

# A Book Report on Pragmatic Education in Democracy and Education

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**Abstract:** In the book, Dewey puts forward the concepts of "democracy" and "social orientation" and believes that democracy and pragmatism both start from social existence and social relations, reflecting the relationship between human beings and nature and forming the influence on education. In his book, Dewey emphasized that children are individuals with independent personalities and interest in pursuing free and comprehensive development; advocated that teachers organize teaching in the context of children's life and learning; proposed that educational goals should be based on social needs; advocated that school education should be child-centred rather than teacher-centred and that students should gain freedom, autonomy, independence, responsibility and independent spirit. The concept of "social orientation" is also analyzed and elaborated.

**Keywords:** Book Report; Pragmatic Education; Democracy and Education.

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## 1. Introduction

In 1916, the Macmillan Press in New York published *Democracy and Education*, a work on pedagogy by the famous American philosopher John Dewey. 1928, published by the Commercial Press, was translated by Zou Enrun and proofread by Tao Xingzhi and reprinted in 1944 and 1949. In October 1990, it was published in New York by the Macmillan Society and translated by the People's Education Press, with Wang Chengxu as the translator.

In the late 19th century, the United States underwent a series of social changes to meet the needs of the industrial revolution, urban and rural changes, frontier development, and population migration, of which the educational renewal movement was a significant element. Traditional education in the United States suffered from two problems: a disconnection from society and separation from children. A new curriculum and innovative teaching methods were the inevitable choices of this educational reform movement. This educational reform movement is divided into three main stages: the first stage is the beginning of the educational innovation movement. In the 1870s, the United States began a nationwide curriculum reform. The goal of this reform movement was to put all students in school, let them learn in school and then go back to the community; the second stage was the promulgation of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, the U.S. government required the United States compulsory education and attendance at public elementary and secondary schools for all school-age children; the third stage was the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1906, Congress passed the Uniform Elementary Education Act, the first national law on education in the history of the U.S. In 1909, Congress passed the Equal Opportunity in Education Act and the National Education Act, which established the compulsory education system. School education developed, and school organizations gradually matured, evolving from community groups to school groups. In 1910, Congress passed the Modern Acts of State and Local Legislatures, which required the classification of state schools into different levels and grades.

From 1894 to 1904, Dewey was chairman of the department of philosophy, psychology, and education at the

University of Chicago. During this decade, an attempt was made to develop the educational philosophy he proposed. Dewey addressed the educational trends of the new era in two main ways: first, by conforming to the requirements of the school and social development, and second, by conforming to the fundamental laws of school and child development. In 1896, he founded an experimental school on experimenting with curriculum, teaching materials and teaching methods by combining teaching theory and practice. He transformed the way of teaching with chalk and oral lectures into a way for children to learn from activities. In 1897, he published *My Educational Creed*; in 1899, *School and Society*; and in 1902, *Children and the Curriculum*. Although the articles were short, they were significant. Later, Dewey left the University of Chicago for Columbia University because he had a difference of thought with the president of the University of Chicago. After years of teaching practice and study, he completed a systematic monograph on the philosophy of pragmatism in education, *Democracy and Education* in 1916.

He defined the purpose of education as the development of "free and independent individuals" and education as serving the "independent and free individuals" that students would become. "We must provide students with an environment in which they can develop their full potential and have the confidence to control their own destiny.

The most striking aspect of Dewey's philosophy of education is his severe and in-depth consideration of the issue of democracy. Dewey believed that "in a democracy, education should be the quality of freedom, independence, and individuality necessary to prepare citizens for the establishment of a democracy." Education must be based on respect for the development of the individual personality, which is determined by the characteristics of education itself. However, at the same time, he states that "the truly successful (talented) and happy person must have a sound personality." This shows that Dewey did not advocate leaving education entirely to the school but rather advocated the development of a good personality necessary for the overall development of students through both school and home.

According to Dewey, "Schools are not designed to train, manage, or organize people to perform any kind of task, but to allow them to develop naturally into a 'person' after they

have completed various activities independently and freely; schools are not designed for people to learn a certain skill in order to accomplish a certain kind of training or management, but to develop students in their Schools are not designed for people to learn a skill in order to complete a certain kind of training or administration, but rather to prepare students to develop that skill as they grow".

