

Main aim of
education to promote
individual differences
education essay



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This essay endeavours to analyse the statement that the main aim of education is to encourage individual differences. It puts forth the ethical claim that our education systems should not standardise students but help them develop as individuals in their own right. In order to present a balanced view to the reader, this literary piece draws upon the works of philosophers and educators from as far back as 360 BC. It is concluded that given the challenges faced by man in the 21st century, it only makes sense that education should support individuality.

Introduction

In the discourse of this paper, I aspire to investigate the aim of education as a facilitator for encouraging individual difference. The paper has been divided into four parts. I first discuss the significance of the nature of the student-teacher relationship and then explore the theoretical and practical realms of the two main educational systems of the 21st century. In the third segment of the essay, I compare the two educational structures on the basis of their support for promoting individuality. The paper is drawn to a close with a conclusion that authenticates the claims of this essay.

Importance of the Student-Teacher Relationship

In the opening chapter of their book, *The Study of Education* (2009), Bates and Lewis present an autobiographical account on education written by Wendy, an early years educator. While exploring the early years of her childhood, Wendy puts forth her feeling of disconnect with education due to the ineffective teaching practices that built up a foundation of fear around the very term. She describes her head teacher as being a strict authoritarian whose teaching philosophy was modelled on Locke's 'empirical pedagogical'

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approach that described the child's mind as a blank sheet of paper that needed instruction from an exterior source in order to form ideas and opinions (Locke, 1924). Wendy says, 'I loathed her for her remoteness and retreated into myself whenever she taught a lesson in our class' (Bates and Lewis, 2009, p. 10). This diminished Wendy's confidence and interest in learning and made her question her intelligence quotient. However, when she shifted to a slightly progressive learning environment where the teacher was not a scary figure, she not only became an A student but thoroughly enjoyed the learning process. Her fear of education disappeared and there was a sheer boost in self confidence (Bates and Lewis, 2009).

Bates and Lewis (2009) use this example to put across the criticality of the relationship between the learner and educator.

The online pocket Oxford dictionary (2006) defines the term relationship as 'the way in which two or more concepts, objects, or people are connected.' Thus, it goes to say that the nature of the connection between two human beings is the most important feature in a relationship. This principle can be applied to student-teacher relationships as well. Studies have proven that a close and positive relationship between teachers and students has a direct impact on the academic achievement, behaviour and adult life of the student (Jones, 1981). For instance, as Jacqueline Zeller (n. d.), lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, points out, when children are provided with a sense of 'safety and security afforded by close relationships with teachers,' they not only enjoy the process of education but also develop into well-rounded adults. However, when children are yelled at by the

teacher, they feel ‘ rejected and frightened’ and tend to shun education (Zeller, n. d.).

When students choose to drop out of high school, it is usually not a spontaneous decision but one that has been reached over a period of time mainly due to the presence of feelings of academic frustration and defeat or socio-cultural issues (Alliance for excellent education, 2009). A paper written by Rouse (2005) for the symposium on the Social Costs of Inadequate Education, New York, points out that these high school dropouts earn, on average, \$260, 000 less than a high school graduate.

Thus, the ineffective flow of communication between the teacher and student has more consequences than we manage to comprehend. This brings up the question that if a positive student-teacher relationship is so important, why do we still see such varying student-teacher dynamics in the current day classroom scenario? The best way to understand this would be by exploring the two main teaching methodologies which define our academic world today: the traditionalist and progressive education system.

Traditionalist education system

A traditional teaching environment is a teacher-centric setup, where the role of the teacher is directive and rooted in authority (Novak, 1998). This teaching methodology arises from the realist philosophy of education that promotes the integration of the mind and body. Therefore, here theoretical learning is on the same footing as experiential education. This approach is mostly based on John Locke’s educational philosophy (Locke, 1693). Locke, the 17th century British philosopher, believed in the ‘ immanent’ perspective

of the child (James et al, 1998). He was of the opinion that the child's mind is a 'blank slate' and knows nothing. It is up to extrinsic factors to provide information in order to instigate thoughts and opinions (Locke, 1813). Thus, while the student is important in this educational system, the main role is played by the teacher, who is more knowledgeable and experienced in matters of the world. Textbooks and workbooks are used as the primary teaching aids that help the teacher fill up these 'knowledge holes' in the minds of the students (Novak, 1998).

In this educational setup, students are assessed via written and oral examinations (Novak, 1998). Since this a standardised testing system, the results are variable within the classroom, depending on each child's cognitive ability (McNally, 1974). However, there is a demand for a more balanced academic result with an exceptionally high class average, which affects the reputation of the school (Novak, 1998). Thus, teachers tend to spend most of their time 'perfecting' students via repetition and rote learning.

