

Dewey's theory of curriculum – overcoming the boundaries of traditional curricula

Znanstveni članek

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KLJUČNE BESEDE: Dewey, kurikulum, izkušnje, vsebina, metoda

POVZETEK – Če upoštevamo kulturne raznolikosti sodobne družbe in zahteve, ki te postavljajo pred sodobnega človeka, lahko sklepamo, da je nujno razviti fleksibilne in odprte kurikule, ki bodo v praksi spodbujali raziskovanje in ustvarjalnost. Članek analizira Deweyevo teorijo kurikula, poudarjajoč njegovo potrebo po preseganju dualizma med v otroka usmerjenim ter predmetnim kurikulumom in dualizma med interesi in prizadevanji, ki obstaja v tradicionalnih kurikulumih. Učitelji morajo razumeti naravo človeških izkušenj in njihovih kvalitet, kar Dewey poimenuje kontinuiteta in interakcija. Učitelj je tisti, ki lahko pretekle izkušnje spremeni v dragocene tako, da jih prenese na sedanjo situacijo in tako spodbudi rast učenčevih izkušenj ter razširi njegove odnose z družbo. Učne vsebine se morajo nanašati na izkušnje učencev in biti dovolj široke ter prilagodljive, da ustvarijo okvir za učenje. Pri izbiri metode morajo učitelji imeti v mislih, da med učnimi gradivi in metodami obstaja naravna povezava. Metoda naj bo zgolj spodbujevalec inteligence in ne vnaprej predpisan nabor pravil, katerim je treba slediti. Dewey podpira metode, ki otroke aktivirajo, spodbujajo eksperimentiranje in raziskovanje ter cenijo vzgojni pomen igre in dela.

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KEYWORDS: Dewey, curriculum, experience, content, method

ABSTRACT – If we consider the cultural diversity of today's society, and its demands set for a contemporary person, it is easy to conclude that it is necessary to have a flexible and open curriculum and practice it through methods that promote inquiry, research and creativity. The ideas identified by Dewey a century ago meet the requirements for such curriculum. This paper analyses the Dewey's theory of curriculum with the emphasis on overcoming the dualisms between child-centred and subject-centred curriculum and the dualism between interest and effort, which are often seen in traditional curricula. Educators must understand the nature of human experience and its qualities which Dewey names continuity and interaction. It is the teacher who can make past experience valuable by putting it in interaction with present situation, and in that way promote the growth of students' experiences, and expanding their connection to society. The content should rely on students' experience and be broad and flexible enough to form a framework for learning. In choosing methods, teachers have to be aware of the natural connection between content and method. It should work as an impetus to intelligence and not as a set of prescribed rules one should follow. Dewey supports methods that make the child active, promote experimenting and research, and are aware of educational benefits of play and work.

1. Introduction

As the last few decades brought special attention to the educational and didactic values of student-centred curriculum, Dewey's ideas gained a renewed attention. Many authors (Matijević, 1999; Mikanović, 2012; Španović, Trbojević, 2010) em-

phasise the value of the research work of students and experiential learning, as well as discovery, cooperation and active participation of students. This orientation raises some important questions for the process of designing curricula. Some of the questions are: Are we allowing students to make discoveries by making connections themselves, or are we simply conveying information? Do we use the funds of knowledge students bring to the classroom and upgrade them, or are we neglecting them? Do we respect the needs and interests of individual students, or do we just proclaim to support individualised learning? It became apparent that turning to Dewey in answering those questions is useful.

We can recognise Dewey's influence, either strong or partial, in many contemporary educational theories or didactic models, which can shed light to the mentioned problems. Still, in this paper we considered that it is of special relevance and importance to analyse Dewey's curriculum theory itself, since it encompasses broader, crucial aspects of educational theory, namely: *the anthropological, psychological and societal aspects of education*. In other words, Dewey explains not only how to build a curriculum, but also why we should do it in the way proposed.

