

# The Social Perspective of John Dewey's Philosophy of Education and its Inspirations

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## Abstract

As heated topics in the history of philosophy of education, John Dewey's Philosophy of Education is the topic of zeitgeist. This paper aimed at thinking John Dewey's Philosophy of Education from social perspective in order to play an important role for china's education in the research of philosophy of education and educational practice. The paper is divided into four parts. The first part depicts the theoretical and realistic significance of the research. The second part deeply analyses John Dewey's Philosophy of Education ideas and explore his social perspectives from two aspects. The third part illustrates the inspiration of Dewey's social perspectives in the philosophy of education. The fourth part summarizes the research.

## Keywords

John Dewey; Philosophy of education; Social perspective.

## 1. Introduction

John Dewey was the most influential philosopher and educator in the 20th century in America. In his brilliant academic career, on the one hand, he was deeply pondering the social phenomena and social problems; on the other hand, he was thoroughly studying American education at that time. And finally formed his philosophy of education. Therefore, it can be said that John Dewey's philosophy of education actually did in-depth research in a broader social perspective. We believe that it has enlightenment meaning for our research in philology of education and the development of education practice to analyze and interpret John Dewey's philosophy of education. There are the most important significances of studying the social perspective of John Dewey's philosophy of education. John Dewey advocated that education is not personal career; but the social and public education is generated from the need of society is a social activity. It is the most effective tool of social evolution. [1] Therefore, we should study education from social perspective. Anyhow, education inevitably establishes extensive contact with the society. so education research should not confine in the ivory town; but deep into the wide range of society. Obviously, Dewey's philosophy of education has a broad social perspective. From this point, it has important theoretical significance to explore Dewey's philosophy of education from social perspective for our current education research.

## 2. The Social Perspective of John Dewey's Philosophy of Education

John Dewey made a deep thinking towards his era. He saw education from angle of social development. His pursuit of philosophy of education is to construct an ideal society through education. The followings are the contents of John Dewey's philosophy of education.

## **2.1. From the Inquiry and Criticism to Traditional Education, to Look at the Social Perspective of John Dewey's Philosophy of Education**

### **2.1.1. The Inquiry of John Dewey's Philosophy of Education Into Traditional Education**

John Dewey was dissatisfied with traditional courses, teaching methods and the relationship between students and teachers in his era. He thought that the characteristic of traditional education was formalism. The school life, curriculum and teaching method isn't fit for the change of social life. The school education was severely separated from social life. Students just passively accepted textbooks. Students can't exert their initiative and enthusiasm under teachers' control. Students

Personalities are also suppressed. Meanwhile, he pointed out in his book *School and Society*: We construct our education activities by ordinary classroom, rows of ugly desks, the same size desks large walls. [2] And education activities are just listening. He criticized that traditional curriculum was the center of education, regardless of children experience and the need of society.

### **2.1.2. The Criticism of John Dewey's Philosophy of Education to Traditional Education**

Dewey explicitly pointed out that social life had great change. But school life can't keep pace with society.[3] In Dewey's eye , only when the school and social life combined together, can school become an ideal education place because students can deeply understand the facts ,concepts and principles in social situation. Whereas, that school life became a boring place and made learning become a dull and mechanical thing as a result of its separation from social life. In this way, school is unable to realize its real purpose. The traditional curriculum was isolated from students' needs and real life as a result of its leaving students ability and world. At the same time, teaching materials of various disciplines were composed according to the adult arrangement and judgment. These materials were only related to the past, not represent nowadays society and future. [4] This lead to students paying more attention to memory, recitation and examination, having no opportunity to experience social life. [5] This kind of teaching pattern not only influenced the development of students spirits, but also killed children initiative and creativity.

The new school system envisaged by Dewey was to take over the functions and compensate for the losses sustained by the crumbling of the old institutions, The school must be made into a social center capable of participating in the daily life of the community and make up in part to the child for the decay of dogmatic and fixed methods of social discipline and for the loss of reverence and the influence of authority. Children were to get from the public school whatever was missing in their lives elsewhere that was essential for their balanced development as members of a democratic country.

He therefore urged that manual training, science, nature-study, art and similar subjects be given precedence over reading, writing and arithmetic (the traditional three R's) in the primary curriculum. The problems raised by the exercise of the child's motor powers in constructive work would lead naturally.

Although Dewey asserted that activities involving the energetic side of the child's nature should take first place in primary education, he objected to early specialized training or technical segregation in the public schools which was dictated, not by the individual needs or personal preferences of the growing youth, but by external interests.

School should give every child the chance to grow up spontaneously, harmoniously and all-sidedly. it will aim at such a reorganization of existing schools as will give all pupils a genuine respect for useful work, an ability to render service, and a contempt for social parasites whether they are called tramps or leaders of 'society.' "Such a definition did not please those who looked upon themselves as preordained to the command posts of the social system.