In other words, in Dewey's view, a person must be "complete and mature," "free and independent," and "individual. In his opinion, these three conditions are necessary and essential. Therefore, a complete personality of adults should have independent and free, complete and mature, and have a specific personality and particular abilities and other conditions.

According to Dewey, education is not a means or a process by which a person is made to perform a particular activity, to achieve an inevitable end, or to accomplish a specific task purely for the sake of accomplishing a particular task.

In Dewey's view, if we want to cultivate a person who is free to develop his or her own personality, who can work independently, and who has the characteristics of an independent personality, then education must be cultivated in three ways: first, to help the student become a complete and mature person; second, to enable the student to work independently; and third, to equip the student with an ability or characteristic to cope with the challenges and changes brought about by the world.

## 2. A Summary of the Book

Dewey's work on education, *Democracy and Education* has been translated into many languages and has had a significant impact internationally. Democracy and education have been hailed by British and American scholars as one of the three crucial milestones in the history of Western education. The book provides a more systematic discussion of Dewey's pragmatic educational ideas developed at the Chicago Experimental School and in his research on educational reform at that time and proposes clear goals and ways how to build a new type of education. Dewey focused on the practical and humanistic nature of education and its role in the moral and social development of human beings, making it transcend the realm of isolated knowledge transmission and treating it as an essential part of social activities, thus giving it a place in contemporary society. In education, Dewey advocated the principles of democracy and equality, the professional development of teachers, and the teaching model of "teaching by doing". He believed that the "teaching-doing-integration" is the way to the overall development of children. Education should not only impart knowledge and skills but also emphasize the education of mind and moral character, the enlightenment of the human mind and the development of personality.

Among the twenty-six chapters in this book, Dewey's purposeless theory of education in Chapter 8 had a profound impact on me. In the book, Dewey writes, "The process of education has no purpose outside of himself; it is its own purpose." Such a view of education is undoubtedly good medicine for the current state of education, which only requires promotion rates and good grades. In Dewey's view, "the development of a man's personality is determined not by himself but by his social environment." Therefore, the purpose of education is not to raise a child to be a person of good character, with high moral character, highly learned, and able to serve others, but to make the student a citizen of the

needs of society. He believed that "teaching is for the individual one of the most useful and respected professions in society, and for education one of the noblest and sacred undertakings of the human soul." Therefore, he believed that various methods should be adopted in schools to cultivate high moral character and sentiments and cultivate high moral cultivation in students.

We can understand Dewey's educational ideas from the following aspects: 1. to form a moral concept in children through teaching and education from the moral field; 2. to experience morality from life; 3. to learn and train moral knowledge systematically; 4. to think about moral issues systematically; 5. to evaluate and choose a moral character for children.

In the context of pragmatic education, Dewey explains the essence of education in this book: "Education as a theory of life, growth, and transformation of experience". The book critiques educational ideas and theories, arguing that education is the continuous reorganization or reshaping of individual experiences. Such reorganization can make the experience more meaningful and enhance guidance for subsequent educational processes. Thus, the fundamental question of education is whether experience can be continually reorganized and recreated. Moreover, according to Dewey, the premise of reorganization or recreation of experience is the "need" or "interest," that is, the need for such an experience. Education is created in a particular environment, and it is in this educational environment that teachers can teach. Therefore, students can grow only through learning. However, in real life, teachers, students, and parents can choose their own preferred experiences, so the educational environment changes - "life changes" or "experience changes". Therefore, the experience needs to be reorganized or recreated. In Dewey's view, children's learning is not a passive process of receiving knowledge and skills, nor is it a process in which teachers instill in students the knowledge or skills specified in the syllabus, but rather a process in which new knowledge and skills are explored through personal experience under the guidance of the teacher.

