

Original Paper

I Am My Own Master: Dewey's theory of pragmatism on Early Childhood Autonomy-Supporting Development

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Abstract

Based on Dewey's pragmatic educational thought, this paper analyses the cultivation content and practical needs of autonomy support for early childhood development. Furthermore, it suggests ways to support children's autonomy from three key perspectives: the viewpoints of children, interactions with children, and the utilisation of unstructured play materials.

Keywords

John Dewey, theory of pragmatism, children, autonomy support

Education's overarching goal has always been to foster an environment in which young children are respected and believed in, and in which they are given opportunities to exercise autonomy. The United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution in 1989 that resulted in the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Within this document, one of the fundamental principles is respecting the views of the child, which includes the child's right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child. In recent years, the right of children to autonomy has been steadily underlined by the entirety of society, and the authoritative parenting style of listening to children's viewpoints and supporting their independence has been championed by an increasing number of parents. This article explores the discovery of the content and manner of parental autonomy support, beginning with the pragmatist educational thinking of John Dewey as its point of departure.

1. The Idea Behind and the Importance of Autonomy Support

According to Bao et al. (2005), one of the most important tenets of the self-determination theory is the concept of autonomy support. Self-determination is defined as a person's ability to make free choices based on an in-depth comprehension of their own requirements and the surrounding environment. It centres on the recipient's sense that "I am the master of my actions" and the habit of "I decide my

things”. According to Clark and Ladd (2000), autonomy support can be defined within the framework of family parenting as a parent’s affirmative response to a child’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. Specific actions that encourage parental autonomy include respecting the kid’s ideas and feelings, explaining to the child the underlying reasons for parental directives, avoiding being unduly restrictive in requests, and offering the child with choices (Joussemet, 2008). In terms of the instruction that instructors provide, Deci et al. (1985) described teacher autonomy behaviours as respect for students, allowing students to express their inner wants, and encouraging students to accept and respect their own inner states, preferences, and expectations. These are all examples of respect that teachers show for their students. According to the research carried out by Chen (2015), the concept of teacher autonomy support can be summed up as the following: comprehending students, decreasing coercive behaviours, and providing the opportunity for choice.

The provision of enough autonomy support by family members is associated with the development of young children’s socio-emotional capacities, as well as their social behaviours and cognitive abilities. Specifically, providing support for parental autonomy helps young children’s self-esteem, basic psychological needs, sense of competence, and sense of belonging (Quested, 2010; Yang, 2013). Grolnick’s study from 1991 found that the child’s perception of self-competence increased along with the level of parental autonomy support, which in turn led to the child having more freedom of choice in the activities they participated in. Studies conducted by Gagne (2003), Bureau (2014), and Tuggle (2014) found that parental autonomy support could have a favourable effect on early children’s honesty, peer interactions, and pro-social behaviour. These are all factors that are important for children’s healthy growth and development.

Students can improve their learning results with the assistance of support for parental autonomy. It has been demonstrated that the degree to which parents encourage their children’s autonomy in parenting is related to the degree to which their children adjust to school (Joussemet, 2008). According to Chen (2019) and Wang (2020), when teachers encourage students’ autonomy, it not only strengthens students’ psychological resilience and pleasant academic emotions, but also stimulates students’ active motivation and independent learning behaviours. The research conducted by Zheng (2011) demonstrated that as opposed to being pushed to do so, individuals are able to use less energy and experience less of an ego-wasting impact when they are more self-supporting. Therefore, autonomy support promotes more effective use of one’s body energy and enhances one’s capacity for learning.

2. What are the Aspects of Providing Young Children with Autonomy Support?

According to Dewey, education is the process of developing people’s basic reasoning and attitudes about nature and human beings. At the same time, Dewey felt that in order for humans to be able to deal with the difficulties of their surrounding environment, they need to have knowledge. The ability of young children to feel self-determined and to solve problems can assist them in coping with the stresses and strains that are brought on by the external world. As a result, adults can develop young children’s

sense of self-determination and problem-solving skills through autonomy support.

2.1 Fostering a Sense of Autonomy

People are independent, engaged, and self-constructed in their lives. According to Dewey, a practitioner has interest when the outcome of the thing is so relevant to the practitioner that the practitioner does what he can to influence the course of the thing; and when a person tries to do a thing and the thing can be felt to act in turn on that person, that practitioner has experience. Dewey is a proponent of the objective of obtaining mental and spiritual autonomy for the human being. Knowledge and experience should be able to be acquired by individuals on the basis of their own autonomous, practical, and rational reasoning.