Traditionalists usually tend to adhere to a fixed curriculum; therefore, it is usually not possible to learn the content in context (Johnson and Johnson, 1991). Also, since there is more emphasis on the realist ideology of individualized learning rather than on group activities (Novak, 1998), the teachers prefer a linear classroom layout. Thus, desks and chairs are generally arranged in rows.

It is interesting to note that though this education system has its roots in the realistic realm, the lack of implementation of the established education policies and rules makes learning more abstract.

For instance, Locke laid emphasis on the soundness of the body and mind (Locke, 1693). He also believed that character-building and morality did not have to be formed by forcing children in a particular direction. He was of the opinion that once the knowledge was imparted to children and they were shown the path, they would be capable of integrating theory with practice. However, the present

day scenario in traditionalist schools suggest otherwise. The teacher has to grill the students over and over again in order to attain a half decent result (Novak, 1998).

Also, Locke was not very keen on the idea of punishment. In his essay, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) he states that punishment does more harm than good to the child. However, what we see in traditionalist schools is a belief in the Kantian notion of the original sin (Kant, 1900). The system practices the concepts of sin and virtue, where a sin is met with punishment and a virtue with a reward. Thus, force is generally used by educators to discipline students and make them obedient (Novak, 2008).

Another example is that of the nature of education. Contradictory to Locke's belief, traditionalists look upon education as a duty and obligation that students must fulfil. The Kantian view that education is not a matter of desire but a call of duty holds much weight here (Kant, 1900). This idea can be understood through an elaborate example presented by Plato, an idealist <https://assignbuster.com/main-aim-of-education-to-promote-individual-differences-education-essay/>

Greek philosopher whose work has affected generations in philosophical thought. In his book *The Republic* (360 BC), Plato puts forth the allegory of the cave, which mainly focuses on the process of attaining enlightenment. This is a brilliant allegory since it covers the metaphysical, epistemological and ethical aspects of the idealist education philosophy and also sheds some light on human nature (Plato, 360 BC). The

allegory is written in the form of dialogues between Socrates, Plato's teacher, and Glaucon, Plato's older brother.

Socrates asks Glaucon to imagine an underground cave with its mouth opening toward the light (Plato, 360 BC). A group of people have lived here since birth, their legs and heads are chained so that they cannot move and they sit facing a blank wall (Plato, 360 BC). There is a fire blazing at a distance behind them and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised walkway with a wall in front of it. The prisoners watch the shadows projected by people carrying all shapes and sizes of objects and stuffed animals while walking down the raised path. Socrates describes these shadows as the closest versions of reality available to the prisoners (Plato, 360 BC).

When these prisoners are liberated they move around the cave and find it hard to adjust to their new realities. The bright light from the fire hurts their eyes causing them to flinch with pain. It is not a welcoming change (Plato, 360 BC). What Plato is trying to convey here is that the prisoners have suddenly moved from a position of relative ignorance to a position of relative knowledge and the entity responsible for liberating them is the teacher.

Thus, Plato makes a blatant point that education is not a pleasurable process but a painful procedure that needs to be forced upon people. Socrates then describes the prisoner's journey to the higher world where they have the sun. The sun is used as a non-religious metaphor for attaining enlightenment. He states that the prisoners had to be

forced to reach the mouth of the cave, implying the requirement of a compulsory authoritarian approach adopted by the teacher (Plato, 360 BC).

Socrates then illustrates to Glaucon how the enlightened prisoner journeyed back into the cave to share his newfound knowledge with the others (Plato, 360 BC). Naturally, his ideas were refuted by the prisoners; for them the images on the wall still defined the ultimate truth of their realities. However, out of a sense of moral Platonic responsibility, which here is to 'pity' the unenlightened minds, Socrates put forth the idea of using compulsion to educate the prisoners; after all the current teacher also had to be forced to go out into the light (Plato, 360 BC).

This allegory echoes a resonating theme in the traditionalist education system.

Progressive teaching methodology

A progressive education system follows a student-centric teaching approach. Here the role of the teacher is that of a facilitator of education rather than an authoritarian instructor (University of Vermont, n. d.).

Today we can find a number of different styles of 'progressive educators'. However, the common thread running through them all is that 'they share

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the conviction that democracy means active participation by all citizens in social, political and economic decisions that will affect their lives' (University of Vermont, n. d.)

This approach has its roots in John Dewey's model of education. Dewey was an American philosopher and educator who played an important role in defining the meaning of education during the late 19th and early 20th century. He founded the philosophical school of pragmatism with Charles Sanders Peirce and William James (Weber, 1960). Unlike ancient philosophical movements, such as idealism and realism, that trace their origins to Europe, the pragmatic system of thought first emerged in the United States of America.

