

Dewey's View of Children's Education in *Democracy and Education*

Hongrui Chen

School of Teacher Education, Huzhou University, Zhejiang, China
chenhhhr@163.com

Abstract: Dewey systematically expounded his views on children's education in his book *Democracy and Education*, the core of which is to recognize the positive significance of children's immature state. This paper analyzes Dewey's view on children's education around the "immature state", and concludes that children have the characteristics of plasticity and dependence. The understanding of children's growth is further elaborated from the two aspects: prolonging immature state and viewing immature state from two point of view. On this basis, this paper discusses the educational enlightenment of children's immature state from three aspects: correctly understanding the significance of communication, connecting with children's life reality and cultivating qualified "social man", in order to better understand children's dominant position and promote education to return to the true state.

Keywords: Children, Democracy, Immature state, Communicate, Experience.

1. Introduction

Dewey was born and raised in the United States in the late 19th and mid-20th centuries. As a pragmatic philosopher and educator, he believed that a democratic society was the best society, and that the establishment of such a society must be achieved through democratic education. In the first three chapters of his book *Democracy and Education*, Dewey pointed out that educators should respect students' interests and help students grow freely in their lives. Dewey proposed that the primary condition for children's growth is "immaturity", a concept that was positively evaluated and explained in his book. Analyzing the connotation and characteristics of "immature state" and viewing this state from different perspectives will help us better understand Dewey's view on children's education, grasp the basic laws of children's immature state, and provide useful enlightenment for finding the true state of children's education.

2. The Concept of Children's Education

The concept of children's education is people's view and attitude towards children's education. "Education is growth" is Dewey's view on the essence of education, and the immature state of children is the primary condition for growth. This state has two sides. On the one hand, the immature state of children is a kind of ability and power to move forward; On the other hand, this kind of ability and power is in a dormant state. Educators are difficult to patiently guide and induce children's potential. They often treat children in a wrong, utilitarian and indoctrinated way. In Dewey's view, immature state is closely related to growth and development. This includes two meanings. One is that the immature state contains some positive meaning. Second, the immature state is constantly developing in life, not static and completed. Combining these two meanings, the immature state of children is plastic and dependent.

2.1 Children are Plastic

As "im-" in "immature state" does not mean lack, but the possibility of growth, it is said that immature state is plastic.

This plasticity is "the power to develop tendencies." [1] It is the ability of children to actively shape themselves. With the increase of age, children begin to be consciously curious about the external environment. This curiosity will be embodied in the desire for knowledge and exploration activities. The exploration is the process of learning from experience, and education plays a key role in this process. If children do not have this plasticity, they will not be able to learn and grow from experience and develop similar habits. If the novelty and exploration of children can be retained until adulthood, then they can grow into a creative person. To deeply understand the plasticity of immature state, we also need to link it with "experience" and "habit".

Plasticity and experience. In Dewey's view, children's plasticity is a kind of ability, an ability to learn from experience and apply it to life. Learning from experience means that people can connect what they do with the result of this thing, and establish a connection between "cause" and "result". Applying it to life means that people will reflect on these causal links and use them to deal with the difficulties encountered later. This is similar to a concept in educational psychology, that is, growth thinking. The essence of growth thinking is "never finished". When facing failure or other people's negative evaluation, people with growth thinking often choose to learn and make progress from it rather than deal with it in a negative manner. At the same time, they are not afraid of failure. In the face of setbacks and failures, they often attribute the failure to their lack of effort rather than intelligence, and will actively seek social support. This is similar to the plasticity of immature state. Both of them hold a positive attitude towards the understanding of "im-", and believe that people can reflect on past experiences to form experiences and improve subsequent activities. In this way, experience is meaningful and vital.

