



Journal of Educational Sciences

Journal homepage: <https://jes.ejournal.unri.ac.id/index.php/JES>



P-ISSN
2581-1657

E-ISSN
2581-2203

Philosophy of Education of John Dewey's Pragmatism and Its Relevance to the Education System in Indonesia

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 11 Oct 2025

Revised: 28 Oct 2025

Accepted: 06 Nov 2025

Published online: 26 Nov 2025

Keywords:

Philosophy,
Pragmatism,
John Dewey,
Education System,
Indonesia

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Article Doi:

<https://doi.org/10.31258/jes.9.6.p.6110-6120>

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ABSTRACT

The study explores John Dewey's pragmatist philosophy, which views education as the reconstruction of experience through social interaction and meaningful activity, and finds it highly relevant to Indonesia's educational system. This study aims to describe Dewey's concept of education and analyze its relevance to the contemporary Indonesian education system. The method used is a literature review by examining books, academic journals, and other scholarly sources related to Dewey's thought and national education policies. The results indicate that Dewey's educational principles, such as learning by doing, experiential learning, student-centered instruction, and viewing schools as miniature societies, are strongly aligned with the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, the Pancasila Student Profile, and the adoption of deep learning approach which emphasizes meaningful understanding and the application of knowledge to real-life situations. However, the application of Dewey's philosophy in Indonesian education still faces challenges, including the persistence of rote learning practices and the limited shift in the teacher's role from knowledge transmitter to facilitator. Therefore, it is necessary to enhance teacher competence, strengthen contextual learning practices, and build democratic and collaborative learning environments. In conclusion, Dewey's pragmatism remains relevant as a philosophical foundation for developing a humanistic, adaptive, and character-oriented education system in Indonesia.

1. Introduction

As the world rapidly advances, technology and science continue to develop rapidly. As users and consumers, humans strive to cultivate and develop various fields of knowledge. This is driven by the human need for knowledge, which is the result of the thought process. This ability to think is one of the characteristics that distinguishes humans from other creatures. This development is inseparable from the contributions of various philosophical schools that provide the basis for educational goals, approaches, and methods (Ferdino et al., 2024).

One philosophical school that has had a significant influence on modern educational reform is pragmatism, pioneered by John Dewey. Dewey is known as the father of educational pragmatism and a pioneer of progressive education, emphasizing the importance of experience, democracy, and active participation in the learning process (Joanne & Situmorang, 2025). John Dewey is a renowned American figure in the fields of philosophy, psychology, and education, whose thinking is heavily influenced by his life experiences. In addition to these three fields, John Dewey was also a thinker who mastered many other fields, including psychology, law, politics, and economics. Dewey was also a well-known public figure in his country, embracing his democratic techniques (Hasbullah, 2020).

John Dewey viewed education as a process of reconstructing experiences aimed at helping students adapt and play an active role in social life. Education, he argued, is not a passive presentation of knowledge, but rather a learning process that emphasizes activity, hands-on experience, and critical thinking skills (Subairi, 2024). Dewey's concept of "learning by doing" has become the foundation for progressive learning models that emphasize active student involvement (Idi, 2002). Dewey's educational ideas, widely recognized worldwide, are pragmatism and constructivism. Pragmatism emphasizes the application of scientific knowledge to real-life situations, enabling students to actively explore the knowledge they acquire.

Constructivism, on the other hand, requires students to actively construct their own knowledge. Constructivism is widely used as a learning method within the scientific approach used during the implementation of the 2013 curriculum in schools. According to Dewey, learning is not merely a passive reception of information, but an activity that involves direct interaction between individuals and their environment. Students must be given opportunities for exploration, experimentation, discussion, collaboration, and reflection, so they can construct knowledge based on meaningful experiences. Because education is regarded as a fundamental pillar in shaping human character and advancing civilization (Saifullah et al., 2025).

In a social context, Dewey emphasized that schools are miniature communities that prepare students to live as active and responsible members of society (Sofa & Safitri, 2022). Therefore, education must develop social competencies, such as the ability to work together, appreciate differences, think democratically, and make decisions based on rational considerations. Education is not merely an intellectual process, but also a process of character and moral formation. Dewey's thinking has broad relevance to the Indonesian education system, particularly in the dynamics of contemporary education policy. 21st-century education currently focuses on the importance of student abilities.

