

A New Exploration of Dewey's "Education as Life"

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Abstract: To gain a deeper understanding of John Dewey's profound concept of "Education as Life" and to explore its educational value, this paper summarizes previous insights and delves into the meaning of "life" in "Education as Life" and the practical implications of this concept. This paper argues that the true essence of "Education as Life" lies in a New Exploration of Dewey's "Education as Life". In the fact that classroom teaching itself should be a form of life, education should revert to its fundamental purpose of nurturing individuals, allowing children to freely pursue their own happiness; education should develop children's intelligence, and the pursuit of happiness should benefit their future development. Based on this, the paper analyzes the educational value of "Education as Life".

Keywords: Life, Education as Life, Possible Life, Real Life.

1. Preface

John Dewey, a renowned American educator in modern times, put forward famous assertions such as "Education is life," "Education is growth," and "Education is the continuous reconstruction of experience," which have had an immeasurable impact on the field of education. Since the proposition of "Education is life," numerous scholars at home and abroad have attempted to interpret it. However, they seem to have failed to grasp its true essence. Based on this, the author endeavors to conduct a new exploration and analysis of this concept, building on previous research.

2. Various Scholarly Views on Dewey's "Education is Life"

Research on Dewey's famous assertion "Education is life" is abundant both domestically and internationally, with numerous monographs, textbooks, and research papers, totaling well over a hundred. These research achievements have played a pioneering role in disseminating Dewey's ideas.

Scholars have diverse interpretations of its original meaning, which can be summarized as follows:

The "Purpose Theory": Zhao Xianglin is a representative scholar who holds this view, discussed in his book *History of Modern Foreign Education*. He discusses "Education is life" in the context of educational purposes and functions, arguing that Dewey advocates education as life itself, rather than preparation for life. In fact, Dewey does not exclude the importance of "preparation" but emphasizes that education should serve as a genuine "preparation" through purposeful activities. [1] Therefore, this book represents the "purpose theory" of "Education is life."

The "Essence Theory": This view can be found in Wu Shiping's *Coursebook on the History of Foreign Education*. He first asks about the essence of education, "What is education, exactly?" Dewey responds that education is life, growth, and the continuous reconstruction of experience. Thus, the second view is the "essence theory." Besides this book, traces of this theory can also be found in *A General History of Foreign Educational Thought*. *A General History* believes that a literal understanding and interpretation of "Education is life" is far from sufficient. Even though traditional education represented, a life out of step with the

spirit of the times, and even suppressed children's nature, it was still a form of life and constituted a part of children's lives. Corporal punishment was prevalent in traditional education worldwide. Yet even so, children were still living, and their lives could not be negated solely because of corporal punishment. Therefore, *A General History* asserts that the basic meaning of "Education is life" lies in the integration of "school and social life; school and children's life." [2]

The "Subordinate Theory": This view does not discuss "Education is life" itself but analyzes it within the context of other views. Therefore, scholars summarize it as the "subordinate theory." In *A General History of Foreign Education*, Teng Dachun first analyzes Dewey's educational thought of "Education is life," "Life is development; and continuous development and growth are life," summarizing it with Dewey's own words: "Because growth is the characteristic of life, education is growth; it has no purpose beyond itself." Hence, "without education, one cannot live. So we can say that education is life." The best education is "learning from life" and "learning from experience." [3]

By reviewing and summarizing the different views of the above scholars, we find that their insights into "Education is life" mainly revolve around the idea that education can enable children to lead a good life and make education a representative of a fulfilling life. Based on this, through a review of Dewey's works and related literature, the author believes that his advocacy of "Education is life" does not simply equate school educational activities with students' personal lives outside school, using life outside school to transform educational activities within school; rather, it implies that classroom teaching itself should be a form of life, and true education should return to the authentic meaning of nurturing individuals. Chu Hongqi similarly states in his article that the profound meaning of "Education is life" proposed by Mr. Dewey implies that education should be connected with children's real lives and that education itself is a good life, while it is also an active means to achieve a good life. [4]

3. The Purpose of Life

To grasp the meaning of "Education is life," it is necessary to understand what Dewey means by "life" and what relationship he sees between it and education.

"Life" is a general and complex term, and Dewey himself did not give a clear definition of "life," but he did elaborate on it. In *Democracy and Education*, he believes that life represents the entire experience of individuals and races, including "habits, institutions, beliefs, victories and failures, leisure, and work." [5]3 Life also refers broadly to a person's ability to survive, "striving to continue surviving indefinitely, which is the nature of life. Since the continuation of life can only be achieved through enduring renewal, life is a process of self-renewal." [5]4 In his later works, the term "life" more often represents a person's original state of existence, similar to the concept of "experience." [6]84

