



# Teachers with Life Wisdom: John Dewey's View of Teachers and Its Inspiration for Teacher Development in China

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**Abstract.** John Dewey, a renowned American philosopher, psychologist, and educator, offers valuable insights into teacher education by challenging traditional views and advocating for the pivotal role of teachers. Drawing from Dewey's view of teachers, this article proposes three key insights to enhance the professional growth and wisdom of teachers: promoting a modern understanding of teachers, transitioning teachers from technical orientation to reflective practice, and encouraging continuous learning to broaden their knowledge base. Cultivating teachers' life wisdom is essential for professional development and teaching effectiveness.

**Keywords:** view of Teachers, teachers' professional development, role of teachers, Dewey.

## 1 Introduction

National prosperity hinges on strengthening its educators, and robust education is built upon empowered teachers. Teachers are the cornerstone of a nation's prosperity, and teacher education serves as a crucial conduit for nurturing high-quality educators, occupying a significant position within the national educational system. "China's Education Modernization 2035" promulgated by the State Council, identifies the construction of a high-quality, professional, and innovative teaching workforce as one of the ten strategic objectives of educational modernization. It is regarded as a vital pillar for advancing educational modernization and building a socialist cultural powerhouse<sup>[1]</sup>. Concepts precede actions, and the construction of a high-quality teaching workforce necessitates theoretical underpinnings. Teacher beliefs guide professional growth and shape educators' perspectives on children, pedagogy, and curriculum. Exploring modern teacher beliefs that can lead professional development and foster educational reform is imperative. By studying Dewey's pedagogical beliefs, examining the value orientations of foreign pedagogical thought, and understanding the developmental concepts and influencing factors of pedagogical thought under different backgrounds, we can broaden our horizons, transcend cognitive biases, and approach teacher education from

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diverse perspectives. Such efforts contribute to the enhancement and innovation of the teacher education theoretical system.

Dewey's philosophy of teacher education is rooted in his broader educational philosophy. At the time, teacher education in the United States predominantly emphasized the fundamental qualities of teachers, focusing on the mastery of specific teaching and classroom management methods. However, Dewey took a different approach, emphasizing the significance of educational theory in teacher preparation and advocating for higher-level and more constructive requirements for educators. He called for teachers to possess elevated qualifications to effectively fulfill their roles. Furthermore, Dewey initiated a series of activities aimed at safeguarding teachers' authority, which had a significant impact on American society at the time. Many of his ideas still hold practical value today, and certain propositions can serve as reference points for reforming teacher education in our country, thereby contributing to the cultivation of a high-quality teaching workforce.

## **2 The Content of Dewey's Teacher Perspective**

From Dewey's perspective, the status and role of teachers are not overlooked but rather highlighted at a higher level. In his view, teachers are not merely titles but rather a fusion of various social roles. "A role is the behavioral pattern exhibited by an individual in a certain social position based on societal objective expectations, adapting to the social environment through one's subjective abilities"<sup>[2]</sup>. In traditional education, teachers are seen as authorities on knowledge and managers, disregarding the vibrant existence of children's lives. Dewey deeply criticizes this tradition of neglecting the existence of life and the "arrogant" attitude of teachers. Specifically, Dewey's teacher perspective can be elucidated from the following aspects.

### **2.1 Initiators and Reflectors of Teaching Activities**

#### **Emphasizing Learning Through Doing**

Dewey believes, "The true center of interconnected school subjects is not science, not literature, not history, not geography, but the social activities of the child itself"<sup>[3]</sup>. Teachers are the initiators and reflectors of these "social activities." Advocating for a "student-centered" classroom does not diminish the significance of teaching activities; rather, teaching activities remain the focal point of student learning. Here, teaching activities no longer solely consist of a series of instructional behaviors designed by teachers; they also encompass active student participation, imbued with practical significance as social activities. As initiators of teaching activities, teachers should determine the direction of children's experiences and the specific ways in which activities unfold. Furthermore, Dewey emphasizes that the "activities" initiated by teachers should be as expansive as the questions they pose. Each activity cannot exist in isolation; it must be effectively linked with preceding and subsequent activities, capable of triggering fur-

ther engagement to evoke children's intense curiosity and desire for knowledge. Otherwise, even the most engaging activities may become aimless due to a lack of educational value.