Since 2000, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), through the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), has consistently analyzed and highlighted the importance of student abilities such as critical thinking, collaborative problem-solving, communication, and creativity. Furthermore, this program has been participated in by more than 70 countries,

including Indonesia, which has participated annually. Unfortunately, Indonesia's participation in this program demonstrates that the abilities of Indonesian students are still far below average (Qomariah & Fauziati, 2023).

These findings have also attracted the attention of the government, policy stakeholders, and education researchers to continue improving the quality of Indonesian education by revising, revising, or providing input related to the Indonesian education curriculum policy. However, the implementation of Dewey's ideas in Indonesian education practice is not without challenges. Much of Indonesian education remains teacher-centered, assessment is still dominated by cognitive aspects, limited facilities and infrastructure remain a barrier, and teachers' ability to design learning is limited.

2. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative method because it does not involve statistical data but instead focuses on data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Hasan, 2002). Library research was used as the data collection technique, involving a variety of literature, including scientific articles, books, notes, and other references sourced from previous works (Azzahra et al., 2025). In analyzing the data, this research employed a descriptive method, where the data was studied in depth, designed, organized, and defined to gain deeper meaning and generate new insights.

The results of the analysis were then presented descriptively to illustrate the research findings. This process included classification and identification of patterns and relationships within the categories within the research object. The documentation study method was used in data collection, relying on relevant documents without conducting direct fieldwork. Data sources in this study included documents from various scientific literature, books, and research journal articles related to John Dewey's pragmatist educational philosophy and its relevance to the Indonesian education system.

3. Results and Discussion

The Concept of John Dewey's Pragmatist Philosophy of Education

John Dewey was a distinguished and influential philosopher and educator from the United States, widely recognized for his contributions to modern educational thought. He was born in Burlington, Vermont, on October 20, 1859. He pursued his early education at the University of Vermont and later continued his academic journey at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where he deepened his intellectual foundation under the guidance of prominent scholars of his time. After completing his studies, John Dewey taught at several schools in Pennsylvania and Vermont for approximately three years, gaining valuable practical experience in the field of education before embarking on a broader and more significant academic career (Fott, 2012).

John Dewey then successfully became a professor in the fields of philosophy and education at several respected universities. Throughout his career, he produced an exceptionally large number of works that demonstrated the depth and breadth of his thinking. Several of his major works include *How We Think*, *Democracy and Education*, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, *Human Nature and Conduct*, *Experience and Nature*, *The Public and Its Problems*, and *The Quest for Certainty*. Dewey eventually passed away in 1952 in New York at the age of 93, leaving behind a legacy that continues to influence educational philosophy to this day (Nasrudin et al., 2025).

John Dewey positioned education as an integral and inseparable part of social life. One of the central ideas in his educational philosophy is that education is not merely a process of transferring knowledge or technical skills, but rather a deeply social process through which individuals interact, participate, and learn from shared experiences in the community. Therefore, Dewey believed that the educational process unfolds within social realities, where learners shape their identities through relationships with other people, with their physical and cultural environment, and with the social norms and values that prevail in society (Hikmah & Dianti, 2025).

In his classical work *Democracy and Education*, Dewey wrote that education is a process of forming intellectual and moral dispositions that emerges within social interactions. Dewey asserted, Education is a process of living and not a preparation for future living. This statement emphasizes that education is not solely intended to prepare learners for life in the future, but is itself a living, ongoing process rooted in present social experience. Through interactions in school, learners acquire and internalize values such as honesty, responsibility, mutual respect, and democracy values that serve as the foundation for their participation in broader community life (Dewey, 1938).

Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism conceptualizes education both as a process and as a form of socialization. This means that, as part of the process of growth, learners are able to derive meaning from events and experiences within their surrounding environment. Therefore, the boundary or separation between school and society must be minimized, as effective learning cannot be confined merely to the formal school setting. Consequently, the ideal school is one whose educational content is fully integrated with the surrounding community and its realities. Dewey believed that education should function as a place for training essential skills and methods of problem-solving that are relevant to daily life. Schools, therefore, must be able to preserve and reflect the characteristics, uniqueness, and cultural identity of the environment or region in which they are situated.