It can be seen that Dewey's views on "life" vary at different stages, with different classifications leading to different understandings of "life." What Dewey refers to as education and life mostly pertains to school education and life, as evidenced in his *My Pedagogic Creed*: "Since education is a social process, the school is a form of social life." [7]4 Education has relative independence and cannot be completely separated from politics, economics, and culture. Therefore, the relationship between education and life should be seen as the connection between school educational activities, which are part of society, and social life. During the period of rapid industrial development in the United States, the rapid development of industry caused schools to be disconnected from both social life and students' lives. Against this background, Dewey proposed "Education is life," aiming to transform detachment from life into integration with life. As Mr. Teng Dachun said, "To put it definitively, American traditional education was detached from both society and children; Dewey's exploration focused on these two major issues, namely, bringing American schools in harmony with the needs of American social development and bringing American schools in harmony with the laws governing the physical and mental development of children and adolescents." [8]

Based on this, we can see that the "life" in Dewey's "Education is life" refers to an ideal life. He believes that education should enable children to live happily, not just "live," but more importantly, to enjoy the process of this "life"; the object of education is also human beings, so education must pay attention to children's real lives. Dewey opposes the idea that education prepares for a future full life. In his view, education should prepare for the present life, focusing on children's current lives. He also emphasizes this point in *My Pedagogic Creed*: "The school must present life as it is-real and vital to the child." [7]4

Dewey believes that children's lives are equally important as adults' lives. "One's life at one stage and at another stage is equally real and equally active; the content of life at these two stages is equally rich, and their status is equally important." [5]56 We should not view children's lives from an adult perspective or hold them to the standards of the adult world. The adult world is filled with academic pressure, career competition, emotional stress, etc. If these are used to demand of children, they will inevitably not have a happy life.

Therefore, the education and life in Dewey's mind are combined, more specifically, school educational activities should reflect children's lives and present lives.

4. The Essence of "Education is Life"

Dewey's concept of life is more of an ideal life, but it is not the medieval religious life that reveres deity and places hope in the elusive afterlife; nor is it limited to secular handicrafts

or agricultural life, but rather a modern life truly based on industrialization and technology. Dewey believes that education itself is meaningful. This sentence seems simple but actually contains profound implications. In the Middle Ages, people believed that receiving education was for eternity and preparation for the afterlife, leading them to pay insufficient attention to present life. After the Renaissance, people's consciousness gradually awakened, realizing that their present life was the most important. However, the consequence of overemphasizing secular life was that the importance of adult life was infinitely magnified, and children's lives were considered a transitional period. Therefore, Dewey's "Education is life" strongly opposes the idea that education prepares for future life. He advocates that education needs to be combined with children's own lives and present lives.

Later generations, when trying to interpret Dewey's original intention, simply understood "Education is life" as integrating school education throughout all aspects of life and using life outside school to transform all educational activities. In the author's view, this proposition intends to turn educational activities into a form of life. Education itself is meaningful, teaching children to "live" and enjoy the process of "life" through education, especially the process of achieving success by striving to satisfy their desires. In this process of "life," children can freely pursue their own happiness. This happiness is not only the joy of success but may also include troubles and sorrows. Although there is pain in the process of "life," children are free and closely connected to their present life. People pursue different kinds of happiness at different stages, and children's happiness differs from adults' happiness. If we measure children's happiness by adult standards and link education solely to future career choices and life success, children's lives are bound to be filled with pressure, and their burdens will inevitably increase. Diverse interests will vanish, rich imaginations will diminish, and various activities will disappear. For children, school will no longer be a place of joyful living, and education will become an awe-inspiring entity. As Thorndike once said, "What Dr. Dewey means by 'Education is life' is evidently that in all phases of the educational process we must have regard for all the desires of the individual."

For educators, we should not only create an environment where children can freely pursue happiness; at the same time, we should also make this happiness beneficial to their future development. In his *The Fundamental Principles of Education*, Thorndike stated, "The desires of the child must not only make him happy-although happiness is also what he desires-but must also make his development more effective. If we disregard their desires, we will surely jeopardize their material well-being, we will surely diminish their interest activities, and we will surely provoke their rebellion against education." [9]22 If we disregard children's thoughts, it may provoke their rebellious psychology towards education. However, if we transform the school into a joyful learning place, then children's life in school will be "more vivid, more active, and happier." Their activities will be better inspired, and their interests will be maintained longer, leading to better educational outcomes. Therefore, Thorndike believed that Dr. Dewey's proposition of "Education is life" has been confirmed by educational practices that align with and do not violate children's desires. [9]23

As the object of education, humans naturally occupy a

dominant position in education. The same is true for people in life; humans are also the subject in life. The focus of education lies in shaping individual values, so education must pay attention to children's lives, especially their current lives, and education should enable children to develop more sustainably. Therefore, it can be said that the original intention of Dewey's proposition of "Education is life" is that school educational activities must constitute a form of life, regardless of which type of life it is. This life-based education enables children to derive joy from pursuing freedom and is beneficial to their lifelong development.

5. The Educational Value of "Education is Life"

The relationship between education and life is inseparable. Since the dawn of early humanity, human education and life have been intertwined. Humans receive education in daily production and life, and early teaching knowledge mainly imparted production and life experiences. This further proves that education, as a social activity, is inseparable from human life.

