

## **Dewey's Experiential Learning: Challenging 'One-Size-Fits-All' Pedagogy in Bangladesh**

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### **ABSTRACT**

John Dewey emphasized experiential learning procedure that fosters critical understanding, inclusive learning strategies, & real-world thinking ability rather than prioritizing old and traditional memorization and passive learning. Bangladesh exercises traditional standardized methods in learning and often overlooks the diversity and potentiality of individual learners. Preliminary literature review suggests that Deweyan philosophy aligns with the contemporary demand in the education sector of Bangladesh. The purpose of this study is to investigate Dewey's influence on contemporary experiential learning while challenging the 'one-size-fits-all' pedagogical approach in the education sector of Bangladesh. Exploring many experiential learning programs in Bangladesh, will highlight challenges and opportunities to implement a better inclusive and responsive approach. This research will adopt a qualitative approach. This study will be an exploratory and interpretative study to understand the deep thought of existing educational policies and their limitations. Comparative analysis & historical contextual analysis will be used to differentiate traditional and experiential learning procedures and to explore the impact of Deweyan policies. This study will examine both primary and secondary sources of data. Selected texts, compositions & in-dept interviews with specialists will be used as primary data. Secondary data will be collected from the contemporary interpretation of Dewey's educational philosophy, journal articles, current educational policies and government reports. It is expected that this research will find many obstacles and barriers in the educational sector. This paper will propose some referendum on reforming Bangladesh classroom learning policies by integrating the Deweyan principle and contemporary learning situations & needs. By revisiting his educational thought, this research expects to contribute to educators, teachers, & policymakers to construct more inclusive responsive approaches that will ensure the potentiality and creativity of learners.

### **1. Introduction**

Bangladesh as holding multi-diversified socio-cultural contexts of Bangladesh, the limitation of multi-functional education system is felt and one-size-fits-all pedagogy system is the matter of questioning to serve the greater purpose of education. The very approaches of Bangladesh in learning procedure are seemingly influenced by colonial legacy where examination, memorization, passive reception and examination results get priority over different talents, critical thinking ability, context-based learning and active engagements of learners. John Dewey's Philosophy has an experiential learning mode that might be an effective alternative that focuses on critical thinking, practical learning and reflective inquiry. Dewey advocates for a relevant, flexible, socially integrated curriculum that supports Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (quality education). Bangladesh's system is often inflexible, abstract, and outdated. Curriculum is nationally fixed, textbook-bound, and infrequently updated. Often disconnected from real-life relevance or local community issues.

In today's modern world, education can't remain static. In many parts of Bangladesh, we still follow rigid and uniform learning styles that can't meet the demand. Even this one-size-fits-all

method widens the gap between rural and urban, and privileged and marginalized. Our education system treats all students the same, ignoring their differences, their experiences, and their potential. In doing so, it not only limits individual growth but also weakens the democratic and developmental goals of education itself. We aspire to build an inclusive, creative, and skilled generation yet our methods often contradict those goals.

## **2. Problem Statement**

In Bangladesh, the common scenario of maximum school and college room that is packed with students, all memorizing the same textbook content, preparing for the same high-stakes examination, regardless of their individual learning styles, backgrounds, or interests. Bangladesh follows a rigid education system that focus on textbook, centralized curricula, and rote memorization. Success is being evaluated based on exam performances. This approach is not promoting creativity, deep understanding, or critical engagement. Teachers often take the role of only deliverers or presenters and students receive content passively, simply memorize and present the same thing continuously. Thus, the classroom becomes a site of mere repetition rather than meaningful learning.

As a result, learners are alienated from their own thinking capability and understanding. Their diverse talents, needs, and subjective experiences are ignored. They even can't connect their education to social phenomena in a crisis period despite having higher degrees and many certificates. And most importantly, the opportunity to develop independent thinking, problem-solving skills, and civic responsibility is lost. This is where the core problem lies. Although Bangladesh has made progress in this field but still neglecting diverse learners need. There are number of empirical research have already been done in education sector identifying the challenges, but this study can give an alternative framework to move a more inclusive and effective pedagogical approach.