This analysis focuses on two problems. The first one is the *content* of the curriculum, and the second one refers to *methods* in putting it to practice. These two aspects of curriculum being in the middle of Dewey's "debate" with the Herbartians, proved to be important for understanding his orientation. Dewey (1938) criticises traditional education for lacking in holistic understanding of students, being overly focused on content and underestimating process which is proved to contribute to the well-being of individuals and society. He rejects the intellectualistic and teacher-centred educational psychology of the Herbartians and contends that human experience comprises more than just the intellect. He introduces the notion of experience as the connecting substance between the child and curriculum. Finally, he shows us how it can help us overcome the dualism between child-centred and subject-centred curriculum and the dualism between interest and effort. And those dualisms are the greatest obstacles and boundaries in making flexible, modern curriculum.

2. Curriculum based on a child's experience – a way out of the dualism between child-centred and subject-centred education

Dewey (1938) argues that educators must understand the nature of human experience and to design education on the basis of a *theory of experience*. We must understand the nature of how humans have the experiences they do in order to design effective education. In this respect, Dewey's theory of experience was based on two central tenets: continuity and interaction.

Continuity refers mainly to the aspects of experiences as they relate to the individual and explains how the whole human life is affected by it. Humans are more

dependent on their experience in survival than any other animal who primarily relies on its inborn instinct. In humans, education is critical for providing people with the skills to live in society. Dewey (1938) argued that every experience, whether positive or negative, provides some kind of knowledge, and accumulated learned experiences influence the nature of one's future experiences. Continuity refers to this idea that each experience is stored and carried on into the future, whether one likes it or not. Continuity is desirable when it fosters growth, arouses curiosity, and helps a person to face the future.

Interaction describes the aspects of experience as they relate to the environment. It builds upon the notion of continuity and explains how past experience interacts with the present situation, to create one's present experience. Dewey's hypothesis is that your current experience can be understood as a function of your past experiences, meaning that how you will experience the present situation depends on your past experiences (knowledge, expectations, values, etc.). This explains why the same situation can be experienced in profoundly different ways by different individuals, for example, one student loves school, another hates the same school. Dewey contended that is important for educators to understand this although they cannot control the students' past experiences. If they understand those past experiences they can better choose the educational situations, methods and content to present to the students. Ultimately, all a teacher has control over is designing the present situation. The teacher with a good insight into the effects of past experiences which students bring with them can provide quality education which is relevant and meaningful for the students.

In his *Experience and Education* (1938), as well as in *Democracy and Education* (Djui, 1971) Dewey insisted that good education should have both a societal purpose and purpose for the individual student. The long-term effects of education matter, but so does the short-term quality of an educational experience. Educators are responsible, therefore, for providing students with experiences that are immediately valuable and which better enable the students to contribute to society. The value of students' experience, no matter whether they are from the past or present, is not contained in the experience itself, but it can be judged by the effect that the experience has on the students' present, their future, and the extent to which they will be able to contribute to society. It is the teacher who can make some past experience valuable, if he/she puts it in interaction with the present situation and thus helps the students to open up to future growth experiences, and expanding their likely contribution to society. In the same way the teacher can make some experiences irrelevant and shut down students' educational potential. That is why it is very important to wisely organise the subject matter. Of course, Dewey argues that not all experiences are educative and that, in fact, some experiences can be miss-educative, which makes the challenge even greater.

In one of the best known Dewey's (Djui, 1971) definitions, the aim of education is continuous reconstruction of experience through conscious and intelligent action. It follows that learning should not be based on lecturing separate scientific disciplines,

but it has to adopt the role of processing all the societal experience and put it in favour of developing cognitive capacities and skills. This idea is a starting point for Dewey's criticism of traditional curricula. He considers them totally unacceptable from the psychological point of view, because their logic organisation of disciplines and subjects is close to grown-ups, but distant from children. The basis should be found in the all-encompassing experience of children and the contents of the programs should rely on that experience, and not on the predefined scientific truths. The main criteria have to be the children's psychological maturity, their interests, needs and instincts.