Dewey also discusses the process of education in his book, "Interest, as an interstitial object, actually acts as a ferryman from one shore to the other for educational activities; in an instrumental sense, interest is the bridge." Dewey emphasizes the vital role of interest in the educational process. It was discussed in terms of education and democracy, interest and training, thinking and teaching, and curriculum and teaching. Dewey argues that traditional cultural concepts, traditional curricula, and traditional teaching and training methods should be changed and that democratizing educational ideas should increasingly dominate the public education system. "In the process, education must combine traditional curriculum and teaching methods with democratic, liberal social movements and a sense of progress, resulting in a new, democratized curriculum based on social values." Dewey believed that what was needed to prepare students for self-regulation and self-control in "society" was the development of independent thinking and practical skills, not the service of entrance examinations. Dewey believed that education must begin with the individual, preparing students to be independent thinkers and life-experienced individuals who are able to act freely, express themselves autonomously, and have an impact on others. Education must be "for all". Dewey's core concepts of democracy, freedom, and emancipation shaped the democratization of education that he

advocated.

Chapters 18 through 23 focus on the value of education: "Any individual has missed his calling, farmer, physician, teacher, student, who does not find that the accomplishments of results of value to others is an accompaniment of a process of experience inherently worthwhile." Through his critique of the dualism of the problem of the value of education, Dewey elaborates on his relationship between labour and leisure, knowledge and action, nature and man, the individual and the world, and profession and culture. According to Dewey, the value of education is to keep experience in its totality. He believed that in organizing curriculum textbooks, care should be taken to maintain the unity and integrity of experience and to avoid isolation among subjects. He advocated combining moral education with nature education and using moral education to develop children's love, respect, and understanding of others; Dewey believed that children needed to have two kinds of knowledge, natural knowledge and social knowledge; they needed to use their thinking skills to learn. Dewey believed that children should be educated in a school in three ways: first, everything they learn in school must be an integral part of their personal lives; second, "adult" education should not be imposed on children; and third, school life should not be treated as a profession. According to Dewey, school is "the only property owned by the individual" and "private property", and he emphasizes the close connection between school and family, society and nature.

Finally, he discusses the relationship between philosophy and education, the relationship between knowledge and morality, and the practical application of philosophy. Dewey linked philosophy and education as the most general field of education and education as a place where different philosophies are distinguished and tested. He also saw moral education as recognizing the connection between knowledge and behaviour, as well as developing the ability of students to be active in society. For Dewey, education was not a profession but a part of life, and he, therefore, believed that education should be a significant part of students' lives. However, he also recognized that education has social and moral responsibilities, but he did not see a direct connection between education and politics. Dewey was a humanist who believed that people should have the emotions of love and hate. Nevertheless, he also had a different view of education than traditional pedagogy: on the one hand, Dewey opposed the idea of raising any child to be a philosopher; on the other hand, he recognized the creative role of man in the process of intellectual development. Dewey believed that science is an instrument of social reform, which enables people to master and apply knowledge and gain experience and also helps to develop students' abilities in moral aspects.

### **3. Comments and Reflections on the Book**

The book *Democracy and Education* contains all of Dewey's ideas on pragmatic education and is the product of combining theory and practice. Although it revolves around education as life, education as growth, education as the reorganization and transformation of experience, child-centeredness, school as a society and other anti-traditional educational concepts, it is still education without purpose that brings me the most questions and thoughts. In the text, Dewey writes: "The process of education, which has no purpose outside himself, is its own purpose." He argues that education

does not attach any purpose to itself; it is education that becomes an appendage to this external purpose. In Dewey's view, the child is the point of departure and society is the point of return of education, and the educational journey is formed between the point of departure of the child and the point of return of society, just as a straight line is formed between these two points.

Dewey believed that what the child, as a human being, has to do is to improve the world and make it a better place through his or her own work. We should understand and view the child as a subject in terms of "the purpose of the child", "the purpose of society", and "the purpose of the child. We should understand school education in terms of "social purpose" and "child purpose. School education is the social development of the child, and the purpose of school education is the development of the child for the purpose of society.

