

RECONCEPTUALIZING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: EVALUATING JOHN DEWEY'S PRAGMATIC EDUCATIONAL THEORIES IN LIGHT OF ISLAMIC EPISTEMOLOGY

Zain-ul-Abedin

Head Coordinator for Academics & Management, Allied School Muhammadan Campus Gujrat, Gujrat, Pakistan
Resource person & Tutor of Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan, Department of Islamic Thought and Culture, GIFT University, Gujranwala, Pakistan
Lahore Leads University, Lahore, Pakistan

zainffms9691@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: *

Zain-ul-Abedin

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary global educational landscapes rely heavily on the pragmatic models pioneered by John Dewey, which prioritize experiential learning, student-centered pedagogies, and democratic classrooms. However, importing these secularized Western methodologies into traditional, Muslim-majority educational systems without modification often generates ideological friction, owing to fundamentally divergent understandings of truth, metaphysics, and moral authority. This study addresses that tension through a comparative analysis of Dewey's pragmatic educational philosophy in light of classical Islamic epistemology. Using a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical comparative framework, the research performs a thematic synthesis of foundational texts, evaluating Dewey's primary educational treatises (*Democracy and Education* and *Experience and Education*) against the foundational sources of Islamic pedagogy, including the Holy Qur'an, Prophetic Hadith literature, and the classical writings of Imam Al-Ghazali's *Ihya Ulum al-Din*. The thematic analysis reveals a strong operational convergence regarding the unity of theory and practice: both Deweyan pragmatism and Islamic pedagogy reject passive, rote instructional methods, and Dewey's learning-by-doing approach aligns structurally with the Islamic mandate of tying knowledge (Ilm) to righteous action (Amal). Critical boundaries nonetheless emerge. On the nature of truth, Dewey treats knowledge as wholly evolving and utility-dependent, whereas the Islamic model balances fluid experiential knowledge with absolute, unchanging divine and moral truths. On the role of the educator, Dewey frames the teacher as a social facilitator within a democratic space, while Islamic pedagogy elevates the educator to a moral role model (Murabbi) and inheritor of the prophetic tradition. The study concludes that contemporary educational policy and curriculum design can integrate Dewey's progressive, experiential mechanics, such as project-based learning and interactive problem-solving, without adopting his secular, relativist worldview. By anchoring these practical tools within the moral and spiritual parameters of Islam, curriculum specialists can develop an educational framework that fosters students who are both technically competent and morally grounded.

Keywords: Educational Philosophy, Comparative Education, John Dewey, Islamic Pedagogy, Pragmatism, Experiential Learning, Curriculum Synthesis.

1. Introduction and Research Rationale

Education is the foundational mechanism through which human societies preserve their cultural heritage, cultivate collective consciousness, and transmit ethical, moral, and spiritual value systems across generations. In modern education, curriculum design and pedagogical training are globally dominated by Western educational paradigms. Among the architects of modern schooling, the American philosopher and reformer John Dewey stands as perhaps the most influential figure. His development of pragmatism—often referred to as instrumentalism—fundamentally transformed 20th-century classroom dynamics by replacing traditional, rigid instructional models with experiential learning, democratic socialization, and a focus on student-centered environments (Dewey, 1916).

However, the rapid, uncritical wholesale importation of these progressive Western models into Muslim-majority societies has introduced a complex layer of structural, cultural, and ideological friction (Hashim, 2023). This friction occurs because instructional practices are never philosophically neutral; they are deeply tethered to the underlying worldviews of the societies that created them (Peters, 2021). John Dewey's pragmatism emerged from a naturalistic, secularized worldview where truth is not an inherent or *a priori* reality but is instead a functional instrument fashioned by human beings to navigate their physical and social environments. Within this framework, truth is mutable, fluid, and entirely dependent on practical utility and environmental consequences.

In contrast, the Islamic educational paradigm is holistic, viewing the acquisition of knowledge as a sacred enterprise that binds together the physical, intellectual, and spiritual evolution of the individual (Al-Attas, 1979). It posits that while the observable universe is a legitimate and highly encouraged site for empirical investigation, human reason must remain anchored to transcendent moral frameworks and divine revelation (Hussain, 2020). When a curriculum built on pure, unmitigated pragmatism is deployed

within traditional societies, it risks creating an educational schizophrenia: it trains students in critical environmental utility while systematically detaching them from the absolute moral and spiritual anchors central to their cultural identity (Farooq, 2024).