These views Dewey elaborates in his paper *The Child and the Curriculum* written in 1902, representing the summary of his experiences gained during his work in the Laboratory School in Chicago. Here, he sharply criticises the "old", subject-centred curriculum and the "new", brought-to-the-extremes and child-centred curriculum. Dewey argues that both of them confront the child and the curriculum separately, and neglect the genuine connection between them. Life of a child has to be the starting point for building the curriculum, and it has to be taken as it really is: comprehensive and well-rounded, relatively limited by its personal contacts and unaware of internal divisions on themes and field. All the things occupying a child in a certain moment are strongly dependent on the network of their personal and social relations, and the transfer of interest is made without conscious breaks and transitions. The whole child's universe is contained in whatever interests them in a given moment. Unfortunately, school usually breaks that universe. It pulls the facts out from their original context and place in experience and rearranges them to fit some general principle (Dewey in Dworkin, 1959, p. 93), usually abstract and unrecognizable to the child. Dewey criticises the "outside" and adult point of view on the curriculum, which insists on classifying, analysis and synthesis and logical distribution of facts, because it makes sense only to an adult person. For the child, the same content has meaning only when it makes a part of their life and personal experience. What educators should keep in mind is that the child's experience is often superficial and narrow and needs to be expanded and deepened; children will gladly accept that because they strive for development and growth themselves (Dewey in Dworkin, 1959, p. 95).

The child as a starting point is an important point. The opponents of subject-centred curriculum went a step further and made the child, not a starting point, but the centre and the aim of education, and the growth itself an ideal rejecting any form of influence and directing. Dewey finds them too occupied by the present moment and unable to see its importance for the future. They do not realise that present moments build the basis for those that are coming and that they give an insight into the child's capacities and tendencies of their development (Dewey in Dworkin, 1959, p. 98). They are equally wrong in their longing to win a victory for instincts, needs and experiences over curriculum. While "the old school" ignored vividness and developmental importance of experience, the "new education" was in danger to make it too plain and empty (Dewey in Dworkin, 1959, p. 101) and to leave it to develop on its own, without providing favourable conditions, help and, finally, material to work on. Dewey adds that "something to develop out of nothing" should not be an expected approach,

nor “from perfect something even more perfect”. The child and the curriculum are not confronted to each other or superior to one another. The child on one side and the contents of the curriculum on the other are in the process of constant cooperation, mutual influences and reconstruction. If the curriculum is based on the child's experience, that process will not be interrupted. Moreover, it promotes an active participation of the child and becomes the connecting element between psychological and social factors in education.

Connecting the child and the curriculum through the child's experience opens many possibilities for the child's active relationship with the environment, learning by doing, experiential learning and learning by problem-solving. The learner becomes the researcher and the principle of scientific value of teaching content gains the whole new meaning. The content is not validated by its value for the science in general, but by its value for the student to develop the scientific or theoretical way of thinking. Dewey (1910) argues that in dealing with problem-solving, the child's mind takes the same steps as the mind of a scientist. The fact that the child discovers the truth that has already been discovered does not make the quality of the process and the importance of the discovery less valuable. This adds to the child's openness towards the world of learning and to the development of critical and creative thinking. Ultimately, positive emotional reactions are very important parts of the whole process.

After making the experience a basis, Dewey turns to two concrete problems in making curriculum: *which contents to choose* and *how to present them* to children. The basic principles are clear: it is an active and free programme, and the educational work is focused on themes and problems instead of sciences and subjects. The content should be given in the form similar to one existing outside the school, which means in complete unity with outside connections and relations that give them sense. Subjects should not exist because everyday life does not recognise them.

Very useful knowledge from biology, geography, chemistry, history or economy should be presented through common and familiar activities. In this case, Dewey recommends gardening. It is the activity very familiar to children containing the great motivational potential. Instead of being just a part of the Botany, the content can make relations with other equally interesting themes and become a part of life of people and animals. Soon, the students will be able to spot interesting questions and make them a new subject of study and gradually move towards an organised cognitive research (Djuji, 1971, p. 141). This leads to the conclusion that Dewey does not deny planning the content in advance, he only asks for them to have a framework broad enough and to be flexible. Different organisation means following psychological order instead of logical, and connecting them to previous experiences. In order to maintain the motivational capacity, the content has to be directed towards solving problems (cognitive, moral or practical) that are meaningful for the child in that moment. If the learning material can find its place in the consciousness of the child and application in his life, then there is no need for special tricks or methods that will initiate the child's interest (Dewey in Dworkin, 1959, p. 108). This type of curriculum makes the firm ground for

further development and Dewey sees it as the only solution for the beginning grades. Later on, especially in high schools, he considers differentiation of the content and following the logic of the science in question being natural and in accordance with psychological maturity of students. Still, in the initial phase of any subject and any age, he recommends following the above explained principles (Djuji, 1971, p. 164).