Each stage of child development has its own dominant needs, problems, modes of behavior and reasoning. These special traits required their own methods of teaching and learning which had to provide the basis for the educational curriculum.

Dewey extended that each grade ought to be child-centered, not externally oriented, he taught. The actual interests of the child must be discovered if the significance and worth of his life is to be taken into account and full development achieved. Each subject must fulfill present needs of growing children. The education is to rob the child of the intrinsic joy of childhood involved in living each single day. Children must not be treated as miniature adults or merely as means for ministering to adult needs, now or later.

Interest, not outside pressure, mobilizes the maximum effort in acquiring knowledge as well as in performing work. The authoritarian teacher, the cut-and-dried curriculum, the uniform procession from one grade to the next and the traditional fixed seats and desks laid out in rows within the isolated and self-contained classroom were all impediments to enlightened education. [6] Whenever the occasion warranted, children should be permitted to go outdoors and enter the everyday life of their community instead of being shut up in a classroom "where each pupil sits at a screwed down desk and studies the same part of some lesson from the same textbook at the same time." The child could freely realize his capacities only in an unobstructed environment.

The child learns best through direct personal experience. In the primary stage of education these experiences should revolve around games and occupations analogous to the activities through which mankind satisfies its basic material needs for food, clothing, shelter and protection.

The school has to give children, not only an insight into the social importance of such activities, but above all the opportunities to practice them in play form. This leads naturally into the problem or "project method" which has come to be identified with the essence of the progressive procedure. The real purpose of Dewey criticism to traditional education is to guide people to focus on education problems from social perspective.

## **2.2. From the Essence of Education and School Responsibility, to Look at the Social Perspective of John Dewey's Philosophy of Education**

### **2.2.1. Education Is Essentially A Social Life**

John Dewey proposed his own unique insight: education is a social life. In his philosophy of education, he proposed that the origin of education was a kind of social life. Education should be a healthy, pure, and full of wisdom and poetic life. [7] Only when we take education as a social life, can education return its natural place. Only when education was shown a social life, can it become truly education. Oppositely, if education can't be shown as a kind of life, it will lose its foundation.

Thus it can be seen that what John Dewey said "education is a kind of social life" refers to education, this kind of social life should meet individual needs and interests. If education was not related to students' life and only take students as containers of accepting knowledge, it will severely influence students' mental and physical healthy growth. Facing with such problems, John Dewey put forward his philosophy of education from a broad social perspective which required schools adapted to social development and students needs. It demanded that education purpose, education contents, education methods ought to be accordance with society. Therefore, and education was a kind of social activity. It cultivated all kinds of talents, transmitted and preserved culture. education actually became an important part of social life. In essence, that education is a kind of social life reveals a kind of new education viewpoint. The process of education and social life was a interactive process. In the process, education should promote students progress and social development because students will be the future member of our society.

### 2.2.2. School Is A Special Social Institution

"School is namely a society". Here, Dewey required that school life is a kind of a select, purified and ideal social life. In Dewey's eyes, students can accept good education and develop students' personality in a good environmental school life. Therefore, school should not isolate from society and outside the organization .it must become a vigorous social institution. Only in such an environment, can students foster their social habits by participating in all kinds of activities and then preparing for their social life. Dewey thought that school should take the following responsibilities. First, it had to provide a simplified social environment because human civilization is too complex. Students can't absorb various complicated social content. Thus school must choose those courses which could arouse students' interests and establish a progressive order. The purpose is using simple content to understand difficult knowledge. Second, school should establish a purified environment. School is trying to eliminate those ugly phenomenon existed in our society lest affect students psychological habits. School should realize its responsibility to transfer and keep those human civilizations. School is the special social institution which guarantees the objective to complete. Third, everyone in social environment is different from each other. School should play its coordinated and balanced effects. A man from an environment turn to another environment has different judgment standard and emotional standard. It is the tendency that requires school to take balance and stability responsibilities. [8]

In the multicultural coexistence social environment, we should construct a purified cultural and social environment. Dewey's education idea more profoundly embodies the social perspective of education philosophy. He claimed that education should be closed to social reality, and then adapt to social development. Finally, education should achieve the socialization. There is no doubt that his philosophy of education showed a broad social perspective.