With the continuous development of society and the continuous improvement of production technology, education has gradually become socialized, publicized, and scaled, thus becoming less closely connected to life and even deviating from it to some extent. [10] In modern times, due to the development of science and technology, there has been a tendency for education to separate from human life. In this context, Dewey proposed the proposition of "Education is life." Dewey attempted to start with school life and transform it so that school life can enable students to pursue freedom and happiness and be beneficial to their future development. From this, it can be seen that Dewey's proposition of "Education is life" has educational value with a humanistic focus on students' lives.

After Dewey put forward the view of "Education is life," many scholars tried to analyze it, aiming to get close to Dewey's original intention. For example, some scholars proposed the "theory of moral education in life"; [11] called for invigorating the classroom with vitality; [12] and some scholars demanded the reconstruction of the classroom, [13] among others. Even the slogan of "Returning to the Life-World" was put forward. Although its original intention was to solve the overly utilitarian problem in traditional teaching and try to establish a connection between learning and life, the "Life-World" theory itself contains many paradoxes. Therefore, this slogan encountered much opposition during implementation. [6]86 Even though these different interpretations of "Education is life" have certain deficiencies, we can see that predecessors have made preliminary attempts to connect education with life. Although this attempt did not yield good results, it has played a pioneering role for future generations in researching the "combination of education and life."

Exploring Dewey's proposition of "Education is life" anew, undoubtedly, we can affirm that Dewey himself focuses on the close connection between school life and children's real life. To analyze its educational value, it is necessary to discuss it in combination with the current educational situation in China to make it practical.

China's basic education has always suffered from the problem of separating knowledge from life, linking education to exam scores, and unreasonable teaching arrangements that

make school activities increasingly distant from students' lives. In this context, if we conduct a new exploration of Dewey's "Education is life" and apply it to basic education reform, it undoubtedly affirms the educational value of this proposition. If China's education reform is calculated from the reform and opening-up, it has roughly gone through four stages. With the development of the times, many changes have taken place in the educational landscape, and previous curriculum standards are no longer suitable for the current educational situation. Based on this, China carried out the ninth curriculum reform in 2022, which revised the deficiencies in previous curriculum reforms. This paper will elaborate on the educational value of "Education is life" from the perspectives of curriculum goals and curriculum content reform.

China's new curriculum reform emphasizes changing the current situation where curriculum content is "numerous, difficult, one-sided, and outdated," and excessive attention is paid to book knowledge. It strengthens the connection between curriculum content and students' lives, as well as the development of modern society and technology, and pays attention to students' learning interests and experiences. This shows that China's basic education reform increasingly emphasizes the integration of education and students' lives. In terms of curriculum goals, China's curriculum goals have undergone an evolution from "basic knowledge and basic skills" to three-dimensional goals and then to core competencies. It can be seen that in the early stage, China's curriculum goals excessively focused on book knowledge, neglecting human integrity, treating people as learning machines, and ignoring children's real lives. Dewey attaches great importance to combining children's real life and possible life. He points out that "a curriculum plan must consider how the curriculum can meet the needs of present social life. The goal of the curriculum is to help children better realize this life and meet the needs of their real life." [5]204, and "Possible life can be defined as the life that everyone means to realize." [14] It is evident that he advocates that education should cultivate children's ability to cope with real life and, at the same time, develop their skills to prepare for a better life in the future. At present, China's curriculum goals pay more attention to students gradually forming the essential characters and key competencies needed for personal lifelong development and social development during the process of receiving education. [15] This is gradually changing for the better, but in the future, based on Dewey's "Education is life," education can be connected to children's real life and possible life to realize Dewey's ideal of "Education is life." In terms of curriculum content, Dewey's "Education is life" was proposed against the background of traditional American education being detached from students' lives, and the same problem exists in China's curriculum content. First, subject-based courses fragment children's understanding of the world, making it difficult for them to comprehend and grasp the world as a whole. Second, whether it's scientific knowledge or moral concepts, they are all expressed using prescribed consistent symbols. The lack of elaboration on natural knowledge and knowledge about oneself in students' actual lives makes them fail to understand the practical significance of these knowledges. [16]

A glimpse into the measures taken in China's ninth new curriculum reform undoubtedly reveals an emphasis on the humanistic consciousness in the educational value orientation of "Education is life." As the subject of life, humans control

their lives. Students should also control their own lives. Dewey emphasizes connecting school life with children's own lives, essentially aiming to enhance children's subjectivity and make them masters of their own lives. As mentioned earlier, the author believes that Dewey's intention of "Education is life" lies in the fact that school teaching activities should constitute a form of life, regardless of which type it's. "Education is life" inevitably refers to real life, not the "ivory tower" we create for children. Since children's lives are filled with diverse possibilities, we must exert the true role of education-developing children's wisdom. We should teach children to solve difficulties they encounter by applying the knowledge they have learned, rather than making choices for them to make their lives fulfilling. Achieving a good life is a result, not a purpose. Children should not be seen as tools to achieve this result of a good life. Based on the emphasis on humanistic consciousness in the value orientation of "Education is life," it's believed that future education will reach an ideal state.

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