Plasticity and habit. Children's plasticity brings the possibility of growth, and "habit is the expression of growth." [1] "Habit" can be divided into "passive habit" and "active habit". The former is people's adaptation to the outside world; The latter is that people transform the environment through subjective initiative, which in turn makes the environment adapt to people. Dewey believes that passive habits can provide a

background for people's growth, while active habits can realize people's continuous growth. The essential difference between human beings and animals lies in this - animals only have passive habits, while human beings not only have passive habits, but also can form active habits. This habit is the accumulation and appropriate use of experience, and the ability to use the environment to achieve their own goals. Immature children are individuals with their own independent consciousness, and they are involved in intellectual factors when making certain behaviors. Therefore, they will reflect and introspect in activities and practice, and can be applied to other similar situations. With the appropriate guidance of educators, children will have the possibility of sustainable growth and progress.

2.2 Children are Dependent

Dewey tends to give different meanings to some commonly used concepts. The dependence here is not a negative dependence, but has a positive meaning. "If dependence is completely helpless, then development will never happen." [1] Therefore, dependence is something constructive. Whether in terms of physical strength or the ability of survival, compared with adults, children are weak and helpless. However, Dewey said that it is this kind of helplessness that implies some power of compensation [1]. This power is mainly reflected in children's social ability, because children can't control external things, so they strengthen their interest and attention to adult behavior, so that they can adapt to the people and things around them.

The dependence of immature state is closely related to development and construction. In fact, children's dependence on the outside world is positive and constructive. Although children are immature in physical development, even babies in their mothers' arms are actively exploring the world and building their own world. According to the view of evolution theory, as individuals, they have acquired the accumulated experience of human evolution through biological inheritance since they were not yet mature. The immaturity of children condenses the experience of human evolution over millions of years. Although immature children can not develop all priors into individual experiences under the external support of the environment, their hidden evolutionary experience makes them have the possibility of active construction. In terms of physiology, children's brain, bones and muscles are all a process of continuous growth. In terms of psychology, in the process of children's development from immature state to mature state, there are intellectual factors and rational thinking, and their wisdom and ability are constantly developing. At the same time, this dependence of children possesses the sociality. From a social point of view, dependence refers to a kind of power, "which is the ability to develop oneself with the help of the power of others" [1]. Through the comparison of the adaptability of human infants and young animals to the environment, it can be found that the "immature period" of animals is relatively short, which makes it difficult to closely integrate their own lives with those of surrounding animals. The environment faced by infants is much more complex than that of animals. Dewey believes that the reason why physically weak infants can survive is because they have social ability [1]. This kind of social ability refers to the ability to establish various connections with the

surrounding environment and help themselves grow with the help of external material conditions. Dewey said that dependence is the interdependence of social groups rather than the illusion of individuals' being alone, which is conducive to the same emotional and intellectual tendencies, so as to form a real community. Of course, from the social extension of dependence, we can also analyze that the immature state has adaptability. The research of evolutionary developmental psychology shows that the psychology and behavior of people at different stages of development are the product of natural selection in the process of evolution, and they are gradually formed "adaptive devices". Some behaviors and different psychological activities of children in the process of development are to achieve better survival and development at the current stage. Dewey pointed out that children have a sharper perception of the things around them and have a sympathetic response to the people around them [1]. This is an arrangement made by immature individuals to better adapt to life.

3. Extended Understanding of Children's Growth

The immature state of children has the possibility of growth. The plasticity and dependence of the immature state are very important in human life. In addition, the social environment is becoming increasingly complex and changeable. A longer infant period is needed to promote more in-depth communication between people and shape common emotional tendencies. Therefore, many scholars put forward the significance of prolonging the immature state. At the same time, understanding immaturity from two different points of view - a comparative point of view and an absolute point of view - will lead to different results and different ways of treating children.

3.1 Extension of Immature State

In the fourth chapter of *Democracy and Education*, the discussion on the immature state also involves the thinking of "prolonging this state". Prolonging immaturity is closely related to the theory of Infantile Persistence. As a researcher and representative of the theory of Infantile Persistence, Konrad Lorenz believes that the essence of infantile persistence is to prolong individuals' active and creative exploration of the environment [2]. Children's dependence is not completely attached to or dependent on adults, but a kind of social ability and social talent, so prolonging dependence or immature period not only provides individuals with more opportunities to explore, but also promotes individuals' better socialization. From the perspective of evolutionary development, prolonging the immature period is the product of evolution, which is conducive to the survival of human race. This extended period gives individuals more time to learn the complex and diverse culture of the society, and learn more skills to protect themselves, which makes human sociality, cognition and other aspects get greater development. The more complex the society, the more complex the skills required, and the longer the immaturity should be [3].