For the pragmatists, democracy is a deep concept rather than a political decision-making plan. It is the idea through which people form their social theories and beliefs about the nature of their world (Dewey, 2004). Dewey applies this concept of democracy to education in his book *Democracy and Education* (Dewey, 2004). He describes education as '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, 2004, p. 83). Thus he considers education a social process and believes that students learn best when indulging in real-life group activities.

It is interesting to note that unlike the ancient idealist dualism of the mind and body or the realist collaboration of theory and practice, pragmatism majorly advocates experiential learning. It harbours a general mistrust in theoretical abstraction or ideal speculation of any kind (Weber, 1960). It is a

grounded ideology that believes in the functionality and practicality of the real world. It can be said that pragmatism is a derivative of realism.

However, stark differences can be found between the two ideologies in terms of their metaphysical, epistemological and ethical principles (Ulich, 1961).

Dewey did not believe in formulating fixed aims of education, since he opposed the segregation of the ' means' from the ' end'. In his opinion, the ' means', or journey, could result in more pleasure than the desired ' end' (Dewey, 2004). ' Conquering the world, as Alexander the Great learned, is less desirable than having more worlds to conquer' (Weber, 1960, p. 265). Similarly, in a progressive classroom the main aim is to insure that the children are comfortable, since this is where their actual learning takes place. Here, children are not educated to be prepared for life; instead, education is considered life itself (Dewey, 2004).

The education system supports an interdisciplinary curriculum, which is more focused on the needs of the students rather than pre-defined tasks and subjects set out by the management or the teacher. By doing so, the students are not only given the power to participate in the decision-making process but are also given the freedom to learn by constructing their own knowledge (Dewey, 1956).

In his book *Democracy and Education* (2004), Dewey talks about the humanistic nature of living beings. He describes the student as the biological child, the psychosocial child and the social child. Thus, when the learner comes to school he brings with him all the connotations, principles and

experiences associated with his persona, which are appreciated and nurtured.

Since progressive educators consider education to be a social phenomenon, more emphasis is laid upon group work rather than on individual learning (University of Vermont). Most of the classroom activities are tailored according to the group dynamics in the class, while keeping in mind the democratic theme of the education philosophy. However, with freedom comes responsibility (University of Vermont). It then becomes the duty of the teacher to instil the correct value system in the students. Keeping such points in mind, there has been a debate on the ultra child centric approach adopted by this school of thought.

To summarise, it can be said that in a progressive teaching environment, the process of education is considered one that makes learning enjoyable (Novak, 1998). Here, learning is usually carried out as a collaborative or a co-operative process and seldom an independent task. Education then is not limited to the individual but to the community as a whole. Due to this approach, the students not only develop a social work ethic but also learn to engage in the exchange of ideas and opinions (Novak, 1998).

Comparison between the two methodologies: promotion of individual differences

On average, a child spends five to seven hours a day for approximately ten months a year at school (Labaree, 1999). Since students spend most of their childhood and youth at their place of education, it is necessary for the

institution to have a calm and happy environment. However, not many children can call their school a fun and pleasurable place (Labaree, 1999).

Teachers across the world are aware of the differences in cognitive ability of children in the same class (Perdew, 1953). However, usually only children studying in a progressive learning environment benefit from this awareness. The main reason behind this is the inflexibility and lack of time in the traditionalist curriculum (Novak, 1998). The traditionalists consider children as socially constructed beings who live in a world structured by adults, where the code of conduct, rituals and language belong to the dominant group. It is, therefore, the moral responsibility of the adults to prepare the child for his or her entrance into the real world (James et al, 1998). The child is looked upon as an object that lacks the characteristics of functioning as an independent entity (Toren, 2006). Thus the attention of the teacher is mostly focused on the child's aim of 'becoming' instead of the concept of 'being'. The student is not given much space to learn by exploration and experiment. He is seen as a 'future adult' rather than as a 'young human being' in his or her own right (Uprichard, 2008). Therefore, the majority of a child's school years in a traditionalist setup can be looked upon as: a 'becoming'; tabular rasa; laying down the foundations; shaping the individual; taking on; growing up; preparation; inadequacy; inexperience; immaturity (Jenks, 2005)

With such ideas in place, where is the time for the teacher to work on the individuality of the students, promote their differences and appreciate them for who they are?

This gives rise to the infamous thought process through which students get accustomed to extrinsic motivators and attend school for attaining a certificate or a degree rather than knowledge (Labaree, 1999). Therefore learning becomes a grade-oriented process. In his book *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, Maslow (1993) states that students in a traditionalist system respond to grades and scores like chimps do to poker chips.