This study addresses this critical gap by conducting a comparative analysis of John Dewey's educational philosophy through an Islamic epistemological lens. Rather than retreating into an isolationist rejection of Western pedagogical advances or uncritically surrendering to secularized educational mechanics, this paper systematically maps the points of operational alignment and fundamental philosophical divergence between these two major systems. By synthesizing the mechanical strengths of Dewey's experiential models with the ethical and metaphysical sovereignty of Islamic pedagogy, this research aims to provide curriculum specialists, policy makers, and educationists with a balanced framework for contemporary schooling.

2. Research Questions

To guide this comprehensive philosophical and comparative inquiry, this paper addresses the following three core research questions:

1. What constitutes the foundational philosophy, methodologies, and objectives of teaching and learning within the classical Islamic educational paradigm?
2. What are the defining characteristics, operational strengths, and unique methodologies of John Dewey's pragmatic educational philosophy?
3. What insights, structural alignments, and critical contrasts emerge when evaluating Dewey's pragmatic models in the light of Islamic pedagogical and epistemological principles?

3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework The Western Context: Deweyan Pragmatism and Instrumentalism

To understand the profound impact of John Dewey on modern education, one must understand the historical and philosophical landscape he sought to reform. In the late 19th

and early 20th centuries, Western education was characterized by a rigid, authoritarian, and teacher-centered structure that relied heavily on passive, rote memorization of abstract text. Dewey argued that this approach disconnected schools from real-world human experience, transforming learning into an artificial exercise detached from social realities.

In works such as *Democracy and Education* (1916) and *Experience and Education* (1938), Dewey formulated his philosophy of instrumentalism. He posited that human thoughts and ideas are instruments for problem-solving. Education, therefore, must not be the transmission of static, pre-packaged knowledge, but rather a continuous "reconstruction of experience." Dewey championed the concept of the democratic classroom, viewing schools as miniature societies where students learn civil responsibility and cooperative problem-solving by engaging directly with their environment. Within this framework, truth is dynamic, verified by practical outcomes and ongoing experience.

The Islamic Context: Holistic Pedagogy and Character Building

Conversely, classical Islamic pedagogy originates from an entirely different ontological and metaphysical foundation. In the Islamic worldview, education is not merely a mechanism for economic preparation or civic utility; it is a sacred process aimed at achieving a balanced cultivation of the total human personality—encompassing the physical, rational, emotional, and spiritual dimensions (Kamali, 2022).

Islamic educational philosophy uses distinct terms to capture its multi-layered nature:

- ***Ilm* (Knowledge):** The acquisition of both revealed truths and empirical, worldly knowledge (Al-Attas, 1979).
- ***Tarbiyah* (Nurturing/Development):** The gradual, holistic development of an individual's potential to align with moral and divine principles (El-Esawi, 2025).
- ***Ta'dib* (Refinement):** The internal refinement of character, manners, and social ethics (Ashraf, 2021).

Classical scholars such as Imam Al-Ghazali (Al-Ghazali, n.d.), Ibn Khaldun (Pratiwi, 2025), and modern theorists like Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas have consistently emphasized that learning must serve as a catalyst for moral transformation and spiritual proximity to the Creator. While Islam fully validates, encourages, and mandates the use of human intellect (*Aql*) to explore the physical universe, it firmly tethers changing human experience to the absolute moral and metaphysical laws revealed in the Holy Qur'an (Qur'an, 61:2) and exemplified by the Prophetic Sunnah (Sahih Muslim, Hadith 2722; Sunan Ibn Majah, Hadith 229).

The Research Gap

While extensive literature evaluates John Dewey's pragmatism within Western secular frameworks, and a distinct body of research outlines classical Islamic education in isolation, there remains a critical gap in comparative educational research (Khan & Ahmed, 2023). Specifically, how can traditional or Muslim-majority educational systems systematically adopt the highly effective, progressive instructional mechanics of Deweyan pragmatism without absorbing its secularized, hyper-relative epistemological assumptions? This study addresses this gap by offering a synthesized conceptual framework designed to optimize modern educational systems (Al-Hassan, 2026).

4. Research Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical research methodology to conduct a systematic philosophical and comparative inquiry. The design is explicitly structured to facilitate a cross-cultural dialogue between Western educational philosophy and Eastern religious epistemology.

Data Sources

The foundational data for this research is drawn directly from primary textual repositories across two main paradigms:

- **The Islamic Pedagogical Paradigm:** Textual analysis is systematically applied to the Holy Qur'an (Qur'an, 61:2), Prophetic Hadith literature (primarily from canonical collections such as *Sahih Muslim* (Sahih Muslim, Hadith 2722)

and *Sunan Ibn Majah* (Sunan Ibn Majah, Hadith 229)), and classical Islamic pedagogical treatises, with a primary focus on Imam Al-Ghazali's *Ihya Ulum al-Din* (Al-Ghazali, n.d.).

