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O PENSAMENTO DE JOHN DEWEY SOBRE EDUCAÇÃO CÍVICA EM 'DEMOCRACIA E EDUCAÇÃO'

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Submitted: 05 June 2016

Accepted: 29 September 2016

Published: 17 November 2016

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Abstract: To draw a relation between philosophy and education is not an easy task. However, such task is doable when this relation is approached through a philosopher or, even better, a philosopher from the field of education. Such approach is considered more specific and thus, deeper because it is possible to gauge the relation by looking for its relevance. Bearing this idea in mind, I would like to present John Dewey's view of the relation between philosophy and education. Such relation is discussed mostly in his *opus* 'Democracy and Education', which particularly highlights civic education.

Keywords: John Dewey; democracy; civic education; philosophy and education.

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Resumo: Identificar a relação entre filosofia e educação não é uma tarefa fácil. Porém, é possível cumpri-la quando por meio de um filósofo ou, melhor ainda, um filósofo do campo da educação. Esta abordagem é considerada mais específica e, portanto, mais aprofundada, pois possibilita avaliar esta relação observando a sua relevância. Com isto em mente, neste artigo apresento a visão de John Dewey acerca da relação entre filosofia e educação. Esta relação é analisada no seu livro Democracia e Educação, com destaque para a abordagem do autor sobre educação cívica.

Palavras-chave: John Dewey; democracia; educação cívica; filosofia e educação.

INTRODUCTION

To draw a relation between philosophy and education is not an easy task. However, such a task seems doable when we analyze this relation through a philosopher or, even better, a philosopher from the field of education. Such

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<https://doi.org/10.53930/27892182.dialogos.1.116>

approach is considered more specific and thus, deeper because it is possible to gauge the relation by looking for its relevance. Bearing this in mind, I would like to present John Dewey's view of the relation between philosophy and education. Such relation is inquired mostly in his opus 'Democracy and Education' (hereafter, DE), particularly in the highlight of his view of civic education.

John Dewey, dubbed as one of the greatest American Philosophers in the 19th century, is an outstanding thinker who has shaped greatly our modern philosophy of education. His contributions set direction for subsequent major theories in the realm of education. In fact, DE, after Plato's Republic and Rousseau's Emile¹, is classified as one of the earliest and best systematized opus on this subject.

In this essay, we shall elaborate Dewey's discourse on his considerably unique view of civic education as set out, mainly, in DE. He claims that civic education aims at forming democratic citizens, which requires a capacity to be critical to engage actively with her/his society, a very relevant need in Timor-Leste.

EDUCATION AS A SOCIAL NEED AND AS A SOCIAL FUNCTION²

Dewey begins this colossal work on the mutual relation between democracy and education with the claim that human beings cannot do away with education without threatening the survival of their kind. The survival of the human race depends on our effort to nurture and sustain human education. In his own words: *What nutrition and reproduction are to physiological life, education is to social life.*³

For Dewey, every human being has the responsibility to develop one's full capacities by transforming of what he calls the 'dispositions of immature'⁴. However, in the context of education, this is not just an

¹ David T. Hansen, 2006.

² John Dewey, 1916.

³ Ibid, p. 9.

⁴ Ibid.

individual responsibility, but also the task of a community⁵. The growth towards maturity, then, is a result of a dynamic engagement between an individual and the society. This engagement, according to Dewey, is enacted through an environment⁶.

Environment is more than a necessary context for the education to take place. In fact, failure in education is gauged by one's ability to control the environment in which education takes place⁷. Hence, a real education happens not in the way of implanting *certain desires and ideas directly, not yet merely establishes certain purely muscular habits of action*⁸. Worse still if education takes place through playing of force, oppressive ways and imposition of authority, in short, it is not the excellence and qualification that matters first. It is ultimately the environment or medium that takes precedence over everything else in the educating process.

So, what does Dewey understand by environment? He explains, *the environment consists of those conditions that promote or hinder, stimulate or inhibit, the characteristic activities of (a) living being*⁹. And further elaborates:

A being whose activities are associated with others has a social environment. What he does and what he can do depends upon the expectations, demands, approvals, and condemnations of others. A being connected with other being cannot perform his own activities without taking the activities of others into account¹⁰.

The medium installs the possibility to engage each other in a mutual activity. It allows others to be recognized as partners¹¹. Actually, to define what medium is, Dewey already highlights the core value of democracy: *[a] democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living,*

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, p. 10. We use medium and environment interchangeably.

⁷ Ibid, p. 19.

⁸ Ibid, p. 14.

⁹ Ibid, p. 11.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 11-12.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 13.

*of conjoint communicated experience*¹². Therefore, education should underline the relational dimension of human existence.

Boyd H. Bode urges that democracy needs schooling in order to become conscious of itself¹³. However, Bode is not the first modern thinker in the field of education who insists on it. Dewey, at the beginning of the 20th century, had propagated the idea that schools play a key role in the internalization of democratic values. He indicates that school fulfills various functions: first, it has to provide a simplified environment¹⁴. There is a great deal of information, values, doctrines, knowledge, etc. available in the society arbitrarily and abruptly. Dewey shows that the school has the function to select *the features which are fairly fundamental and capable of being responded to by the young*¹⁵.