While choosing themes Dewey does not make hierarchy between the subjects. None of the themes is more important or more valuable. Life is the highest value and every knowledge and experience contributing to it has its value that is essential and incomparable. No one can say that contents from Arithmetic are more valuable than those from poetry because both of them add up to the richness of life and help dealing with different life situations.

In answering the question what is the best way to present the contents, he stays close to principles of continuity and interaction. For example, in Laboratory School, teaching reading, writing and counting were so closely connected with some useful and interesting lessons that the children felt that they want to master those skills as soon as possible. While this part was easy, the main concern was to give the real value to history and science and connect them to the real life in an appropriate way (Dewey, 1956; Djuji, 1971). He succeeded by continuously expanding personal experience of the children by storytelling. As they listened about real men and real events, they gradually developed time and space perspective of their own life. Geography and history proved to be powerful means for enriching personal life and overcoming boundaries. The children developed imagination and started appreciating spiritual and intellectual discoveries, and in addition they enriched the language and came to value the skills of verbal expression. As he never looked upon the content as independent from the method, Dewey believed that if given as facts about some people that are distant from us regarding space and time, they will not be only useless but also dangerous for development because they can make children resent school and learning, making a permanent damage in that sense.

Natural sciences are expected to have the similar effect. They should do for individual the same they did for the humanity: to free him from tight links of space and time and expand his views behind the randomness and personal restraints (Djuji, 1971, p. 162). Knowledge about the world should not be valued as important per se, and must not come to symbols, notions and definitions in the end. It should be alive, helpful and applicable and, above all, it should introduce students to the scientific view of the world. Natural sciences were studied through occupations and problems. Children developed the abilities to observe, to focus, and then to analyse, explain and conclude, and the final goal was developing love and respect for the nature, and willingness to observe and study it. Information they gained were of a broad scope and relatively unsystematised, but making the basis and introduction into studying theoretical outlines of sciences. For example, studying the telegraph and telephone functions, locks and clocks led to the basics of physics, while classes of cooking opened the grounds for chemistry.

3. Occupations – overcoming the dualism of interest and effort

The problem of the teaching methods Dewey discusses while having in mind that there is not only one method that can be proclaimed the best, or the most appropriate for teaching in schools. He believes that method is not independent from the content and that method is nothing else but the successful way of using some content in order to reach the educational goals (Djuji, 1971, p. 118). The choice of the method depends on the nature of content and the goal we are aiming to, consequently, a one-size-suits-all method cannot exist.

Dewey (Djuji, 1971, p. 119) believes that the major drawbacks of teaching practice come from neglecting this fact. There is a natural connection between content and method and we must not brake it. If we do that, methods will turn into a mechanic repetition and become uniform, and the content will lose its meaning. The consequence for the teacher is that he/she is deprived of using the motivational potential of children's interests and natural instincts, and he/she is forced to use external motivation tools. The consequence for the students is that they end up learning for the sake of avoiding punishment or other inconveniences, or in order to gain small awards. Finally, learning and studying become goals for themselves and the real reasons for learning are lost. Such methods oversee the value of the content for building children's experience, they do not welcome open and direct communication and push away flexibility and initiative for the sake of routine and mechanic movement.

Still, there is a danger in denying the method, because without it the teaching process would be random and chaotic in the best, and badly thought out in the worst case. Dewey believes that educators should strive towards a good method, but a very general one which would not confront the personal needs nor the specific nature of the content. Such a method would rely on knowledge, on broad scope of techniques, historical experiences in teaching, work materials and psychology of learning. It should work as an impetus to intelligence and not as a set of prescribed rules one should follow. It should be there to remind of the aims, tools and materials, to inspire the teacher to choose his/her best way to teach a specific content. The qualities of a good method are: close connection with the content, nurturing spiritual openness of children, activating the need to view the problem from different perspectives and to accept the new ones, inspiring commitment and full interest, achieving cognitive responsibility and thoroughness (Djuji, 1971, p. 122). It is up to the teacher to make the best choice of a method which brings those qualities into practice.