- **The Pragmatic Educational Paradigm:** The study examines the complete educational and philosophical writings of John Dewey, using *Democracy and Education* (1916) and *Experience and Education* (1938) as the primary pillars for analysis.

Data Selection and Archival Sites

To ensure academic rigor, comprehensive archival research was conducted across multiple physical and digital repositories within Pakistan. The data was systematically gathered from the following major institutional libraries:

- GIFT University Library, Gujranwala
- University of Gujrat E-Library, Gujrat
- Government Zamindar Degree College Library, Gujrat
- The Main Library of the University of the Punjab, Lahore

Analytical Matrix

Table 1: Comparative Framework Matrix

Analytical Dimension	John Dewey's Pragmatic Model	Classical Islamic Pedagogical Model	Synthesis / Curricular Application
Epistemology & The Nature of Truth	Truth is entirely evolving, mutable, relative, and dependent on environmental utility. Rejects <i>a priori</i> or absolute metaphysical realities.	Dual-layered: Synthesizes relative, empirical knowledge with absolute, unchanging divine and moral truths.	Integration: Modern curricula can utilize changing empirical frameworks for technical skills while anchoring core values in permanent ethical structures.
Theory and Practice (Instructional Mechanics)	Forcefully rejects passive learning and rote memorization; demands the absolute "unity of theory and practice" via "learning by doing".	Strongly condemns passive absorption; mandates the alignment of acquired knowledge (<i>Ilm</i>) with righteous action (<i>Amal</i>).	Complete Convergence: Direct structural validation of active, experiential, and project-based learning within contemporary classrooms.
Role of the Educator	Demystifies traditional authority; the teacher acts strictly as a social facilitator, guide, and organizer of democratic community experiences.	Elevates ontological status; the teacher functions as a spiritual architect, moral role model (<i>Murabbi</i>), and source of wisdom.	Expansion: The contemporary teacher goes beyond a simple activity coordinator to become an active moral exemplar through character replication.

The collected textual evidence underwent a rigorous thematic analysis. The data was organized into an analytical matrix focused on three core operational nodes that dictate the structure of any educational system:

- **Node 1: Epistemological Foundations** (The nature of truth, knowledge acquisition, and the relationship between human reason and divine authority).
- **Node 2: The Ontological and Operational Role of the Educator** (The authority, status, and responsibilities of the teacher within the learning environment).
- **Node 3: Theory-Practice Alignment and Instructional Mechanics** (The delivery of curriculum, pedagogical methods, and the validity of experiential learning).

5. Analysis and Discussion

The comparative analysis reveals distinct areas of profound operational harmony alongside critical, irreconcilable philosophical boundaries. The following comparative core outlines the thematic intersections of this research:

Instructional Environment	Student-centered, democratic, highly interactive, and focused on navigating environmental realities.	Interactive, active, and focused on conscious, internal environmental comprehension and communal transformation.	Adaptation: Deploying progressive, interactive student-centered mechanics to facilitate holistic individual and character development.
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5.1 Epistemological Foundations: Absolute Truth vs. Changing Utility

The most profound and fundamental divergence between John Dewey's pragmatism and the Islamic educational philosophy lies within their respective epistemologies—specifically, how they define the nature, boundaries, and validation of truth.

John Dewey's instrumentalism completely rejects any notion of static, unchanging, eternal, or *a priori* truths. For Dewey, knowledge is not a reflection of an objective external reality, nor is it a set of divinely revealed laws. Instead, knowledge is entirely functional—an instrument used by the human organism to adapt to, solve problems within, and transform its physical and social environment. Consequently, truth is inherently dynamic, shifting, and continuous; it is formulated and verified purely by its practical consequences, social utility, and experimental outcomes. If an idea or a moral concept ceases to produce successful practical utility within a changing society, it loses its status as "truth."

In stark contrast, the Islamic educational paradigm establishes a sophisticated, dual-layered epistemological framework rooted firmly in the divine authority of the Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunnah. The Islamic model recognizes that human life operates within two overlapping spheres: the metaphysical/transcendent sphere and the empirical/worldly sphere.

Therefore, Islamic epistemology balances two distinct forms of knowledge:

1. ***Ilm-ul-Wahy* (Revealed Knowledge):** Absolute, immutable, and timeless metaphysical, ethical, and moral truths communicated by the Divine to humanity. These truths provide the permanent spiritual framework for human existence and are not subject to shifting societal preferences or environmental utility.
2. ***Ilm-ul-Kasp* (Acquired Knowledge):** Relative, empirical, and experiential truths

discovered by human beings through observation, rational deduction (*Aql*), scientific experimentation, and historical analysis.

