

# Philosophical Interpretation of Dewey's Moral Education Thought and Its Implications for Moral Education in Chinese Schools

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**Abstract:** Under the background of the new curriculum reform, school education increasingly emphasizes the central role of students and focuses more on cultivating students' abilities rather than just "pure knowledge." The same applies to moral education in schools. Traditional school moral education is showing growing signs of inadequacy in the context of the new curriculum reform. It is urgent for moral education practitioners to address the inefficiency in school moral education and analyze the underlying problems. This paper attempts to start from Dewey's moral education philosophy, focusing on the core ideas of his philosophical thought, and proposes an "interdisciplinary moral education" strategy based on the current situation of school moral education.

**Keywords:** Dewey; Moral Education; School Moral Education

## Introduction

China is currently undergoing a period of social transformation, during which the subjectivity of individuals has gradually eroded amid the conflict between indigenous culture and Western cultural values, as well as the contradiction between historical traditions and modern concepts. Current school moral education is facing severe challenges. This paper seeks to explore the implications of Dewey's moral education theory for the development of moral education in Chinese schools, starting from an analysis of the inefficiencies in current school moral education.

## 1. Dewey's Moral Education Thought

Dewey believed that "morality, in its potential form, includes all of our actions." This is the premise and foundation of Dewey's moral education philosophy, and it is also the first concept that needs to be clarified when discussing Dewey's views on moral education.

### 1.1 Dewey's Meaning of Morality

Firstly, the meaning of morality in Dewey's perspective is strongly colored by democratic ideals. He considered morality as altruism that exists under the premise of realizing one's own interests. It is a simple morality that takes place in everyday life. The core characteristic of a democratic society is that all members should enjoy the benefits they deserve; those who contribute should be rewarded, and there should be a balance between contribution and reward. This perspective offers significant insights for today's discussion on the content of school moral education.

Secondly, Dewey believed that the meaning of morality is broad and that morality universally exists in all human behaviors. It should not be confined to a specific area. In China, the concept of "general moral education" has long been adopted in schools, which encompasses moral education, political education, and ideological education. Dewey's view on moral education is also not limited to the narrow sense of moral education; the discussions in democratic society contain his views on politics and ideology, and they all fall under the "general moral education" concept. This confirms the value and significance of discussing Dewey's insights on moral education in the same context.

## ***1.2 Approaches and Methods of Implementing Moral Education***

Dewey argued that traditional moral education only teaches abstract "concepts about morality," which only enables students to memorize various moral terms and concepts, without helping them understand the underlying motives and meanings. Therefore, teachers should guide students to form a self-concept that aligns with the requirements of morality. This approach reflects an inquiry-based, consultative, and discussion-oriented teaching method. Teachers are encouraged to design real-life situations and dilemmas to stimulate student discussion and reflection, thus promoting the development of moral thinking and judgment.

In addition, Dewey believed that the ultimate goal of all education is to socialize children, and moral education is no exception. On this basis, he proposed a socialized approach to moral education, urging schools to be built as miniature societies—social environments that are easy for young people to understand and engage with. This helps students prepare to take on diverse responsibilities and participate in various social roles in future societal life. Moreover, Dewey advocated for an active rather than a didactic approach to moral education. Morality originates from experience, and knowledge gained and tested through experience holds moral significance. He argued that school moral education should fully utilize three key curriculum resources: school life, teaching materials, and teaching methods. Students should "learn by doing" and "learn from experience" in activities, gaining moral experiences through engaging with real-life situations.

## **2. Philosophical Interpretation of Dewey's Moral Education Thought**

Based on the basic principles of Marxist philosophy and historical materialism, Dewey's moral education can be interpreted as follows:

Firstly, the economic base determines the superstructure, and the superstructure has a reciprocal effect on the economic base. The relationship between the economic base and the superstructure is a dialectical unity. By maintaining the consistency of moral objectives, the outcome of moral education will be more conducive to actively promoting the development of the social, political, and economic spheres. Behind Dewey's moral education philosophy is the persistent adherence to the unchanging objectives of moral education in Chinese universities, ensuring the consistency of moral education goals and continuously consolidating the positive outcomes of moral education in higher education institutions.

Secondly, the existence and development of society are objective. According to Dewey, the environment plays a crucial role in shaping experience. Experience "is in a dialectical process, within the conflict of material or natural environments, linking human beings as active organisms with their ever-changing surroundings." Dewey believed that humans and the environment are never separate; there is mutual influence and interaction between the organism and its environment. The environment is the source of experience and the field in which experience is tested. Without the environment, experience could not form. Dewey emphasized the close connection between the things that shape experience and the process of human action and experience.

Thirdly, practical activities are objectively essential to educational processes. Practical activities align moral cognition with moral behavior, making them an important means of character education. Dewey believed that life manifests the knowledge and experiences students gain at school. Students participate in moral education activities according to their subjective will, and ultimately, these are expressed through practical life activities. Therefore, necessary and adequate space should be given to practical activities in moral education, with organized and planned content filling the educational process, fully utilizing the students' subjective initiative.