The fundamental spirit of democratic education is 1. to put the human being first and to combine the individual with society. Dewey emphasized that children have their own independence and mobility and cannot be controlled by any authority. Dewey opposes teacher-centred teaching methods in which everything is arranged by authority, and he advocates organizing teaching activities according to children's needs and giving children the opportunity to explore on their own. 2. He emphasizes that school education should pay attention to personality development and the democratic relationship between teachers and students. 3. Emphasizes children's active participation. 4. Focuses on students' life practices and advocates experiential education. 5. Values the democratic nature of teaching methods. 6. Advocates the spirit of democracy throughout every lesson and every teaching activity, allowing children to think and explore on their own.

At the same time, when I read Dewey's exposition of the purposelessness of education, I had doubts: Since education is purposeless, but the purpose of education is to socialize children as stated in the starting point and social destination of children, is Dewey's theory of the purpose of education not contradictory? With this question in mind, I continued to read the book, and in the process of reading it, I finally understood the true meaning of Dewey's purposeless theory of education with the help of other references.

According to Dewey, education is not a purely scientific research activity; it does not pursue a goal like the study of natural science but instead thinks in terms of society, culture and the individual; nor is it a practical activity but a social system. Fundamentally, education is for society. This has led to a deeper understanding of Dewey's theory of the purpose of education. First of all, it is a theory of the purpose of education in the service of society. Dewey believed that in order to cultivate the three aspects of citizens, scientists and politicians needed in a democratic society. Education is needed in the following three aspects: 1. to cultivate citizens for the nation; 2. to cultivate scientists for the nation; 3. to serve the nation, the nation and human development.

The ancient eye is the eye, and the central target of the arrow target is the. Archery is to hit the bull's eye, which also gives rise to a clear purpose, after which people convert this concrete action into an abstract conceptual noun. If Dewey's education is purposeless, "purpose" is a noun, but if it is a verb, the problem will be solved. In fact, Dewey's education had a purpose. Dewey lived in an era of high industrial development, but it had not yet reached a highly developed era when industrial society needed a large number of workers who

repeated mechanical operations, and in such a social context, people neglected the development of their own intelligence and neglected the development of human interests, hobbies and creativity, which was against the innate nature of human beings and the law of development. Society pursues the benefits of producing products but ignores the people who produce them. Dewey's purposeless theory of education is proposed in such a social context to solve the single mechanical model of education. The significance of Dewey's use of the child as the point of departure and society as the point of return is that the ultimate purpose of education is to allow children to complete the process of socialization by way of continuous reorganization and transformation of life, growth, and experience. "Any purpose that helps us from moment to moment to observe, choose, and plan so that our activities can proceed smoothly is a worthy purpose." Dewey opposes teachers setting distant, vain educational goals for children and advocates setting appropriate and attractive teaching goals for children according to their physical and mental development. Such a theory of purpose is the true meaning of Dewey's purposeless theory of education. Dewey opposed the view of schooling as the purpose of teaching and advocated that school is not a means and a tool for teaching but a place and a paradise for stimulating and cultivating students' interests. Teachers should not focus all their energy on an "end". He believed that schools should not have a tendency to pursue "eternal goals" but should mainly focus on cultivating students' interest and enthusiasm for life so that they can become people with independent thinking and individual activity. Dewey opposed the practice of artificially setting up many subjects in schools in order to achieve educational results so that students could learn "useful knowledge" through these subjects. He advocated not to use grades to measure students' learning ability but to examine what practical and meaningful impact students have made after learning a subject, and thus to determine grades, which is a proper understanding of the purpose of education.

According to Dewey, "What do children get out of school learning?" is a critical but complex question. He advocated that education should be based on the developmental characteristics of children at different ages. According to Dewey, there are two age stages of human beings: one is childhood (before the age of 12), and the other is young adulthood (13 to 30). If adults have some interest in knowledge, it is a particular interest in what they can understand and grasp.

Dewey attached great importance to the two elements of "feeling" and "experience" in children. He believed that "school learning is equivalent to playing games and toys; education is equivalent to playing games and toys; school is as free as a garden; the teacher should give him an opportunity to observe and experience nature as much as possible." Therefore, educators should create a relaxed, harmonious, natural and pleasant atmosphere in education to meet such feelings and needs of children.