## **3. Research Objectives**

1. Analyzing Dewey's core educational philosophy and its contrast with the pedagogical approach in education sector of Bangladesh
2. Exploring existing experiential learning programs to identify the challenges and opportunities to implement
3. Recommending ideas for educational reform for a better inclusive and responsive pedagogical approach

## **4. Research Questions**

1. How does John Dewey's experiential philosophy contrast with the 'one-size-fits-all' pedagogy in Bangladesh?
2. What practical challenges and possibilities exist for applying Deweyan principles in Bangladesh context?
3. How can Dewey's ideas inspire more inclusive, student-centered and reflective education in Bangladesh?

## **5. Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative approach, employing exploratory and interpretative methods to examine the relevance of John Dewey's educational philosophy, particularly described in *Democracy and Education*, in the context of Bangladeshi pedagogy. Through a conceptual analysis of Dewey's key ideas on education, the research aims to explore their theoretical significance and practical applicability. The primary data for this study includes Dewey's original texts and major interpretative works, while secondary sources encompass national education policy documents, curriculum frameworks, NGO reports, and scholarly literature on pedagogy in Bangladesh. The analysis involves both thematic and theoretical examination of Deweyan concepts, as well as a comparative review of how these ideas align or contrast with the actual pedagogical practices observed in Bangladeshi classrooms.

## 6. Dewey's Educational Philosophy

In the broadest sense, education is the means of this social continuity of life (Dewey, 1916, 6). It is necessarily connected with personal and area and makes a bridge between individual and the experiences the gathered. It is that reconstruction or reorganization of experience, which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience (Dewey 1916, pp.81-82). In short, it means education is the process that transmits the values, habits and thoughts and necessary for the growth of individuals and for social needs and functions. In short, Education, for Dewey, is not mere knowledge transfer but a lived, continuous process of growth, shaped by and shaping the social environment.

## 7. The Aim of Education

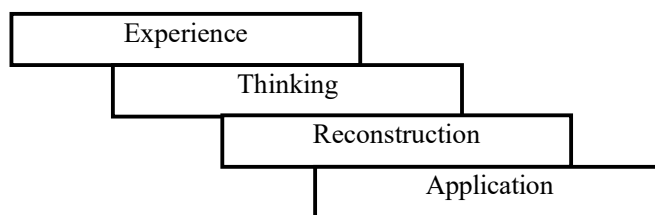
According to John Dewey in *Democracy and Education* (1916), the aim of education is to enable the capacities of individuals to continue their education as they can be rewarded by the continuous capacity of growth (Dewey 1916, p. 105). It reflects the aim of education is not to heading for a permanent and static goal but to cultivate the capacity for lifelong learning, critical thinking, and active participation that can be suitable for the democratic society. The main concerns of education according to Dewey are,

- Growth and Natural development
- Social efficiency
- Civic efficiency
- Culture

Education is the process of nurture continuous physical, intellectual, emotional, and moral growth in accordance with nature (Dewey 1916, pp. 116-123). It prepares individuals to make contribution to society and brings social efficiency (Dewey 1916, pp. 123-125). Civic efficiency or good citizenship may give concentration on empowering individuals to strengthens one's respectful relationships with others that makes democratic citizen (Dewey 1916, p. 125). And then culture is something different from natural development as it denotes something that is cultivated and appreciates the ideas and art that is connected to broader human interests (Dewey, 1916, pp. 126-127). In essence, education develops both natural and personal development that make themselves capable of self-directed autonomous person and active participation in communal and social life.