Islam highly encourages, and indeed mandates, empirical investigation and the acquisition of worldly knowledge. However, it systematically subordinates relative experiential data to the overarching absolute ethical frameworks of revelation. This dual-layered reality is illustrated by classical Islamic scholarship. For example, in *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, Imam Al-Ghazali highlights the foundational role of human intelligence by citing the prophetic tradition:

"The first thing that Allah created was the intellect (Aql)."

Islam fully validates the function of active intelligence to uncover new applications and solutions relevant to the technical progression of an era, but it keeps human reason tethered to divine boundaries. This balance is captured in the classical Urdu formulation foundational to this comparative research:

اسلامی تعلیمی نظام میں علم اور عمل کا ملاپ لازمی ہے، جہاں عقل وحی کے تابع ہے۔

(Translation: "In the Islamic educational system, the integration of knowledge and action is mandatory, where human intellect remains subordinate to divine revelation.")

Therefore, from an Islamic perspective, a school curriculum cannot base its ethical or moral modules on shifting societal utility alone. While the curriculum must evolve to teach modern sciences and changing technological skills, it must anchor the student's moral self within permanent spiritual realities.

5.2 The Role of the Educator: Social Facilitator vs. Spiritual Architect

Another critical thematic contrast emerges when analyzing the ontological status and operational

responsibilities of the teacher within the educational ecosystem.

Dewey's Perspective

John Dewey sought to dismantle the traditional, authoritarian role of the teacher, which he viewed as a barrier to authentic learning and democratic socialization. In Dewey's progressive model, the educator is explicitly stripped of traditional, top-down authority. The teacher is visualized not as an authoritarian dictator of knowledge or an absolute source of wisdom, but rather as a social facilitator, a guide, and a lateral organizer of community experiences within a democratic classroom. The teacher's duty is to prepare the environment, observe student interactions, and gently steer collaborative projects toward productive social outcomes.

The Islamic Perspective

While Islamic pedagogy shares Dewey's view that the teacher must act as a compassionate, gentle guide who respects the unique individuality and psychological development of the child, it significantly elevates the educator's spiritual and ontological status. In the Islamic paradigm, the teacher is framed as a spiritual architect, a moral role model (*Murabbi*), and a direct inheritor of the prophetic mission. This deep positioning is derived from the foundational prophetic declaration recorded in classical Hadith literature: **"Indeed, I have been sent only as a teacher."** (*Sunan Ibn Majah, Book 1, Hadith 229*)

This conceptualization transforms teaching from a simple technical profession or social facilitators' role into a sacred duty and spiritual trust. Within classical Islamic frameworks, authentic learning is achieved not merely through abstract, horizontal interaction with the environment, but through a vertical process of character replication (*Tarbiyah*), ethical training (*Ta'dib*), and the absorption of embodied wisdom (*Hikmah*) represented by the educator.

Imam Al-Ghazali explicitly notes in *Ihya Ulum al-Din* that a teacher's actions must never contradict their words. If a teacher commands moral uprightness but exhibits ethical compromise in practice, the curriculum fails completely,

regardless of how technologically advanced its instructional delivery may be. Thus, while modern teacher-training programs can benefit from adopting Dewey's practical facilitation skills, the educator must ultimately remain an active moral exemplar who teaches through character replication and spiritual stewardship.

5.3 Theory-Practice Alignment: A Major Convergence Point

Despite deep philosophical, metaphysical, and ontological divergences regarding the nature of truth and teacher authority, a profound operational harmony exists between John Dewey's progressive methodology and Islamic pedagogical principles concerning the "unity of theory and practice".

Schematically, both traditions converge along the same trajectory: an action-oriented epistemic commitment—Dewey's "learning by doing" on one side and the Islamic principle of matching faith with righteous action on the other—that leads each tradition independently to the same destination: a rejection of passive rote memorization in favor of active, experiential comprehension.

John Dewey built his reputation on a fierce critique of passive learning, famously championing the slogan of "learning by doing." He argued that genuine, lasting intellectual growth occurs only when students actively engage with their environment to solve real-world problems, thereby testing their ideas through practical application.