Self-determination refers to the free choice that an individual makes while being fully aware of his or her own requirements and circumstances. On the one hand, positive parental autonomy support can improve children's and adolescents' sense of choice, stimulate intrinsic motivation to do things, which in turn promotes positive integrative strategies in the face of negative emotions and fewer inhibitory strategies, improves adolescents' self-esteem, and reduces the likelihood of depression (Brenning, 2015; Grolnick, 2007). Young children's self-esteem and fundamental psychological needs will be satisfied appropriately when there is a high degree of support for parental autonomy. This will be accompanied by a sense of competence, which will lead them to believe that they are capable of finding solutions to difficulties. On the other hand, a lack of support for children and teenagers' autonomy from their parents can raise the risk of depression in these age groups. According to Gong & Wang (2021), parental autonomy support is a predictor of emotion regulation capacity as well as self-esteem during emerging adulthood. What's more, teachers who create an environment that is supportive of autonomy in learning have the ability to make children feel comfortable and at ease in their learning activities. As a result, children are more inclined to take on tough material and persevere in difficult learning tasks (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Therefore, cultivating a sense of self-determination in young children can enable them to experience the feeling of self-determination, which in turn enables them to be interested in, think about, and gain experience on their own.

2.2 Fostering Problem-Solving Skills

Dewey's pragmatist thought holds that man's rational conception serves practice and emphasises knowledge as a means of thinking. At the same time, Dewey was against the dualism of the mind and the body, as well as the conflict between knowing and doing, as well as the opposition between the individual and society. Hence, the cultivation of autonomy support in early children can be attained by engaging them in experiential learning activities within authentic contexts, thereby equipping them with the necessary information and skills to navigate future challenges.

The cultivation of positive problem-solving skills in young children has been shown to have a beneficial impact on their ability to effectively navigate problems and promote overall well-being. The practice of self-support facilitates the optimal utilisation of physical energy, augments the process of acquiring knowledge, and strengthens the ability of young children to adapt and strategize for future

endeavours. According to research that was published in 2008 by Joussemet, parental autonomy support not only helps relieve and avoid weariness in early children by regulating their emotions, but it also has a favourable correlation with young children's future academic and social adjustment while they are in primary school.

The negative problem-solving approaches exhibited by young children contribute to their heightened sense of overwhelm when confronted with subsequent challenges. Passive coping and venting are two instances of inadequate strategies employed in problem-solving. Passive coping methods refer to situations where individuals engage in avoidance or inaction as a response to misfortune. Marusak et al. (2018) did a study that revealed a negative association between the level of parental psychological control and the activity in the left forebrain insula of children when confronted with emotional conflict. Moreover, it was observed that children who had elevated levels of parental psychological control exhibited quicker response times, but their accuracy was compromised, and they displayed a greater tendency towards avoidance behaviours. Furthermore, the emotional expression observed in venting tactics tends to be unregulated and impulsive. Roth and Ryan (2019) posits that parents that exhibit controlling behaviours tend to promote increased utilisation of venting emotion regulation strategies in their children. Consequently, children who adopt such strategies are more prone to experiencing subjective misery and encountering rejection from their peers.

3. How Can We Encourage Young Children to Develop Their Own Autonomy?

When it comes to teaching young children how to solve problems, the most important role players are the children's parents and instructors. Parents and instructors have a huge impact on the development of children's feeling of self-determination and ability to solve problems since young children need to be nurtured and schooled in real-life settings.

3.1 Establish a Correct Child View to Help the Child Discover "Autonomy".

Dewey held high regard for children and placed significant stress on the significance of equipping them with information in order to adequately prepare them for future experiential and environmental obstacles, hence fostering their success. The youngster ought to refrain from engaging in purposeless actions solely driven by external directives, as well as avoid responding in a purely automatic manner to the stimuli of the external surroundings. Children possess their own unique lives and exhibit a distinct pattern of growth that is tailored to their individual needs. The education of children is thus an ongoing process characterised by reorganisation, transformation, and conversion, rather than a passive receptacle awaiting the infusion of knowledge and moral values. Based on Qusted's (2010) findings, it can be inferred that children whose parents possess an accurate understanding of their child's characteristics and offer substantial support for their child's independence are more inclined to exhibit respect towards their peers. Additionally, these children tend to develop a sense of competence, fostering the belief in their ability to independently resolve difficulties.

We have a responsibility as parents to do everything in our ability to respect young children and their

autonomy as human beings, and adults should make every effort to listen to children's viewpoints. Put yourself on an equal footing with the child and listen carefully to what he or she has to say about what they think, why they think it, and what they want. Adults may conclude that the child has his or her own reasoning, and that some of the value assessments made by adults are erroneous and too far removed from the child's perspective. Children have a responsibility and a right to think about and respond to issues that are important to them, and they must be shown how to do so. It is critical to pay attention to children so that they can become conscious of their own lives and leaders of their own journeys, which begins in childhood and continues into maturity.