Dewey also emphasized that the process of learning through direct involvement in real-life social experiences is far more effective than traditional educational methods that rely heavily on lecturing and rote memorization (Kosasih, 2022). By engaging learners actively in group activities, discussions, collaborative projects, and the analysis of authentic community problems, education prepares them to become individuals capable of critical, creative, and responsive thinking in addressing social challenges. For this reason, his philosophy advocates for an

educational system grounded in the principle of “school while doing” or learning by doing. Dewey viewed his version of pragmatism as a framework with wide-ranging applications in society. He considered education as a strategic and central mechanism for ensuring future survival and societal progress. American national education, according to Dewey, taught content that was outdated, repetitive, and no longer relevant to the lives of learners, thus stifling their intellectual development.

Therefore, in order to realize these ideas, Dewey proposed two key instructional approaches. The first is the problem solving method. Through this method, learners are exposed to various challenging situations and problems, and they are granted full freedom to attempt to solve these problems according to the progression of their abilities. Within this learning model, the teacher no longer functions as the sole source of knowledge; instead, the teacher assumes the role of a facilitator who assists students in addressing the difficulties they encounter. Through this method, the traditional model in which the teacher is positioned as the dominant center of information (the pedagogy model) is replaced by an andragogical approach that respects the individual differences of each learner. The second is the concept of learning by doing, which serves to bridge the gap between the world of formal education and the practical needs of society. For learners to meaningfully participate and contribute to society after completing their education, they must be equipped with practical skills that align with the real needs of their social context (Aji & Rosiana, 2024).

Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that John Dewey is an important figure in the world of philosophy and education who made significant contributions to modern learning reform. His ideas position education as an integral part of social life, where learning is not only focused on the mastery of knowledge but also on character formation, critical thinking, and social competence. Through the concepts of learning by doing and the problem solving method, Dewey rejected passive learning and emphasized the importance of direct experience and active engagement of learners in the learning process. Schools, in his view, function as miniature societies that serve as spaces for learning democratic values, cooperation, and social responsibility. Thus, Dewey’s philosophy of educational pragmatism asserts that education must be relevant to real life and capable of preparing learners to play active roles in society, rather than merely becoming passive recipients of information.

Education in the Perspective of Pragmatism: A Social Process and the Reconstruction of Experience

Pragmatism conceptualizes reality as an ongoing interaction between human beings and their environment, where knowledge emerges not as a fixed or absolute entity but as the result of continuous engagement, reflection, and adaptation. Human beings, in this view, are dynamic and evolving creatures, shaped by biological, social, and psychological factors. Their ability to think, to adapt, and to reshape their surroundings underscores the fundamentally plastic nature of human existence. Within this philosophical framework, education is not an external process imposed upon the child, nor is it merely the activation of innate potentials;

rather, it is a deliberate and continuous reconstruction of the learner's lived experiences. Every experience a child encounters must be reorganized and reinterpreted, forming the basis for intellectual, moral, and social growth (Prajā, 2003).

From this standpoint, education is not a preparation for life it is life itself. Learning, therefore, must be rooted in observable facts and real situations that students can directly encounter, understand, question, and discuss. Each subject in the curriculum should be connected meaningfully to real-life contexts so that school experiences are integrated with experiences outside the school environment. The teacher's position shifts from being the primary source of knowledge to becoming a facilitator, guide, and co-learner who encourages students to think logically, scientifically, and reflectively. Instruction, then, becomes a cooperative enterprise, grounded in inquiry and active engagement (Nidawati, 2022).

Dewey firmly argued that education cannot be separated from its social context, because human beings are thoroughly social creatures. Learning occurs not only through deliberate instruction but also through observation, interaction, imitation, and participation in social life. When learners observe the behavior of others, they naturally attempt to reproduce what they see, even if they do not yet fully grasp the deeper reasons behind those actions. This is why social control shaped collaboratively by the family, the school, and the broader community is essential. Children live far beyond the walls of the classroom; they absorb values, attitudes, and habits from every social setting they encounter. Thus, education must extend beyond academic instruction and become a comprehensive socialization process embedded within everyday life.