## 8. How Learning Happens

Through experience, active interaction with environment. According to John Dewey in *Democracy and Education* (1916), experience and active participation are needed for learning, not just passive reception of information. "Education is not an affair of 'telling' and being told, but an active and constructive process" (Dewey 1916, 44). Learning happens when learners interact with their real environment and apply the knowledge to solve practical problems. Only theoretical knowledge is not enough to face the facts as we can't swim only by watching videos on phone. Learning process is an active and experiential process, not passive. Learning is not only confined to books, but rather it occurs by engaging in social, circumstantial and purposeful phenomena. Knowledge is constructed by learners' subjective experiences. For Dewey, learning is a continuous reconstruction of experience. When students are involved in real-life, collaborative, and inquiry-based tasks, they learn deeply and meaningfully. Dewey's learning model may be understood in four simple steps:



Dewey's education philosophy offers an approach not to include everybody in a uniform parameter. They should not be treated as empty vessels rather as an active agent capable of intelligence, thinking ability and deep understanding. Structured and fixed methods damaging students' capability of learning in worldwide including Bangladesh.

## 9. Dewey's Key Ideas on Curriculum

Dewey aims for a curriculum for learners that is not only for passing exams but rather being an active democratic citizen. According to John Dewey in *Democracy and Education* (1916), the curriculum should be flexible, experience-based, and connected to the learner's social and personal life. It must grow out of the interests and activities of the learner. According to him,

Curriculum should be	1. Rooted in Experience
	2. Child-Centered and Growth-Oriented
	3. Dynamic, Not Static
	4. Integrated and Interdisciplinary

According to Dewey, the curriculum should be connected to real-life problems. The aim of education is the creation of self-control and self-realization. It should encourage inquiry, critical thinking, and moral growth. He believed in interdisciplinary learning that mirrors the interconnectedness of life. Knowledge is something constructed through social and practical activity.

## 10. Role of Education According to Dewey

According to John Dewey, the role of education is not merely to transmit knowledge but to foster growth, social participation, and democratic living. Education is a means of personal development, and participation in a democratic society.

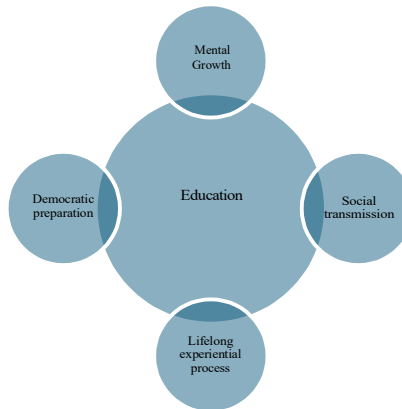


Figure: Adopted from *Democracy and Education* (1916) by John Dewey

- Education as Personal Growth
- Education as Social Continuity
- Education and Democracy
- Education as Experiential and Transformative

## 11. Contrasting Dewey with the Bangladeshi Pedagogy Context

According to John Dewey, teaching should not be about simply transmitting information but helping students actively to apply these in real life. The teacher's role isn't just a lecturer or educator, but a guide who helps create a learning environment.

### 11.1 Real Life Engagement

A place of learning can't be only theoretical. The successful ways of teaching are those that engage real-life experiences instead of just giving students things to memorize, they're given something to do by their own effort that makes them think and by this natural learning happens (Dewey 1916, p. 160). This describes learning should start solving real life questions and students should learn through the process of finding the answers of them that will foster their inquisition, critical thinking, and self-directive power.

### 11.2 Learners Focus

Dewey states, education must be child-centered, flexible, and diversified interests. While the pedagogy system of Bangladesh is emphasizing on standardized textbooks, rigid course plans, and exam centeredness. There is very little room for satisfying or learner diversity. The current system applies the same content and method to all, ignoring learner variation.