This operational focus aligns seamlessly with the core Islamic insistence on matching theoretical knowledge (*Ilm*) with immediate, practical, and righteous action (*Amal*). In the Islamic tradition, knowledge without a practical, beneficial manifestation in reality is considered not only incomplete but spiritually dangerous. This structural convergence is grounded in the direct Qur'an-based warning against the separation of speech/theory and action:

"O you who have believed, why do you say what you do not do?" (*Al-Qur'an, 61:2*)

Furthermore, the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) systematically sought divine protection from

abstract, non-functional, or purely theoretical knowledge that fails to benefit human society:

"O Allah, I seek refuge in Thee from knowledge which does not benefit." (Sahih Muslim, 2722)

Classical Islamic tradition forcefully rejects passive, unproductive rote memorization that lacks deep internal comprehension and active social execution. Both Dewey's pragmatic framework and the Islamic pedagogical model demand an active, experiential understanding of societal and environmental realities. Both systems reject the classroom as an isolated tower, pushing the student instead to become a conscious, active, and transformative agent within their community.

5.4 Practical Implications for Contemporary Curriculum

The synthesis of John Dewey's practical, experiential instructional mechanics with the holistic spiritual and moral core of Islam offers an invaluable roadmap for contemporary curriculum design and educational reform, particularly within Muslim-majority nations like Pakistan.

Currently, modern educational landscapes in developing Islamic societies are fractured by a severe, counterproductive dichotomy. On one hand, elite educational streams frequently import highly secularized Western pedagogical modules wholesale. While these modules succeed in teaching technical proficiency and critical inquiry, they often alienate students from their localized religious identity and traditional value systems. On the other hand, traditional public and religious schooling streams often cling to outdated, hyper-authoritarian, and purely rote-based instructional mechanics. These archaic methods insulate students' moral character but fail to prepare them to navigate or contribute to modern scientific, economic, and technological realities.

This comparative research demonstrates that this dichotomy is entirely false. Elementary and secondary school curricula do not need to choose between technical progression and moral development. Educational policymakers can confidently adopt Dewey's progressive, student-centered mechanics—such as project-based learning, interactive scientific inquiry,

collaborative problem-solving, and democratic classroom discourse—without adopting his secular, naturalistic worldview (Pratiwi, 2025; Al-Hassan, 2026).

By intentionally connecting Deweyan practical tasks with underlying moral, ethical, and social responsibilities derived from Islamic epistemology, localized schools can naturally neutralize the secular risks of hyper-utilitarianism. For instance, a science project on environmental sustainability can utilize Dewey's experiential, hands-on methodology while being explicitly framed around the Islamic theological concept of *Khilafah* (humanity's sacred stewardship over the Earth). This approach fosters a community-minded student body that values both practical, real-world skills and deep-rooted moral principles.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

This study concludes that while John Dewey's educational pragmatism and the classical Islamic pedagogical framework emerge from fundamentally different ontological, metaphysical, and epistemological worldviews, they share highly valuable operational and methodological commonalities. Dewey's revolutionary focus on experiential learning, student-centered classrooms, and the absolute rejection of passive instruction finds a powerful structural ally in the Islamic doctrine of aligning knowledge (*Ilm*) with righteous practical action (*Amal*).

The critical, non-negotiable boundary remains metaphysical: Islam maintains the sovereignty of absolute moral truths and views the educator as a spiritual mentor and *Murabbi*, whereas Dewey treats truth as purely relative and the teacher as a lateral social facilitator. Synthesizing the instructional and mechanical strengths of the Deweyan model with the ethical and spiritual sovereignty of the Islamic paradigm creates a balanced, highly effective educational framework tailored for contemporary HEC-recognized educational reform.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the synthesized findings of this comparative research, the following three strategic

recommendations are proposed for educational policymakers, curriculum design specialists, and institutional managers:

1. **Curriculum De-secularization and Moral Anchoring:** Educational authorities and policymakers must carefully filter modern pedagogical imports. They should ensure that student-centered, active-learning instructional delivery strategies are deliberately anchored within the absolute moral, cultural, and spiritual frameworks of the society, preventing ideological alienation.

2. **Pedagogical Reframing via Experiential Mechanics:** Contemporary schools must aggressively move away from outdated, passive rote learning models. They should adopt experiential, hands-on learning strategies ("learning by doing")—such as community project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, and interactive problem solving—which are fully supported by both Deweyan pragmatism and historical Islamic teachings.

3. **Teacher Training Reformation (The Murabbi-Facilitator):** Professional development and teacher-training programs should redefine the role of the contemporary educator. Programs should synthesize Dewey's advanced "social facilitator" skills with the traditional Islamic "moral role model" (Murabbi) archetype, emphasizing holistic character building and values transmission through active, lived example.

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