The problem of method should be viewed from the student's perspective as well. The process of learning in school does not differ in any way from learning in any other situation. For the student, it is important that the natural process is not interrupted or disrupted. Some methods in the past were doing that and Dewey strongly condemns them. Discussing the drill in teaching, Dewey points out that this method "reduces the training of human beings to the level of animal training" (Dewey, 1910, p. 52), and continues that we cannot expect someone to use their knowledge intelligently if

intelligence did not take part in acquiring it. He keeps the similar attitude towards the object teaching, because this method focuses on perceiving the mechanical characteristics of the objects studied and does not involve or stimulate thinking; he finds it equally abstract as learning any definition by heart (Dewey, 1910, p. 139). Herbart's method and formal steps in teaching are criticised throughout the whole chapter (Chapter 15: The Recitation and the Training of Thought) of *How We Think* (1910). It is seen as completely distanced from any content, it oversees the necessity of some difficulty, obstacle or vagueness which is the stimulus to every research, including those that lead to learning, and finally, it is totally inflexible. In addition, Dewey concludes that in Herbartianism, thought is the side effect that is produced during the process of acquiring information, while in fact, the development of it should be the main aim and information just a tool in that process (Dewey, 1910, p. 201).

Dewey supports methods that make the child active, promote experimenting and research and are aware of educational benefits of play and work. This orientation, as well as his personal connection with Kilpatrick, led to a broadly accepted view that Dewey was a spokesperson for the project-method. But it is wrong to believe that he considered it best or the only good method. He approved of intellectually and physically active children, the ones that can apply, construct, express themselves and finally evaluate their knowledge. Project-method put all these into practice and gained his support, but by no means did he consider it the only alternative to traditional teaching methods, or "the only way out of the educational confusion", even in elementary school (Weiss, DeFalco and Weiss, 2005).

Dewey offered the solution for the teaching method in the form of occupations. They united the psychological needs of students, a variety of contents, and an active cognitive development. Occupations were divided into three categories: carpentry and work with wood and tools, cooking, and work with fabrics – sewing and weaving. All these activities involved many other activities that were based on them. Occupations were not supposed to furnish the students with knowledge of those crafts or to prepare them for practicing them. The work itself was not the aim, the aim was to intellectually engage the students and help them to develop habits of observation, perception, thinking and planning. Dewey (1956, p. 134) makes a significant distinction between occupations and manual work, because manual work is often a mechanical action while occupations ask for the conscious engagement. The advantages of occupations over the traditional methods are in their respect for the psychological development of the child, and those are: activity always precedes passivity, notions are created as the result of activity, forming the correct notions is the basis of teaching, interests are the abilities that wait to be awakened, and feelings are closely related to activity (Djuji, 1983, p. 173).

Through occupations students got in touch with knowledge from many different realms of social life and sciences, and all led by their own instincts and interests. At the carpentry class, students are inspired with their natural instinct for building and motivated by precise aim, as well as by the practical result of their action, which is,

for example, to make a wooden box. During the process they are always focused because they are involved in an action that has continuity and they have to find out many facts about materials, tools and so on, in other words they constantly need to do something. In a well prepared class they will gain knowledge of geography and history such as how, when and where the activity developed and history of the tools they use; from physics and botany facts such as how those tools function or what is the origin of materials used; mathematics is needed in order to count the measures and so on. Occupations are the way to integrate the material goals of education (learning) with educative and psychological, and because of that they can, above all, be considered a method, not a content.

4. Conclusion

If we consider the cultural diversity of today's society, and its demands set for a contemporary person, it is easy to conclude that it is necessary to have a flexible and open curriculum and practice it through methods that promote inquiry, research and creativity. The ideas identified by Dewey a century ago meet the requirements for such curriculum. He looks at the curriculum from both perspectives – the child's and the curriculum's perspective. The most important question is what the child must learn, in regard to the child's present state of mind, because not all of the students have the same experiences and background knowledge. Everyone can relate to the lesson you are teaching in different ways. Dewey knew from both, the personal experience and active research, that the curriculum and the child must meet on the child's terms. He explains that the curriculum must provide the opportunity for the students to explore, experience, and connect information, so they can truly understand and internalise the abstract principles, the logical classifications, and space and time.