### **11.3 Method**

Learning is effective through doing and real-life experiences. Teachers should design hands-on activities and projects that encourage exploration, experimentation, and reflection. Real learning happens through active participation, reflection, and hands-on experience. Dewey sees knowledge as constructed through experience. Bangladesh's pedagogy largely treats knowledge as static and to be memorized. In Bangladesh, encourages rote learning to pass exams. Rarely includes experiential, project-based, and inquiry-based learning. When someone gives any information, it may suppress curiosity but it's not an idea or real thinking. Real thinking happens through 1<sup>st</sup> hand wrestling of problems and trying to find out the solutions and thus we think consciously (Dewey 1916, p. 166).

### **11.4 Democratic engagement**

School is a miniature society that must prepare students for active participation in democratic life. Dewey wants education to empower democratic thinking. The local model often reinforces passive reception and hierarchy. Emphasizes obedience, discipline, and exam results. Lacks focus on critical thinking, debate, collaboration, and democratic participation. Dewey states, A democratic society depends on its educational programs that contain greater moral values and sense of social responsibility (Dewey 1916, p. 200).

### **11.5 Teachers Role**

Teachers are facilitators, helping learners engage with materials and explore meaning. Dewey promotes a dialogical and open learning environment. Bangladesh's approach often relies on authoritarian, one-way transmission. Teachers are often seen as sole authority figures, transmitters of textbook content. Student questioning or creative deviation is often discouraged. Educators or teachers have many things in their hand beyond compliance or giving external motivation (what parents or teachers decide for them), rather can use some methods which are thought provoking or interesting and helpful to make connection with life (Dewey 1916, p.135). The teacher's role is to shape a rich environment, pose thought-provoking questions, and scaffold the student's thinking not to dominate or dictate. Be a facilitator, not a transmitter of fixed content.

### **11.6 Social Integrating Curriculum**

Curriculum should evolve with the needs of society and the child, integrating real-world contexts. To Dewey, education is a social process because it happens by participating in social life and eventually it integrates individuals into that group life, and from that learners adopt social norms and values to shape their community life (Dewey 1916, p. 85). Dewey emphasized group work, dialogue, and learning through shared experiences since growth happens through participation in community life. Foster collaboration and community-based learning.

## **12. Practical Challenges and Possibilities in Bangladesh Pedagogy**

### **12.1 Challenges**

Implanting Dewey's education philosophy into practice is not without its challenges especially in the context of Bangladesh. Most public schools in Bangladesh suffer from high student-teacher ratios, often exceeding 50:1. "Teachers in Bangladesh's secondary schools often find it almost impossible to give individual feedback to 60–70 students within a 50-minute class, which significantly undermines the quality of education" (Akanda & Haque 2025, pp. 5-11). It indicates large class sizes in government schools often hinder teacher-student interaction and reduce learning effectiveness. Dewey proposed individualized learning and active engagement, which is extremely difficult in this context. Besides, overcrowded classrooms with limited materials are also obstacles for exploration, creativity, and reflection.

Another barrier is the deep-rooted exam culture. The education system of Bangladesh is deeply ingrained in big public exams (PSC, JSC, SSC, HSC). Students do well in knowledge-based, memorization questions but struggle with higher-order tasks like analysis and problem-solving, largely because classrooms remain focused on rote learning rather than creative, skill-based teaching (Nath & Chowdhury 2009, pp. 120-123). Teachers and

students are under pressure to "teach to the test," limiting creative or experiential approaches. The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) tightly control content and structure. Teachers are rarely allowed to deviate from the centrally designed curriculum. Schools and teachers have limited autonomy to adapt materials to students lived experiences. Many teachers rely on lecture-based methods, lacking training in child-centered, participatory pedagogy. The report of UNICEF states some serious pedagogical shortcomings: despite high enrolment, the teaching methods and curriculum aren't successfully imparting foundational literacy and numeracy, leaving a significant portion of students deficient in basic academic skills (UNICEF, n.d.).