In addition, the significance of prolonging the immature state is closely related to the establishment of the democratic society pursued by Dewey. "A democratic society is a

community in which everyone must refer his actions to those of others and consider their actions to make his actions meaningful and directional.”[1] Dewey believes that the physical distance between people does not affect the formation of a common feature, and even individuals who work hard towards a common goal do not form a social group. However, if people care about and consider this common goal and to regulate their own activities and practices, then a community can be formed. Prolonging children’s dependence or immaturity is to prolong communication, enhance contact, strengthen children’s interest and attention to adult behavior, and promote the formation of consensus and common psychological factors among social members.

3.2 View “Immature State” from Two Different Perspectives

There are two understandings of children’s immature state, one is “lack” and the other is “possibility” and “growth”. The reason why there are different explanations is that people use two different views to analyze the immature state. The former is a comparative point of view, while the latter is an absolute point of view.

In fact, the view of comparing the immature period of children with the mature period of adults is to put adults and children at the two ends of the pros and cons, and think that the mature state of adults is to have everything, and regard the immature state as the preparation of the mature state, which gives the immature state a negative meaning. Dewey believes that this view has the nature of arrogance, because when we use adulthood as a standard to measure childhood, we focus on what children do not have now[1]. As a result, adults who play the role of educators tend to treat childhood in a self-righteous way, impart knowledge through indoctrination, and force children to grow up to maturity rapidly. This kind of utilitarian education is what Dewey tried to reverse. Rousseau, a thinker and educator, once said that children who have been wrongly educated are farther from wisdom than those who have not been educated. Therefore, children should not be shrouded in the shadow of adults. They are independent, free and potential individuals.

When we look at the immature state of children from an absolute and internal point of view, the immature state represents a positive ability. Educators believe that children have the power to grow forward, and then use appropriate teaching methods to activate the interests and attention of the educated, so as to realize the real democratic education. Sukhomlinsky, an educational practitioner and theorist of the former Soviet Union, has similar views on childhood. He believes that childhood is the most important period of life. It is not a preparation for future life, but a truly brilliant and unrepeatable life[4]. Although children will eventually grow into adults, they should not be regarded as the unfinished state of adults. In essence, although there is continuity in development between children and adults, there are also great differences. When children are immature, they are also a complete individual with unique development needs. Therefore, the immature state of children should be viewed from an absolute perspective.

4. Contemporary Enlightenment of Children’s Educational View

Both children and adults are independent individuals. Children’s immature state is plastic and dependent, and can realize real communication. At the same time, using two different perspectives to analyze the immature state will produce different education and teaching methods. In connection with the current impetuous educational environment, we can also get some enlightenment from the immature state.

4.1 Correctly Understand the Significance of Communication and Give Full Play to the Value of Communication

Education is a process of experience transfer. In the process of education, teachers should not only transfer direct and indirect experience to the educated, but also pay attention to the key tool of experience transfer - communication. It can guide students to think and create, and stimulate students’ interest in things around them.

In children’s education, teachers should patiently assist students, not only through verbal communication, but also through appropriate physical contact, such as pacification, patting, shaking hands, and paying attention to and caring for students from the heart. The ultimate goal of school education does not lie in the amount of knowledge given to students, but in the ability to achieve endless development. Once educators realize the importance of communication and give full play to its due value, both students’ ideas and behaviors will become more democratic. As the main force of building a democratic society in the future, children will eventually grow into qualified community members and contribute to creating a more democratic, free and humane environment.