Dewey's curriculum theory is founded upon anthropological, psychological and social-philosophical (political) views that conceptualise the nature of a child as an active organism in search of stimuli that will promote its growth. The child is still developing the context and the framework to process information about the world around him. The child's interests lie in the world of persons and relationships as opposed to that of facts and laws. The experiential nature of learning as problem-solving and the political nature of schooling on the other side lead up to "the curriculum theory that maximises active participation in learning, moves toward a more flexible curriculum and conceives education as a process of communication, participation, dialogue and sharing" (Berding, 1977).

Curriculum has to move as close as possible to the child's experience and its main aim has to be to extend it from narrow and personal towards the vast knowledge of the world. It has to be presented in a context and linked to the prior knowledge; it has to be aware of the children's interest and instincts because it is the only way to provoke the willing and conscious effort and make the children learn without pressure.

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Deweyeva teorija kurikula – preseganje omejitev tradicionalnega kurikula

V zadnjih desetletjih se vedno več pozornosti namenja didaktični vrednosti kurikulov za učence, kar se povezuje tudi z Deweyevimi idejami. Mnogi avtorji (Matijević, 1999; Mikanović, 2012; Španović, Trbojević, 2010) poudarjajo pomen raziskovalnega dela učencev in izkustveno učenje, poučevanje skozi odkrivanje, sodelovanje in aktivno udeležbo učencev. Deweyev vpliv se lahko identificira v številnih izobraževalnih modelih in teorijah, ki se ukvarjajo s temi vprašanji. V prispevku smo analizirali izvirne ideje, glede na to, da zajemajo tudi pomembne vidike teorije vzgoje, kot so antropološki, psihološki in socialni vidiki vzgoje, ki pojasnjujejo ne le kako zgraditi teorijo kurikula, ampak tudi zakaj graditi na takšen način. Analiza se osredotoča na dve vprašanji. Prvo je vsebina kurikulov in drugo se nanaša na metode, ki te vsebine obravnavajo v praksi. Ta dva vidika sta prav tako v središču Deweyeve razprave s Herbartovo pedagogiko in sta pomembna za razumevanje njegovih pogledov. Dewey kritično opredeljuje tradicionalno vzgojo, ker nima celostnega vidika, saj se preveč osredotoča na vsebino in podcenjuje pomen procesov, ki se kažejo pomembni za razvoj otroka. Zavrača intelektualno in na učitelja osredotočeno pedagoško psihologijo, in trdi, da osebna izkušnja zajema veliko več kot samo razum. Uvaja izraz izkušnja kot povezovalni element med otrokom in kurikulumom. Nenazadnje prikazuje tudi, kako premostiti dualizme, ki predstavljajo bariero v ustvarjanju sodobnega in prilagodljivega kurikula. Kurikul, zasnovan na izkušnjah otroka – način, da se premosti dualizem med v otroka usmerjenim in predmetnim kurikulumom. Dewey je izpostavil, da morajo pedagogi najprej razumeti naravo osebnega izkustva, da lahko izoblikujejo efikasno izobraževanje. V ta namen opredeljuje teorijo izkušnje, znotraj katere posebno pozornost nameni dvema pojmom: kontinuiteta in interakcija. Kontinuiteta je značilnost, ki opisuje izkušnjo v odnosu na človeka samega in na kakšen način se nove izkušnje nanašajo na njegovo življenje. Dewey se naslanja na idejo, da je vsaka izkušnja shranjena in se nosi s seboj v prihodnost. Izkušnja tako spodbuja rast in radovednost in pomaga osebi, da se sooči s prihodnostjo. Interakcijo opisuje z vidika izkušenj, ki se nanašajo na okolje. Interakcija pojasnjuje, kako pretekle izkušnje prihajajo v stik s trenutnimi situacijami za tvorjenje sedanjih izkušenj. Z drugimi besedami, sedanje izkušnje so funkcija vseh preteklih izkušenj in pogledi na določeno situacijo je odvisen od naših preteklih izkušenj. (znanje, pričakovanja, vrednote, itd.). Dewey je verjel, da so izkušnje bistvenega pomena za pedagoge, saj čeprav ne morejo obvladovati preteklih izkušenj naših učencev, četudi jih poznajo, lahko nadzorujejo sedanje situacije in v skladu s temi izbirajo ustrezne vsebine in metode. Torej, vrednost posameznih izkušenj ni mogoče navesti kot vrednost samo po sebi, ampak v odnosu na to, kakšen vpliv ima ta vrednost na učenca pri kreiranju prihodnjih izkušenj. Učitelj je tisti, ki lahko določene izkušnje napravi pomembne ali brez vrednosti, odvisno od tega, kako uporabi njihove vzgojne potenciale. Dewey meni, da so tradicionalni kurikuli popolnoma nesprejemljivi s psihološkega vidika, ker je organizacija