Dewey's educational thought had a profound impact on China in the early 20th century. The famous Chinese educator Tao Xingchi, who was a student of Dewey, absorbed Dewey's pragmatic educational thought and selectively integrated it with China's national conditions, putting forward the "Six Emancipations" of "cracking the hell out of children. He put forward the idea of "Six Emancipations": freeing children's eyes, telling them to see the essence and truth of things; freeing children's minds, cultivating children's creative

thinking; freeing children's hands, advocating the teaching concept of "learning by doing"; freeing children's mouths, teaching children to tell the truth; freeing children's space, giving them enough room to grow and freeing children's hands and advocating the concept of "learning by doing"; freeing children's mouths and teaching them to speak the truth; freeing children's space and giving them enough room to grow; freeing children's time and giving them time to do what they want to do, to experience the world and to find the meaning of their lives.

Dewey's educational ideas not only had a significant impact on pre-liberation China but also had profound inspiration for solving the educational problems that exist in China today. Today, primary and secondary schools in China focus on the rate of advancement and the academic performance of students, and the development of children is determined by teachers and parents as to the future direction simply by the scores on the test papers. The goal of teaching is to let students master systematic and complete but boring theoretical knowledge, such teaching is not in line with the law of students' physical and mental development, and the student-centred teaching concept is just a slogan that is shouted. What can we learn from Dewey's "educational goals" when we think about current education? The current goals of education are based on something other than the needs of students, and almost no one recites abstract mathematical symbols. Interest in these is also obtained from the results of these activities. For example, you can get praise from your parents, and you can get compliments from your teachers.

## 4. Conclusion

The practical significance of Dewey's educational thought for China's educational problems lies in the following: first, to solve the problem of separating education from society, education is life, school is society; second, to solve the problem of separating education from children, highlighting "education is growth"; third, to solve the problem of disconnect between theory and practice, focusing on the transformation of Third, the problem of the disconnection between theory and practice should be solved by focusing on the transformation of "experience", "learning by doing", and "problem-solving"; fourth, the purpose of education should be addressed, and the nature of students should be developed. He states: "Schools should be an integral part of society, not simply a place for profit. For our responsibility is not only to teach students knowledge but also to teach them to be human beings". Therefore, "we must see school as a microcosm of social life in its infancy". Dewey also believes that "the school should be a laboratory of embryonic social life", where the process of development from "natural man" to "social man" is genuinely realized. Therefore, "the primary duty of the school is to produce sensible individualists. Dewey's pragmatic theory of education is not only applicable to the United States but also to China; Dewey's educational thought is a good reference for solving the current educational problems in China. Dewey's "child-centeredness" and pragmatism philosophy make people realize that education should be child-centred; Dewey's view of the purpose of education believes that "education is life" and "school is society" and advocates promoting social progress through school education. These ideas are important inspirations for the current implementation of quality education in China in terms of objectives, contents and methods.

Dewey advocated a democratic education in order to realize a bourgeois democratic society, i.e., a society of the people ruled by the people. Dewey's ideal state, that is, a democratic society, has two standard features: one is to take care of the development of the poor, and the other is to promote mutual interaction, for example, black and white students in joint schools. Dewey's view of what education is is based on the idea that "education is life, education experiences, education is growth". "Education has no purpose" and "education must meet all the needs of the child's own growth". In terms of curriculum and teaching, Dewey criticized Herbart's "three cores" and advocated moving from "doing" to "experiencing", with a "Dewey proposed a "five-step reflection" approach to teaching and learning. Dewey also discussed issues related to the philosophy of education, the theory of knowledge, and moral education.

Dewey's ideas and his book *Democracy and Education* have had a profound impact on traditional education in the United States. Ideologically, it was a critique of the strictures of traditional education and the bondage of children and advocated freedom for children. In terms of educational

practices, the atmosphere in American schools and classrooms has changed, resulting in a "learning by doing" model of teaching. Socially and culturally, it has contributed to the transformation of education in the West. On a global scale, it has had a profound and widespread impact on education in many countries. However, in practice, the over-emphasis on human-centeredness and the neglect of the role of teachers has led to a decline in teaching quality. Dewey's various educational philosophies should be viewed and learned from reality in a discriminatory manner.

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