Socio-cultural differences like class, creed, gender, physic, language, ethnicity and differences in economic backgrounds usually tend to be a major cause of concern for teachers. However, given the restraints of the traditionalist setup, the teachers are often forced to believe that the number of differences among the children in a classroom is less than the number of similarities among them. Thus, they should focus more on the positive, the similarities (Perdew, 1953). On the other hand, in a progressive classroom, instant care would be provided to make sure that the students feel welcomed and at ease in their learning environment.

It must be noted that when the traditionalist education system was developed it was the ideal education structure, considering the composition and requirements of the society in the pre-modern era(Weber, 1960). The child not only attended school but also took part in activities such as 'farming', 'weaving', 'animal husbandry' and 'milling'. This helped with his/her over all development (Weber, 1960). Thus, it successfully met the need of the hour. However, since times have changed, societies have advanced, economies have undergone a sea change and people have become more conscientious of their needs and desires, the ideals of such an education system have become rather obsolete (Weber, 1960).

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Let us take the example of the Maple Bear teaching methodology. Maple Bear is a Canadian early childhood and elementary education system. Its progressive education charter concentrates on learning through 'experience and exploration' (Maple Bear, n. d.). 'Our Mission is to provide a high quality Canadian style early childhood and elementary education in a safe, secure and stimulating environment that will provide students with a foundation for lifelong learning' (Maple Bear, n. d.). Today, there are Maple Bear schools in countries such as Korea, India, Bangladesh, Turkey and Morocco. Each of these schools attracts students from diverse cultural and economic background with varying levels of cognitive ability.

It is noteworthy that the demand for Maple Bear schools is increasing by the day, which speaks volumes about their education philosophy. Currently, India is leading the tally with twenty-four Maple Bear institutions (Maple Bear, n. d.). This is especially interesting because the country already has a well-established education system in place (The World Bank, n. d.). Since the early years are the most formative for a child's development, could the increase in the number of Maple Bear schools possibly be due to a lack in the present, mainly traditionalist Indian education system? Are people beginning to realise the importance of promoting individual differences?

Conclusion

In today's world, where economic paradigms are changing at the drop of a hat, where education systems are modelled on the interests of industrialisation, where there is no guarantee that a degree will provide a job, why are we still slotting students into water-tight compartments?

(Robinson, 2010) Why are we alienating children on the basis of their
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cognitive and socio-cultural differences? Why are we killing their individuality and in turn costing them their creativity? The majority of schools today adopt a production line mentality wherein little emphasis is laid on divergent thinking and the child is mostly taught to indulge in linear and convergent thought processes (Robinson, 2010). With the progress in educational research, teachers can now easily use tactics such as the ' aptitude-by-treatment-interactions' which is a research methodology used to explore alternative ' aptitudes, attributes or traits and alternative instructional methods' (Jonnasen and Grabowski, 1993, p. 10).

The German Philosopher, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, (Brainy Quote) had said, ' You have your way. I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist.' This statement can be interpreted to support the belief that it is only natural to have differences among individuals. Thomas Jefferson, third president of the United States, stated that ' All men are created equal' (Jeudwine, 1919). This statement is a traditionalist claim that has caused much unrest in the present society. If all men were created equal, why are there differences among us? This statement should be altered to the democratic idea that all men should be treated as equals (Dahl, 2003). It is only then that people can learn to maximize their potential.

Throughout human history, people have been shunned by society due to their differences. However, many of these societal rejects did great things and helped the human race move forward. Thomas Edison, Galileo Galilei, Jean-Jacques Rousseau are only a few examples. It is difficult to envision a world without their contributions. They succeeded in spite of the system.

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Imagine what could happen if the system itself promoted and rallied for encouraging individual differences among people? In the cutthroat competition of the 21st century, where everyone is exploring their niche to get ahead in the rat race (Robinson, 2010), it seems only fair that differences in individuals should be supported from a very early age. Therefore, schools should employ teachers who have the right motivation for teaching, increase the student- child ratio and invest in teacher's training programs which are extensive and rigorous in nature. What the teacher really needs to learn is how to put pedagogical theory into practice rather than the details of fifth grade mathematics.

' Difference is the course of invention and adoption of new idea and new behaviour patterns. It is the challenge to the old, to the formal, to the status quo, and to reaction. it instigates the dynamism of change. The success of individual differences in the area of technology suggests to us the potentiality of a similar expression in social invention. Our culture suffers from a dearth of new ideas and new approaches to life. Our need is to encourage difference and evaluate it, selecting among new proposals whose which seem to suggest the most fruitful outcome' (Perdew, 1953)

Thus, for us to move forward by promoting a sense of social justice and facing the economic and cultural challenges of the 21st century, the main aim of education should be to encourage individual differences.