njihovih vsebin neprilagojena otrokom, pač pa odraslim osebam. Osnova za sestavljanje kurikula mora biti v celoviti izkušnji otroka in se nanjo navezovati, osnovna merila pa morajo biti: zrelost otroka, njegovi interesi, potrebe in nagoni. Dewey kritično gleda na "stari" predmetni kurikulum in tudi na nov, "v otroka usmerjen" kurikulum, saj meni, da oba zanemarjata povezavo med otrokom in vsebino, katere se otrok uči. Klasifikacija, analiza in sinteza, logično povezovanje dejstev ter gledanje z različnih perspektiv so značilni pristopi za znanost, za odrasle osebe; otrok še ne obvlada mehanizmov in tehnik znanstvenega raziskovanja, zanj imajo te vsebine smisel edino, ko so del njegovega življenja in osebne izkušnje. Izkušnje otroka so površinske in ozke, zato jih je treba poglobiti in razširiti. In ker otrok teži k razvoju in dozorevanju, z veseljem izkušnje sprejema (Dewey, 1959, str. 95). Tisti, ki v otroku ne vidijo le izhodiščne točke, ampak tudi središče in cilj celotnega vzgojnega procesa, rast razumejo kot ideal, ki sam po sebi ne dovoljuje nikakršno usmerjanje. Predstavniki takšnega mišljenja so po Deweyu preveč prevzeti s sedanostjo in nikakor ne ugotovijo, da so trenutne izkušnje prehodne. Trenutne izkušnje niso končne, pač pa so osnova za prihodnji razvoj in napovedujejo določene razvojne tendence (Dewey, 1959, str. 98). Otrok na eni strani in smiselne vsebine na drugi so v nenehnem procesu sodelovanja, medsebojnih vtisov in rekonstrukcije. Zaradi tega je treba kurikule osnovati na otroških izkušnjah. Vsebine morajo biti dane v takšni obliki, kot jih otroci dobivajo izven šole, kar pomeni v popolni enakosti z vsemi zvezami in odnosi, kateri jih spremljajo in jim dajejo smisel. Otroška izkušnja je osnova takšnega programa, ker narekuje osnove in smernice po katerih se bo program razvijal. Delitev na predmete moti izkustvenost, ker v vsakodnevnem življenju takšna delitev ne obstaja. Zelo koristna znanja iz biologije, geografije, kemije, zgodovine in ekonomije se lahko nahajajo v enostavnih aktivnostih, kot je na primer vrtnarjenje. Sprememba v kurikulumu, h kateri teži Dewey, ne izključuje vnaprejšnjega načrtovanja vsebine, ampak predvideva, da se vsebine določajo okvirno in široko, da so drugače organizirane in namesto logičnega spoštujejo psihološki vrstni red posredovanja. Vsebine morajo biti organizirane tako, da organsko povezujejo predhodne izkušnje otroka, morajo biti usmerjene k reševanju nekih trenutnih problemov, s katerimi se otrok sooča (intelektualnih, moralnih ali praktičnih), saj so šele takrat podkrepjeni z motivacijo. Dewey tukaj govori prvenstveno o osnovnošolskem izobraževanju, medtem ko na srednješolski ravni že dopušča diferenciacijo gradiva ter sledenje logičnemu redu, ker je to v skladu s psihološko zrelostjo učencev. Takšno organizacijo gradiva tako priporoča v začetni oz. osnovni fazi vsakega predmeta, ne glede na razvoj (Djuji, 1971, str. 164). Dewey ne vzpostavlja hierarhije med predmeti, jih ne opredeljuje na pomembnejše in vrednejše. Vrhovna vrednost je v življenju samem in vsako gradivo, ki doprinese k njegovemu bogatenju ima svojo vrednost, ki je pomembna in neprimerljiva. Poklici – premagovanje dualizma med interesi in prizadevanji. Ukvarjajoč se s problemom metod poučevanja, Dewey izhaja iz predpostavke, da ne more biti enotne metode poučevanja, za katero se lahko določi, da je najbolj uspešna in da se lahko predpiše za uporabo v šolah. Prvotno ta svoj odnos Dewey razloži z dejstvom, da metoda ni neodvisna od vsebine poučevanja. "Metoda ni nikoli nekaj izven gradiva. V vsakem primeru je metoda le uspešen način uporabe gradiva za doseg nekega cilja." (Djuji, 1971, str. 118) Torej so metode, ki se uporabljajo v danem primeru odvisne od narave gradiva in namena, za katerega se dano gradivo uporablja.