In addressing individual and social problems, Dewey emphasized the application of scientific logic to problematic situations. He outlined five stages of reflective thinking: the emergence of an indeterminate or problematic situation; the careful diagnosis and formulation of the problem; the development of a hypothesis; the testing of the hypothesis through inquiry or action; and finally, the evaluation of the results, determining whether the hypothesis effectively resolves the initial problem. Truth, according to Dewey, is not a static or universal certainty but what is ultimately accepted by those who investigate it through reflective inquiry. This epistemological stance positions education as a bridge between thinking and action, where intellectual engagement must always lead toward concrete problem-solving (Fauzi, 2019).

In relation to society, pragmatism views learners as individuals endowed with intelligence and creativity, naturally inclined to explore, innovate, and respond dynamically to the demands of their environment (Nidawati, 2022). Dewey maintained that education is both a process and a form of socialization; therefore, an ideal school is one whose curriculum is integrated with the local community and its cultural characteristics. The school should preserve and cultivate the uniqueness of its environment, offering students opportunities to understand and appreciate the values, traditions, and knowledge systems of their own locality. This aligns with

pragmatism's core principle: learning must occur through active engagement with real-life experiences learning by doing (Ferdino et al., 2024).

To support the reconstruction of experience as the foundation of learning, Dewey introduced two primary methods: the problem-solving method and the learning-by-doing approach. Through problem solving, learners confront challenging situations and are encouraged to develop solutions independently, relying on their reasoning, prior experience, and collaborative inquiry. The teacher's role is to guide rather than dictate, shifting the classroom from a teacher-centered model to a student-centered environment. Meanwhile, learning by doing emphasizes that knowledge is solidified through action, experiment, exploration, and participation in meaningful tasks. Practical activities such as group discussions, collaborative projects, fieldwork, experiments, and community engagement become essential learning experiences.

Thus, education from a pragmatic standpoint is deeply rooted in social life and the lived experiences of learners. It must remain connected to reality, responsive to social change, and oriented toward developing individuals who can think critically, act responsibly, and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Dewey's philosophy insists that education should not isolate students from the world but prepare them to understand, participate in, and improve the society in which they live. Through the integration of experience, social interaction, and reflective inquiry, the pragmatic approach to education shapes learners not only intellectually but also morally and socially, equipping them with the capacities necessary for democratic life and continuous personal growth.

The Relevance of John Dewey's Pragmatic Thought to the Indonesian Education System

John Dewey's pragmatic philosophy holds strong relevance to the development of Indonesia's education system, particularly in the context of 21st-century learning, which demands students to think critically, creatively, communicatively, and collaboratively. Dewey's conception of education as a social process and a reconstruction of experience aligns closely with current national education policies that emphasize character development, active learning, and meaningful student engagement. The influence of Deweyan pragmatism is evident across various aspects of Indonesian education, including student-centered learning, experiential-based instruction, the Merdeka Curriculum, the Profile of Pancasila Students, and even the recent deep learning approach formulated as a new pedagogical direction by the current Ministry of Education.

First, education based on experience. In the pragmatic view, the central purpose of education is to guide students in connecting their experiences so they can draw conclusions and test new knowledge. New experiences transform into new knowledge when students continuously question and reflect upon what they encounter. The answers they build become new cognitive structures (Nidawati, 2022). Student experiences, whether intentionally designed or naturally occurring in school, must anticipate future societal demands, because changes implemented

today will shape outcomes in the future. The accumulated experiences of students determine their competencies, which serve as essential indicators of their readiness to face global competition. In this regard, student competencies formed through meaningful experiential learning are integral components of the school curriculum.

Second, learner-centered education. For pragmatists, students grow and develop through active interaction with their environment (Tilaar, 1999). Therefore, education must be grounded in the concrete conditions of learners their interests, talents, capacities, and the evolving dynamics of society. Teachers must be prepared to adjust methods, strategies, and instructional plans in line with scientific, technological, and socio-cultural changes. For pragmatism, schooling is part of life itself, not merely preparation for life; thus, the way students learn in school should not differ fundamentally from the way they learn in real-life contexts.

Third, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum reflects Deweyan thought through its emphasis on experiential learning via projects, exploration, and context-based activities. This curriculum enables students to develop interests, talents, and problem-solving abilities rather than merely memorizing information (Nisak & Yuliastuti, 2022). Its focus on Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Discovery Learning, and Problem-Based Learning (PBL) corresponds directly to Dewey's principle of learning by doing. In practice, students learn through investigation, observation, collaboration, and reflection processes that ensure knowledge becomes applicable to real-world situations. Teachers, in this framework, serve as facilitators rather than authoritative sources of knowledge, guiding students through dialogue, experimentation, and experiential exploration. This instructional model mirrors Dewey's belief that schools should not enforce hierarchical teacher–student relations but instead foster democratic collaboration. The classroom becomes a space for inquiry and reasoning, not merely for lectures and memorization.