## 3. The Enlightenment of Social Perspective of John Dewey's Philosophy of Education to Us

### 3.1. Education Philosophy in China Should Broaden Its Social Perspective

The education philosophy research in China mainly focus on the following aspects: the first kind is to discuss education from Marxist philosophy. The second kind is to illustrate education problems from western philosophy system. The third kind is to study education from the angle of ontology. The fourth kind is to inquiry education from its value aspect. The research shows that our education philosophy made much progress and innovation in research angle, logic structure etc. However, we need to strengthen the research of social problems in social life; strengthen the attention of all classes' life. The education philosophy research in China should take social life practice as a foundation. And we need to understand the change of today's society. Education philosophy should become effective ways of connecting education with realistic social life. The current society and education required the establishment of human subjectivity and initiative in the social construction and education development. And we also should pay special attention to human life and life practice as well. Education philosophy research should reflect the existed profound change in today's era and social life and change the research of education philosophy accordingly. Hence, education philosophy should focus on the contemporary social practice and those important practical problems. Education philosophy ought to concern living condition and human living fate. The concern should be continued and full of compassion. responsibility and love. The aim is to further explain the relationship between various social life ,human fate and education activities. The aim is to further provide ideal resources for a more humanitarian and justice society. [9]Only when

education philosophy pay more attention to human and society, can education manifest its responsibilities and wisdom and can become truly education philosophy.

### **3.2. The Theory of Education Philosophy in China Should Deeply Study Education Practice**

Education philosophy in China is isolated from education practice. Shi zhongying in his book: an introduction of education philosophy research pointed out that education philosophy research in China largely separated from education practice. It can't respond all kinds of questions proposed by the deepening education reform because of education philosophy in China ignoring education practice, education value. Education philosophy in China can't obtain nutrients from education practice. [10] So education philosophy should guide people reflect upon contemporary education knowledge and make people better understand today's education. First ,education philosophy in China should criticize and reflect the existing education experience. Dewey's education philosophy based on the criticism and reflection of traditional education. Education philosophy in China should fully analyze the background, value and social basis of today's education. Through analysis and research, education philosophy can more explicitly reflect its thinking depth and its value. Second , education philosophy in China should have an overall thinking towards education and social life. Education as a social phenomenon and social activities should not isolate, but associated with various social life and experience. If education philosophy didn't pay attention to this link, you can't really understand the essence of education. Therefore , education philosophy research not only include direct or indirect education experience, but also include direct or indirect social experience.

### **3.3. Education in China Should Be Accordance with Social Life and Children's Life**

In current primary and middle school, students learning objective is aimed at the entrance examination. Exam- oriented education dominantly control school life. The purpose of school education is just to master those knowledge presented in the textbook, regardless of whether these knowledge is useful or not in our realistic society. It enables students' world only confined in school life. So student can't experience the colorful social life. Confronted with the problem of education separated from social life and children life. We should make our education adapt to social life and children life.

Education should also reflect social life. Education should express the meaning of social life. Devey said that education is a process of socialization. School is a form of social life. [11] Therefore, school education aims at making people willing to learn from the society itself in the process of social life. [12] And then education should reflect the link between realistic life and future life. Its purpose is not only to meet needs of children but also in the future. Therefore, in education practice, education should not only mirror real life but also create a beautiful and new life above the realistic life. The ultimate goal of education is to create a higher than the real life more beautiful future life. Then the value of education lies mainly in the future. Third, school curriculum and teaching should be connected with students study life, daily life and other social life. It should be a bridge which connected individual life with their social life. Therefore, the school curriculum and teaching not only conform with students development needs and the needs of social development; and importantly, combine them together. It means returning to life and transcending to life. Essentially, it made students learn freely and happily. Education is not a mode or a prison. Education should be a process of participating in a wide rage of politics, economy and culture in an equal environment. Thus students can bath the sunshine and enjoy the happiness of life. This is determined by education activities. First, we should pay attention to students' real life and their possible life. That means we should put students students as a member of social life and school education take necessary measures to enable students to

understand the social relation. And finally play an important role in the social life. In addition, education life should conform to children physical and mental rules, steadily promoting their development. What's more, education must take different students ages and stages into consideration. Education must pay attention students' individual differences, their aptitude and eventually make every student quickly improve.

#### 4. Closing

Dewey philosophy educations essentially respond American social transformation. The social perspective of Dewey's philosophy education is full of innovation because it is deeply rooted in the reality. So we can see that Dewey aimed to integrate the school with society, and the processes of learning with the actual problems of life, by a thoroughgoing application of the principles and practices of democracy. The school system would be open to all on a completely free and equal basis without any restrictions or segregation on account of color, race, creed, national origin, sex or social status. Group activity under self-direction and self-government would make the classroom a miniature republic where equality and consideration for all would prevail. [13] This type of education would have the most beneficial social consequences. It would tend to erase unjust distinctions and prejudices. It would equip children with the qualities and capacities required to cope with the problems of a fast-changing world. It would produce alert, balanced, critical-minded individuals who would continue to grow in intellectual and moral stature after graduation. For a long time, we have made great efforts to promote the development of our education. But we should also realize that it is necessary to absorb positive and reasonable contents and factors of Dewey's philosophy education to apply to china education and social reform. Finally, we can achieve the purpose of liberating personal ability and social development. Faced with today's education reality, Dewey left us thinking and enlightenment.

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