4.2 Connect with Children’s Life Reality and Respect Students’ Personality Differences

In Dewey’s view, life and experience are the soul of education. Without life and experience, there is no growth[5]. Rousseau believes that the people who live the most meaningful life are not the people who live the longest, but the people who feel the deepest about life[6]. Educators use different forms to explain that education should pay attention to the current reality of life. In teaching, Dewey advocates learning by doing and transferring experience from real life. In terms of curriculum, Dewey praised his activity homework curriculum. To some extent, children’s growth is closely related to practical activities. In fact, the labor education advocated by China today is also a clear manifestation of paying attention to the actual life of students. Not only is knowledge systematic, but activities also have rules to follow. Especially in the immature period of children, using children’s active nature to stimulate their enthusiasm to participate in activities will help enrich their life experience in childhood and highlight the true significance of children education.

In addition, individual differences are an unchangeable fact. A progressive society regards individual differences as treasures

because it finds its own means of growth in individual differences[6]. If educators use their own authority to replace students' thinking, over time, students will no longer be able to think and create independently, and eventually become victims of other people's ideas. Therefore, we should not only oppose the education that is eager for quick success and instant benefit, but also resolutely overcome the education that ignores children's dominant position and treats children's differences and particularity perfunctorily. The immature state of children means that they have plastic and open abilities. As educators, they should first help children adapt to the external environment, master the characteristics of children's psychological development, and pay attention to arranging courses and teaching in combination with children's characteristics and needs, so that students like to actively acquire knowledge and enjoy learning.

4.3 Education Promotes Individual Socialization and Cultivates Socialist Builders

“Society determines the future of teenagers in the process of guiding their activities, which in turn determines the future of society itself.”[1] Even though many people can realize this, there will be various deviations and errors in the actual teaching process. Especially in the post truth era, people's sense of autonomy has been greatly enhanced, and people's distrust and egoism have brought new difficulties to social development. While emphasizing morality and cultivating people, education in China also has the problem of emphasizing intellectual education and neglecting moral education. This is the result of not grasping the psychology of students, especially the young students, and paying too much attention to economic benefits. Dewey is deeply aware that children are the future citizens of society and an important part of collective strength. They should assume more responsibilities now. Educators should help students establish a sense of collective honor and dedication at their immature stage. As a socialist country, China's core idea is to help each other, distribute fairly and achieve common prosperity. Therefore, in terms of educational purposes, we should cultivate “social man” with a sense of historical responsibility and social responsibility[7], so that the country can achieve more stable and high-quality development.

In short, it is one aspect to have a correct understanding of children's immature state, and how to treat children in educational practice is another aspect. No matter in the past or now, it seems difficult for adults to truly educate students according to the law of children's development. Educators' rude treatment of children's immaturity for distant and external goals is essentially a short-sighted restraint of growth. However, “the nature of society basically depends on the guidance given to children's activities in the previous era.”[1] Therefore, we should focus our thinking on how to provide appropriate education according to the immature state of children. The current educational practice is still oriented to further education and employment, rather than achieving the perfection of human life and human growth. There is still a long way to go to correct people's understanding of “immature state”. We still need to make unremitting efforts to cultivate real people.

References

- [1] Dewey. Democracy and education[M]. Beijing: People's education press, 1990.
- [2] Montagu. Growing young[M]. Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1989.
- [3] Dan Peng. On the immaturity of children[D]. Nanjing Normal University, 2016.
- [4] B. A. Sukhomlinsky et al. Give your whole heart to your child[M]. Tianjin: Tianjin People's publishing house, 1981.
- [5] Xin Yu. How can children participate in political life – Enlightenment from Democracy and Education[J]. Journal of Shaanxi Preschool Normal University, 2018, 34 (10): 93-97.
- [6] Law Rousseau J. J. et al. Emil[M]. Beijing: People's education press, 2001.
- [7] Chengqian Xia, Zhiqiong Tao. On the social value orientation of Dewey's view on children and its modern significance[J]. Educational theory and practice, 2015, 35 (28): 12-15.

Author Profile

Hongrui Chen (1998 -), female, from Chengdu, Sichuan Province, is a 2020 master candidate majoring in principles of pedagogy in the school of teacher education of Huzhou University.