## **3. Problems in the Current Situation of Moral Education in Chinese Schools**

### ***3.1 Schools' Neglect of Students' Subjectivity***

In the book *Learning to Live*, it is pointed out that in modern school education, children's personalities are split into two disconnected worlds: "In one world, children engage in learning like puppets detached from reality; in the other world, they seek self-satisfaction by engaging in activities contrary to educational objectives." This illustrates the reality of moral education in Chinese schools, which, by neglecting students' subjectivity, impedes their growth. From the content perspective, moral education teaches students "noble" and "sanctified" moral knowledge rather than starting from the students' actual

situations, making it difficult for students, living in a society with multiple values, to find a connection between their inner cognitive structures and experiences and this moral knowledge. This makes it hard for them to internalize it as a belief and externalize it as behavior. It is difficult to judge whether students' actions come from the heart or are driven by external expectations. In the teaching process of moral education, the relationship between educators and students is one of subject and object, without communication or two-way interaction between them. This results in moral education becoming a "top-down" imposition, creating a situation where "you speak, I listen; I act according to my own will."

### ***3.2 Schools' Disregard for Students' Non-Cognitive Factors***

"Intellectualism," which centers on knowledge, suggests that the quantity of knowledge is directly proportional to the quality of talent. Under this guidance, school education follows a one-way teaching and indoctrination model, where educators solely impart moral knowledge to students. After this one-way transmission, the students' knowledge acquisition is evaluated through exams, training, and other written forms to assess the effectiveness of moral education. This traditional view and method of moral education are seriously disconnected from reality, and the knowledge learned by students is divorced from practical life and their surrounding environment. It can be said that moral education that only focuses on moral cognition cannot be considered complete. Complete moral education is a combination of rational and non-rational factors.

### ***3.3 Lack of Moral Education Elements in Subject Teaching***

In actual school moral education in China, these potential and important moral education resources are not fully utilized, leading to their neglect and waste. Dewey believed that the lamentable separation between intellectual training and moral training in current moral education results in the tragic division between acquiring knowledge and developing character. Many subjects tend to emphasize the systematic theoretical framework of the discipline or focus on high efficiency and quality in teaching, without incorporating moral education as one of the goals in subject teaching. Little do they realize that "education in knowledge and skills turns people into mere production tools, shaping them into various parts of the overall production machine." Teaching that removes moral education goals from subject instruction cannot be considered true education. "Modern education is heading toward this alienated danger: in the pursuit of knowledge and skills, it inadvertently or intentionally abandons the passion and aspiration for goodness. Education without moral enthusiasm is essentially directionless, not knowing where its destination lies." Teachers should all be implementers of moral education. Moral education should be subtly integrated into the teaching process. A student with good moral qualities is naturally one with a strong drive and a good spirit of mutual help, and these qualities will serve as the driving force for their academic learning rather than hindering the achievement of teaching goals. In this way, moral education and subject teaching can create a positive feedback loop.

## **4. Insights and Philosophical Significance of Dewey's Moral Education Thought**

As mentioned above, an important issue in current moral education in China is the rigidity of its methods, which still focus predominantly on traditional knowledge transmission. Such an approach can only allow students to acquire "moral knowledge," and this is merely a possibility. Therefore, based on my expertise in curriculum and pedagogy, I attempt to propose a new organizational method for "interdisciplinary moral education" in an effort to improve the current state of moral education in China.

This attempt mainly focuses on content organization. Under the framework of interdisciplinary moral education, school moral education could consider organizing content based on topics, large projects, phenomena, or major concepts.

The moral education method, which is centered on traditional knowledge transmission, can only allow students to receive "moral knowledge." The rigidity of this moral education approach is a significant issue in current moral education in China. Therefore, this attempt proposes a new organizational method—"interdisciplinary moral education"—in order to improve the current situation. School moral education, under the interdisciplinary moral education framework, could consider organizing content based on topics, large projects, phenomena, or major concepts.

Here, I will provide a brief explanation of content organization based on phenomena. Phenomenon-based teaching is a method that integrates multiple disciplines around a specific phenomenon, theme, or topic. It focuses on the teacher's leading role in curriculum design, while also emphasizing the student's

active role in the learning process. This type of learning is focused on the topic itself and facilitates knowledge acquisition through the integration of different subjects<sup>[1-9]</sup>.

More importantly, this focus on the topic itself enables a connection between society and schools, rather than merely focusing on textbook knowledge. To some extent, it allows for a connection between the school environment and the outside world, which reflects the core ideas of Dewey's moral education philosophy. In fact, phenomenon-based teaching is also known as topic-based teaching or integrated teaching. It emphasizes general competencies and collaboration between different subjects (as shown in Figure 1). It is a new type of teaching organization that combines the cultivation of abilities with subject teaching, offering a "both the forest and the trees" approach<sup>[10]</sup>.