Fourth, Dewey's influence is evident in the Profile of Pancasila Students, which emphasizes faith and noble character, critical thinking, creativity, independence, cooperation, and global diversity (Nugraha, 2022). These values reflect Dewey's conviction that schools must cultivate democratic attitudes, tolerance, and social responsibility. Consequently, education is expected to produce learners who are intellectually competent and morally grounded. Dewey's concept of the "school as a miniature society" is also realized in cocurricular programs and the Project for Strengthening the Profile of Pancasila Students (P5), where learners engage directly in real social, cultural, and environmental contexts such as entrepreneurship, environmental stewardship, literacy campaigns, community service, and projects rooted in local wisdom. These activities represent concrete forms of experience reconstruction, enabling students to learn through action, social interaction, and reflective engagement.

Fifth, the deep learning approach, newly introduced in Indonesia in early 2025 by the Minister of Education Abdul Mu'ti, focuses on meaningful, mindful, and joyful learning. This approach strengthens students' capacity through deep understanding, critical thinking, value-based reasoning, and real-life relevance (Syafi'i & Darnanengsih, 2025). Deep learning aligns directly with Dewey's pragmatic

philosophy, which views learning as an experiential reconstruction process through individual interaction with the environment. Knowledge is not transmitted from teacher to student but constructed by learners through relevant activities. Dewey's principles of learning by doing and problem solving form the philosophical foundation of deep learning, which requires learners to understand concepts, relate them to experience, apply them to solve problems, and reflect on learning outcomes. Thus, deep learning represents a contemporary embodiment of Deweyan pragmatism both emphasizing experiential engagement, active participation, meaningful understanding, and the integration of classroom learning with social reality.

Based on the above explanations, it can be concluded that John Dewey's pragmatic thought holds significant relevance to the direction and practices of contemporary education in Indonesia. The principles of education as a social process, experiential learning, and active knowledge construction align with student-centered curricula, character development initiatives such as the Profile of Pancasila Students, and contextual, collaborative learning found in the Merdeka Curriculum. Additionally, Dewey's concepts of learning by doing and reflective problem solving provide a philosophical basis for the deep learning approach, which emphasizes meaningful understanding and practical application. Thus, Dewey's philosophy continues to shape not only theoretical discussions but also the practical formation of an educational system that is more humanistic, adaptive, and responsive to the evolving challenges of modern society.

4. Conclusion

The philosophy of John Dewey's educational pragmatism provides an essential contribution to shaping modern educational paradigms, including those embedded within the Indonesian education system. Dewey emphasized that education is a continuous process of reconstructing experience, occurring through social interaction; therefore, learning must be grounded in activity, direct engagement, and reflective inquiry. Core ideas such as learning by doing, problem-based learning, and the concept of the school as a miniature society illustrate that education is not merely oriented toward the transmission of knowledge, but also concerns the cultivation of character, morality, and students' critical thinking abilities.

Within the context of the Indonesian education system, Dewey's ideas demonstrate clear relevance to various contemporary educational policies, including learner-centered education, experiential learning, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, the strengthening of the Profile of Pancasila Students, and the emergence of the deep learning approach, which prioritizes meaningful understanding and the connection between knowledge and real-life contexts. All of these approaches align with Dewey's view that knowledge must possess practical functions within students' social lives. Thus, John Dewey's pragmatic philosophy remains relevant as a foundational and directional framework for the ongoing development of Indonesian education, aiming to realize an educational system that

is humanistic, adaptive, contextual, and oriented toward nurturing learners who are intelligent, critical, creative, and morally grounded, as well as capable of actively contributing to social life.

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How to cite this article:

Mananna, M. A., Safutra, N. E., & Sirozi, M. (2025). Philosophy of Education of John Dewey's Pragmatism and Its Relevance to the Education System in Indonesia. *Journal of Educational Sciences*, 9(6), 6110-6120.