3.2 Use Suitable Engagement Approaches to Help Children Acquire "Autonomy"

Dewey posited the viewpoint that human beings are an integral element inside the world, which undergoes continuous self-formation. The construction process necessitates the active involvement of the constructor, who actively undergoes the process, and the outcome of this transformative action impacts the constructor's own self. The acquisition of experience is an intentional and empirical endeavour. The daily activities of early children are significantly influenced by their interactions with parents, making parents a crucial factor in the development of young children's self-construction.

Mageau (2015) presents six distinct perspectives that parents might examine when contemplating how to enhance their support for young children's autonomy. One potential approach is to offer a range of alternatives to the child. For instance, when acquiring a school bag, parents can present the child with multiple possibilities within a specified price range, rather than making a decision solely based on their own preferences. The subsequent stage involves elucidating to the youngster the fundamental rationales behind the parent's directives. For instance, when the child is prompted to consume food during the evening, it is advisable for the parent to refrain from merely instructing the child with the statement "You must eat tonight." Instead, the parent should engage in a conversation with the child, elucidating the underlying rationales that establish a connection between eating and physical growth. Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge the child's perspective and emotions. When a child receives criticism from a teacher within the school environment and has discomfort as a result, parents have the ability to demonstrate empathy towards the child. This can be achieved by expressing understanding towards the child's difficulty in coping with criticism and providing them with comforting words of encouragement. Furthermore, the potential impact on the child's well-being should be considered. For instance, if the child is consistently expected to achieve top rankings in all endeavours, it could result in an undue amount of psychological stress and an excessive focus on performance outcomes. In addition to the aforementioned points, it is imperative for parents to take into account two more variables pertaining to their interactions with their children: the presence of punitive measures and the utilisation of guilt-inducing criticism. Simultaneously, it is possible for parents to cultivate a democratic familial environment and engage in introspection and enhancement of their level of support for their children's autonomy on a consistent basis (Roth & Ryan, 2019). This facilitates the development of effective emotion control strategies among youngsters within an environment that promotes autonomy and

avoids judgement.

3.3 Creative Use of Authentic Circumstances and Unstructured Play Materials to Help Kids Build “Autonomy”

Dewey posited that the primary objective of education was to establish an environment that would engender the child's intrinsic curiosity and engagement with the educational contents. Additionally, he believed that the materials employed serve just as a vehicle to achieve a desired outcome, rather than as a method to address the teacher's repetitive exercises. The typist, whose role entails conveying their thoughts, utilises the typewriter as a means to synchronise the cognitive processes occurring in their mind with the manual actions performed by their hands. This enables the typist to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of communicating their ideas. Moreover, Dewey maintained the perspective that the significance of materials lay not in the initial knowledge acquired by a young kid and then applied to these things, but rather in the inherent qualities and discoveries that the child encounters within the materials themselves. In the context of kindergarten, children engage in play activities that involve the utilisation of meticulously designed materials. These materials serve the purpose of directly imparting knowledge about material applications to children, thereby qualifying as material applications. Conversely, children also engage in play activities that involve the use of rudimentary, unadorned, and unprocessed materials. These activities necessitate children to actively process and imagine potential material applications, thus qualifying as material discoveries.

Kindergartens can focus on the use of unstructured play when designing various types of corners and organizing activities for children. Imagine that a food street opens and that teachers put a lot of work into creating the right atmosphere. In such a scenario, it is possible that the youngsters possess the setting and inclination, yet the cognitive stimulation they receive within this context is inadequate. The children who assume the role of cooks are alone responsible for the tasks of receiving and arranging the food items. What's more, the children assigned as servers are exclusively engaged in vocally communicating with clients, managing transactions, and directing customers to exit the premises. Conversely, educators have the capacity to provide students with less rigid materials and assignments that incorporate a multitude of open-ended inquiries or scenarios. In this scenario, children have the opportunity to engage in exploratory activities pertaining to several subjects, including the operational hours and organisational structure of stores, the contents of menus, and appropriate actions to take. Additionally, they can also delve into the realm of character costumes. The utilisation of raw resources can facilitate the implementation of John Dewey's cognitive development theory, which encompasses the stages of observation and assimilation of knowledge, critical thinking to devise solutions for challenges, practical application of those ideas, and subsequent evaluation of their efficacy. Field trips, which are led by educators, also provide students with valuable opportunities to participate in genuine experiential learning. For example, young individuals may come across vehicles that have been unlawfully parked in contravention of the local no-parking regulation. Teachers have the capacity to capitalise on the educational opportunity presented by the current circumstances, employing strategies

such as posing thought-provoking inquiries like “What motivates individuals to engage in illegal activities?” and “Does the coherence of this signage warrant scrutiny?” In an alternative approach, educators have the opportunity to guide students in conducting interviews, engaging in discussions, and collaborating with parents and community leaders to address the issue of indiscriminate parking. The cultivation of young children’s inclination towards social interaction can be facilitated through the implementation of these activities, ultimately leading to the progressive development of autonomy in them.

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