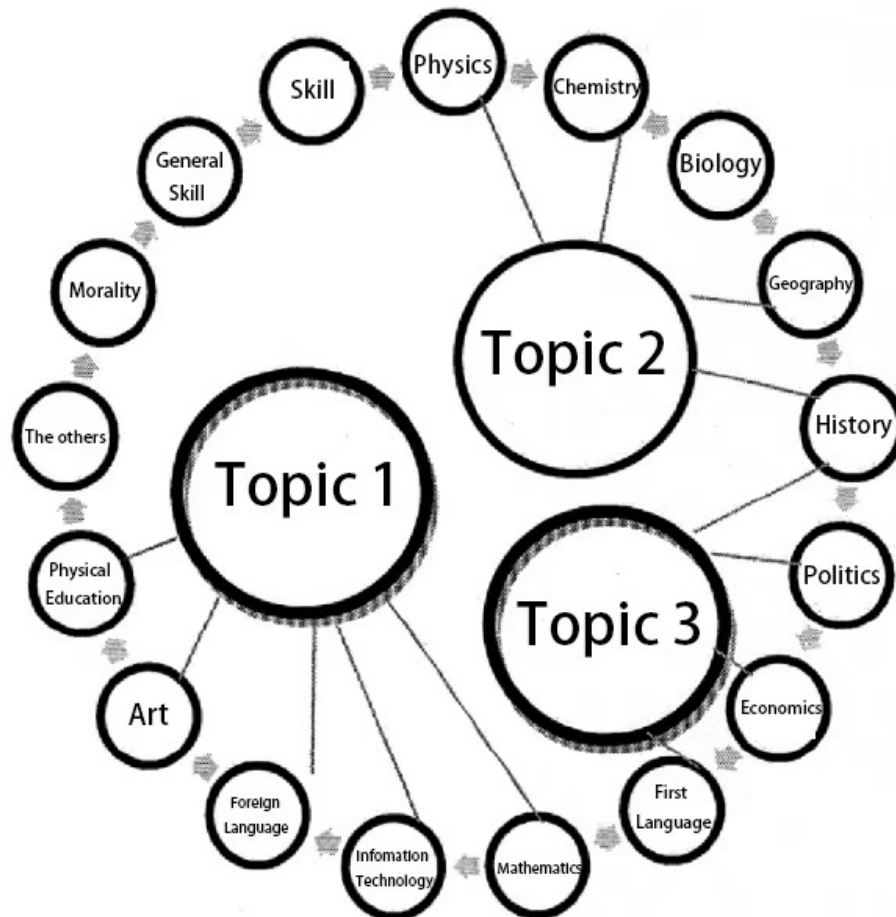


Figure 1: Diagram of Phenomenon-Based Teaching

The specific application in school moral education can be reflected as follows: when teachers conduct moral education, they integrate interdisciplinary teaching around a certain topic. For example, in the seventh grade "Moral and Law" (five-year school system) textbook, focusing on the theme "Life Needs Law," teachers can integrate moral education, history, and art to explain this topic. For instance, students can discuss "Life Needs Law" through examples from their surroundings or current social news. They can also illustrate it through relevant historical stories or create a series of cartoons about "Life Needs Law." Regardless of the method, when students "actively participate," they will gain a deeper understanding of the core moral concept of "Life Needs Law," and it is more likely to be practiced, ultimately achieving alignment between moral education inside and outside the school. As Dewey stated, real moral education is only possible when school-based moral education connects with countless social interests outside school<sup>[11]</sup>.

Dewey's moral education philosophy incorporates rich philosophical thoughts, and the implementation of moral education should return to real-life contexts. It cannot simply replace social life with school life, nor can students be expected to automatically transform their school life experiences into social experiences based on their own abilities. The formation of correct moral concepts is a long process. Therefore, in carrying out school moral education, there should be long-term, grade-based social practice activities that connect the "small society" within the school with the "big society" outside.

Dewey's moral education philosophy emphasizes the central role of students in their moral education, sharply critiques the traditional, coercive, and one-way moral education model, and offers profound reflections from the perspective of "becoming a qualified citizen." For current school moral education, Dewey's thoughts are highly inspiring. Despite some undeniable limitations of Dewey's moral education philosophy, if schools at all levels and types follow a consistent approach to cultivating students as "qualified citizens," moral education across various stages will form a synergistic effect. The experiences students gain in the "school environment" will be solidly enriched and enhanced, and the related moral education activities will achieve more positive results. Dewey's moral education philosophy is a great thought born in a great era, closely aligned with China's national conditions. Continuous and in-depth research into Dewey's moral education philosophy will certainly contribute to the healthy development of moral education in China's schools<sup>[12]</sup>.

Of course, my thoughts on interdisciplinary moral education are still shallow and incomplete, but its essence is to connect school moral education with society through interdisciplinary methods and new content organization, creating social interests to truly achieve moral education.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Dewey's moral education philosophy, rich in philosophical ideas, holds significant inspirational value for current school moral education. It closely aligns with China's national conditions, and continuous, in-depth research into Dewey's moral education philosophy will undoubtedly contribute to the healthy development of moral education in China's schools. Moreover, using interdisciplinary methods and new content organization to connect school moral education with society and create social interests is a beneficial exploration toward truly realizing moral education.

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