In most government schools, especially in rural areas, teaching is entirely focused on exam preparation. Students are taught to memorize textbook content rather than understand or apply knowledge. Teachers are at the heart of education in Bangladesh, but they don't always get the support, training, or respect they need to do their best. Without helping teachers grow and succeed, it's hard for students to truly learn and for the country to reach its education goals (CAMPE, 2024). In rural Bangladesh, pedagogical practices are often traditional and teacher-centered, which limits student participation and critical thinking. Furthermore, the lack of teacher training and resources

makes it difficult to implement inclusive education effectively, particularly for children with disabilities or from marginalized communities (Begum, et al. 2018). The TQI-SEP project is reported to have had a positive impact, raising the SSC pass rate to 82% (CIDA, 2012). However, inclusive education will only be fully realized when the remaining 18% of students are also counted among the successful achievers (Malak, et al. 2013). According to PEDP4\* aims, limited facilities and inaccessible infrastructure, absence of accessible transportation, negative attitudes of the family, teachers and community hinder disabled children's full participation in schools (Cited in Grimes, 2021, pp.11-12). Students in the Chittagong Hill Tracts face significant challenges in education due to language barriers and cultural differences. The dominant use of Bengali in schools often alienates ethnic minority children whose mother tongues and cultural practices differ, leading to lower engagement, comprehension difficulties, and higher dropout rates (Rashid 2020).

### **12.2 Possibilities**

However, despite these challenges, there are also real possibilities for change. Some schools and NGOs in Bangladesh are already experimenting with project-based learning, local content integration, and participatory teaching. For instance, learning through community mapping, storytelling, gardening, or science fairs, these are not luxuries. They are small but powerful ways to bring experience and reflection into the classroom. We also need policy shifts not massive overhauls at once, but gradual reforms. That includes reforming teacher education, introducing alternative assessment models, and giving schools more flexibility to localize the curriculum. Most importantly, we need to shift our mindset viewing it as a journey of growth. Dewey reminds us that education is not about filling minds with facts, but about developing the habits of inquiry, empathy, and civic responsibility. Curriculum Revisions 2012 and 2021 Reforms can put a great impact on Bangladesh education system. Recent curriculum reforms aim to reduce rote learning and emphasize competency-based education, a move closer to Deweyan ideals. Organizations like BRAC, JAAGO, and Teach for Bangladesh have introduced project-based learning, activity-based classrooms, and digital education models aligned with Dewey's thought. The greater objective remained to provide ICT-based quality formal education to underprivileged children of Bangladesh (JAAGO Foundation, n.d.). Initiatives like Shikhhok Batayon (Teachers' Portal) and multimedia classrooms help in introducing interactive and visual learning methods (Hansson, et al. 2018). There is a slow cultural shift among progressive educators and policymakers advocating for student agency, critical thinking, and democratic values in education.

In Mymensingh, BRAC, Gonokendra Pathshala (BRAC Learning Centres) students built a community garden to learn about science and cooperation, integrating knowledge and

experience, also Dewey's core idea. Dhaka slums, Shoishob Bangladesh (Child-Centered Urban Schooling), runs informal schools where children learn through play, group activities, role-play, and arts, with no exams, aligned closely with Dewey's emphasis on natural learning. The government of Bangladesh introduced the Creative Question System (Srijonshil Poddhoti) in 2010 to reduce rote learning and encourage higher-order thinking.

### 13. Conclusion and Recommendations

The literacy rates are increasing gradually, but this is not the purpose of education. It's about making good citizens, future leaders and motivated people for a sustainable future of a nation. John Dewey's educational philosophy offers an effective and inspiring alternative to the education system of Bangladesh. His education philosophy is hard to fully implement in Bangladesh for the small class size, rigid curricula, and exam pressures. But his philosophy can be reflected in our education system by making the curriculum more flexible and inclusive. Moreover, training teachers for experience-based and participatory approach, analyzing real-life problems in teaching, encouraging students voice and creativity in classrooms will be effective in this regard. After all, his vision of democratic and experiential learning could meaningfully transform Bangladesh's educational future.

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