In this way, the school has the capacity to draw out what should be relevant to hand down to the students. Second, the school aims at annihilating the unfitting features of the still existing influences from different environments¹⁶. Dewey manifests the essential capacity of each school as the locus for transformation. A school cannot thrive wholly only on its function of segregating and disseminating information, as it embodies a responsibility that changes the students for the better as well. Lastly, it provides a 'broader environment' and it assures all students to have a sufficient exposure to it¹⁷. This broadening of one's environment enables each student to look beyond his/her single world as the only possible existing world. Besides, the school also helps each student to consider diversity in a healthy, optimistic and confident way, rather than to consider it as a threat or worse, to regard it with animosity and disdain. This latter function of schools is crucial in a modern context where we have to live in a heterogeneous society¹⁸.

¹² Ibid, p. 87.

¹³ Boyd H. Bode, 1937, p. 95.

¹⁴ John Dewey, 1916, pp. 1-22.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 20-21.

In another text, Dewey emphasizes the fact that the school serves this ultimate purpose, namely to further the well-being of society¹⁹. A school can hardly be conceived as an isolated institution, detached from the concerns, visions, failures, purposes, and challenges. On the contrary, it should convincingly represent the real life of society and be integrated into the fabric of its essentials. In short, the curriculum and non-curriculum activities of the school allow no discrepancy and incompatibility with the society in general. Ideally, education should be well integrated with all aspects of society, including its aspirations and struggles.

A KIND OF CIVIC EDUCATION THAT ENHANCES CITIZENSHIP AND ITS RELEVANCE²⁰

According to Dewey, democracy is *more than a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience*²¹. Taking up this view, Jim Cork claims that democracy, for Dewey, is a complete way of life²². To put it in a different way, democracy aims at something more complex than merely an established political theory or a set of principles of how a state should be organized. Such a description of democracy opens widely the possibility for a solid and vivid relation between democracy and education. Hence, the following are necessary characteristics of education that eventually supports the growth of mature democracy citizens.

[1] *A non-coercive education*. Dewey is aware that a coercive approach could be very effective to elicit obedience from students. However, to force someone to abide by the law is never an ideal way of promoting moral acts. On the contrary, to draw out a disposition to act morally is the best way to engender moral responsibility. That is because the former is related to fear and

¹⁹ John Dewey, 1977, p. 269.

²⁰ There are two preliminary important ideas that will serve both as guide as well as limit to the following discourse on citizenship: first, the discourse is primarily abstracted from Dewey's oeuvre, 'Democracy and Education', therefore, secondly, citizenship is highlighted in its unique and mutual relation to education.

²¹ John Dewey, 1916, p. 87.

²² Jim Cork, 1949.

the latter entails a respect for human freedom. Hence, education should be directed to the inculcation of a moral disposition²³.

[2] *Education is a permanent process.* Dewey is keen to emphasize that education, which sets static, fixed, indissoluble and abstract purpose to be achieved by students after a huge and harsh effort is a profound misconception of the purpose of education. Education, instead, is a constant process characterized by *continual reorganizing, reconstructing, transforming experience*²⁴. Education hence does not end when one graduates from a certain academic institute. On the contrary, it is a lifetime affair. Then, the more intensively and critically one is engaged with his/her society, the more vibrant and dynamic his/her education will be.

[3] *An education towards critical citizens and against conformity.* This a major and recurring theme in DE. The imperative dimension of society in Dewey's philosophy of education does not entail any kind of submission on the part of individual to gain its dignified existence. Instead, a society should cherish the uniqueness of the individual and never pose a threat to it.

Each individual posits a unique existence, which corresponds to its unique contribution to the welfare of society. This uniqueness, then, is expressed ultimately in one's capacity of being a critical citizen. Dewey remarks that every citizen should harness the *ability to judge men and measures wisely and to take a determining part in making as well as obeying laws*²⁵. In order to build a truly democratic society, therefore, critique is necessary and should never be denounced as a dissenting voice aimed at destabilizing society. Rather, it guarantees a more vibrant society.

CONCLUSION

Anthony Giddens argues that *many have become cynical and skeptical about Democracy as it mainly operates at the national levels distant from more ordinary*

²³ John Dewey, 1916, pp. 26-27.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 50.

²⁵ Ibid, p.120.

*concerns and has failed to deal with the challenge of more globally orientated time or foster a robust civic culture*²⁶. The discouraging prospect of democracy as observed by Giddens poses a fundamental reason why revisiting Dewey's oeuvre DE is very relevant nowadays in countries like East Timor.

Dewey's concept of democracy i.e. a way of life²⁷, serves as the kind of alternative that Giddens is seeking. Hence, democracy should 'embrace' the reality in its completeness rather than limit itself simply to a political system. But, then, how?

Admittedly, Dewey does not give a facile answer on how to restore democracy into the fabric of lives of individuals and of society. Yet, his effort to tackle the reductionist view of democracy as indicated by Giddens is best summed up in the expression *democratic citizen*, which entails a capacity of the citizens to be critical which is seen as badly needed in East Timor.

Dewey, precisely through DE, points out carefully that the capacity to claim one's rootedness into society and being an agent or part of a movement that engenders transformation should be viewed in the perspective of the dynamic interplay of democracy and education.

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²⁶ Apud Stevenson, 2010.

²⁷ John Dewey, 1916, p. 87.

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