experiences as much as possible, and the teacher is in the position of a guide who enables the provision of experiential education.

Besides, the fact that John Dewey's views on experience have particularly great influence on Kolb's theory of experiential learning (Ord, 2012; Kolb and Kolb, 2005), which he designed

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on four learning styles which are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984 cited by: Lewis and Williams, 1994: 6) can be regarded as important in terms of demonstrating the importance of his views about experience on the field of education.

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