John Dewey Challenged the Common Practice of Education Example

John Dewey (1859-1952) challenged the common practice of education during his time on Earth. Originally, the curriculum was set and never changing, the teachers had an authoritarian discipline style, and student-centered learning was non-existent, simply because he was a major instigator of this style of teaching. He believed that educators needed to look at where each student is at individually in their learning, and base the curriculum and teaching methods off of their needs. This is now the main focus of educators today – to adapt curriculum and learning experiences from authoritarian and stiff, to student-centered and social learning. Thus, meeting the individual needs of each unique student and class. Dewey explains that "The traditional scheme is, in essence, one of imposition from above and from outside. It imposes adult standards, subject-matter, and methods upon those who are only growing slowly toward maturity. The gap is so great that the required subject-matter, the methods of learning and of behaving are foreign to the existing capacities of the young... Moreover, that which is taught is
thought of as essentially static. It is taught as a finished product, with little regard either to the ways in which it was originally built up or to changes that will surely occur in the future" (1938, p. 18-19). Educators were expecting students (children) to learn adult material and mannerisms, while their brains are not mature enough to effectively cement and learn the material. They also were not changing their teaching methods or their curriculum. "Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher, has been quoted as saying change is the only constant in life" (Singer, 2017). Even with this fact, the educators of the past were fairly set in their way of teaching. According to Dewey, the old education method looked upon the "mind as a purely individual affair in direct and naked contact with an external world" meaning that it was based only on knowledge and intellect, not considering the emotions that are a part of every student (2018, p. 98). This goes along with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Along with physiological needs of basic functions, the need for safety and the need of love and belonging need to be met before learning can occur. The old methods of education did not meet these needs for the students, causing their teaching to be inefficient at times. "Dewey's influence on education was evident in his theory about social learning; he believed that school should be representative of a social environment and that students learn best when in natural social settings" (Williams, 2017, p. 91; Flinders & Thornton, 2013). By creating a social environment for the students to cooperate and engage with their peers, it satisfies the need for love and belonging and even their esteem needs (which is in the level above love and belonging). Some educators at the time were worried that student-centered learning would cause them to lose control of their class. They believed that the authoritarian discipline style was the only way to have any sort of structure in the classroom – thus causing the issue with safety (Williams, 2017). It was not uncommon to get spanked, licked (another form of beating), and handled in a rough manner overall in the classroom. Students were scared of doing wrong because they would be punished physically; they didn't feel safe. By having a social environment in the classroom, it kills two birds with one stone. It causes the students to rise to a level where there are no basic needs hindering their learning. Besides the social aspect of a student-centered classroom. There are educational factors involving the curriculum development as well. "...[Dewey] believed that students thrive in an environment where they are allowed to experience and interact with the curriculum, and all students should have the opportunity to take part in their own learning... the main purpose of education should not revolve around the acquisition of a pre-determined set of skills, but rather the realization of one's full potential and the ability to use those skills for the
greater good" (Talebi, 2015, p. 4). Dewey envisioned learning as a way for students to apply the skills and lessons they learn in the classroom to their own lives. To be able to have a positive influence on the world around them and make a difference. One thing to note with student-centered learning is that "too much reliance on the child could be equally detrimental to the learning process" (Williams, 2017, p. 5). The teacher must not be minimalized as well as the importance of the material being taught. They both still have a very important role to play in the classroom. There needs to be an "educational framework that strikes the balance between distributing knowledge while also considering the interests and experiences of the student" (Williams, 2017, p. 5). It is the teacher's job to maintain this balance within the classroom for the most effective results. In conclusion, the basis of Dewey's input and effect on education today is the practice of a student-centered environment where social learning can take place. It is extremely important that the students be made a part of the curriculum development in the sense that their interests and needs are met, that the classroom is a safe, social environment for students to thrive and make new relationships with their peers, and that the teacher assumes their proper role to maintain balance between the curriculum and the needs of the students. These concepts that Dewey introduced "...are reflective of such a practice, therefore teachers who currently subscribe to the use of student-centered teaching techniques are showing evidence of John Dewey's theory in 21st century classrooms" (Williams, 2017, p. 96). His teaching model is just as effective in classrooms today as it was when it was first introduced.