Največje primanjkljaje poučevanja Dewey opredeljuje posledico zanemarjanja te naravne enotnosti gradiva in metod. Ko metode postanejo mehanske in enoznačne ter ko se več ne navezujejo na gradivo, ni več možnosti, da se pri poučevanju upoštevajo interesi in naravni nagoni učencev, kar pa za seboj potegne tudi uvedbo zunanjih motivacijskih sredstev, ki se najpogosteje nanašajo na izogibanju kazni in ostalim neprijetnostim. Potrebno je, da metoda obstaja kot neke vrste vodilo, saj pomanjkanje učnih metod vključuje tako kaotične in naključne procese, kot tudi slabo premišljene. Splošne značilnosti dobrih metod so neposredno nanašanje na gradivo, negovanje duhovne doveznosti otrok, aktivne težnje, da sprejemajo različne poglede in menjujejo svoj odnos, doseganje predanosti oz. popolnega zanimanja za gradivo zaradi njega samega in spodbujanje intelektualne odgovornosti oz. temeljitosti (Djuji, 1971, str. 122). Vloga učitelja je, da v odvisnosti od učnega gradiva, katerega ima na voljo, najde najboljši način oz. metodo dela, preko katere bo najbolje uspel izvesti zgoraj omenjena načela. Problem metode, katera bi združila psihološke potrebe otrok, smiselno prikazala učno gradivo in spodbudila intelektualni razvoj, kot enega najpomembnejših ciljev, je Dewey rešil z uvedbo poklicev v šolo. Ukvarjanje s poklici ni imelo namena, da otroke nauči znanja za poklice, niti da jih usposobi za uporabo teh veščin v prihodnjem življenju. Cilj poklicev je bil, da otroke intelektualno pritegnejo, da razvijejo spretnosti opazovanja, dojemanja, razmišljanja in načrtovanja. Dewey razlikuje med poklici in ročnimi deli, saj se zadnja navezujejo na mehanski in nezavedni proces, pri poklicih pa se zahteva, da se v delo vnese čim več zavestnega prizadevanja (Dewey, 1956, str. 134). Prednosti poklicev v primerjavi z običajnimi metodami poučevanja so v tem, da gre za spoštovanje psiholoških zakonitosti razvoja otrok, ki so: da aktivna stran prevladuje pred pasivno, da so oblikovani koncepti rezultat dejavnosti, da je ustvarjanje pravih predstav osnova poučevanja, da se vzbujajo različni interesi ter da so občutki tesno povezani z dejavnostmi (Djuji, 1983, str. 173). Če upoštevamo kulturno raznolikost sodobne družbe in zahteve, ki jih predstavlja za sodobnega človeka, je mogoče sklepati, da je treba razviti prožne in odprte kurikule, kateri bodo v praksi spodbujali raziskovanje in ustvarjalnost. Dewey je vedel, da se morata otrok in kurikulum združiti pod pogoji otroka. Pojasnjuje, da mora kurikulum zagotoviti možnosti za raziskovanje, izkušnje in povezovanje informacij, da bi otroci na koncu res ponotranjili abstraktna načela, informacije in logične klasifikacije. Potrebno je otroku kurikulum približati, da bo lahko razširil svoje izkušnje, in predstaviti v kontekstu, ki ga otrok razume in je povezan z njegovimi preteklimi izkušnjami. Nenazadnje, kurikulum mora spoštovati interese in nagone otroka, saj je to edini način, ki spodbuja njegovo prostovoljno in zavestno prizadevanje ter omogoči, da se uči brez pritiska.

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