### **Coordinating the Relationship Between Direct and Indirect Experiences**

Experience, as a concept encompassing both active and passive elements, distinguishes between direct and indirect experiences primarily based on their acquisition methods. Dewey does not oppose indirect experience per se but rather opposes its complete detachment from real-life situations and disregard for societal needs, particularly condemning the imparting of indirect experiences that overlook children's experiences and feelings in the real environment. He rejects the inefficient methods of imparting indirect experiences in traditional education, where teachers often disregard children's psychological levels. Direct and indirect experiences hold equal significance for children's development; they are neither inherently good nor bad but require careful consideration by teachers in terms of the choice of teaching methods and content. Dewey advocates for children to "learn by doing", where the content of "doing", i.e., the content of experiences, needs to be carefully selected and arranged by teachers. The process of "doing", i.e., the behavior of experiencing, must be guided by teachers, reflecting their role as leaders.

### **Growing into Reflective Teachers through Reflective Teaching**

Teachers should and must be reflectors of teaching activities. Only continuous and deep reflection can provide sustained intrinsic motivation for teaching activities, endowing teachers with vitality in teaching. The teaching method of "learning by doing" benefits both teachers and students immensely. For students, "learning by doing" means guiding them to actively acquire and transform experiences, while for teachers, it means helping them reflect on the teaching process and design teaching activities more effectively. We should not only recognize the value of students' growth in "learning by doing" but also see the significance of teachers' self-construction through it. Although the focus of child-centered activities is indeed on students' individual development, teachers' initiation and organization of activities also involve them actively participating in students' activities, truly engaging in students' life-long growth journey. Throughout the process, teachers not only see students' progress but also recognize their own transformation. Through "learning by doing", teachers learn how to fully understand students' instincts and interests, how to initiate teaching activities, and, most importantly, how to reflect on themselves.

## **2.2 Cultivating Children's Thinking Abilities and Enlightening Children's Intelligence as Leaders**

### **Cultivating Children's Thinking Abilities**

Dewey believes that the cultivation of children's thinking abilities by teachers is the best embodiment of teachers as leaders. He argues that experiences truly valuable or meaningful in education need to be acquired through thinking, which is the correct

method for transforming and reorganizing experiences. "Thinking is consciously attempting to discover the specific connections between what we are doing and the results we are producing, connecting the two"<sup>[4]</sup>. Thinking is the foundation for cultivating other aspects of competence. Without thinking, the cultivation of other competencies would be futile, and education would be meaningless. The cultivation of reflective thinking ability is the key to cultivating students' thinking abilities. Dewey points out that "the function of reflective thinking is to transform vague, suspect, contradictory, and somewhat discordant situations of experience into clear, orderly, stable, and harmonious situations"<sup>[5]</sup>. Teachers should guide children to transition smoothly from perplexing and challenging situations to stable and rational ones. Through this transition, children, feeling accomplished and satisfied due to the updating and improvement of their existing experiences, are encouraged to engage in another round of reflection.

### **Igniting the Wisdom of Children**

Achieving growth in students' intelligence relies not only on the expansion of knowledge but more importantly on the formation of thinking, especially reflective thinking. Teachers play a crucial role as facilitators of students' intelligence formation. Firstly, teachers carefully guide the direction of children's experience transformation, aiding in their active growth, which is the starting point for the development of children's intelligence. Secondly, teachers stimulate children's learning interests by posing high-quality questions, encouraging them to actively seek new materials, engage in systematic and continuous exploration, and gradually develop good thinking habits. Lastly, teachers pay more attention to stimulating children's curiosity, thirst for knowledge, learning interests, and initiative<sup>[6]</sup>. Dewey believes that "if teachers teach in contradiction to children's natural interests, they will surely find it very difficult. But if they establish a relationship of natural cooperation with children's nature, then teaching becomes much easier for children to accept"<sup>[7]</sup>. Therefore, as leaders in fostering the development of children's intelligence, it is essential for teachers to stimulate children's learning interests and turn them into intrinsic motivation for learning.

## **2.3 Practitioner of "Child-Centered Education"**

### **Understanding "Child-Centered"**

When discussing "child-centered" education, most people immediately think of Dewey, as if "child-centered" has become a label for Dewey's educational philosophy. Understanding "child-centered" education should not involve a binary opposition, where placing children at the center of education implies marginalizing or diminishing the role of teachers or society. In fact, Dewey believed that the free growth of children is inseparable from the guidance of teachers and the democratization of society<sup>[8]</sup>. The concept of "child-centered" education played a role in reconciling the conflicts between individuals and society in America at the time. The development of children is not contradictory to the development of human society; highlighting the position of children is aimed at reforming education for the better, as education serves an important social function: fostering new citizens for the new era and transforming society to promote

the development of democracy<sup>[9]</sup>. In Dewey's educational theory, "child-centered" means that all educational activities revolve around children, with the content, methods, and purposes of education based on realistic considerations of children's needs and aimed at their continuous growth. It does not imply letting children develop freely without guidance from teachers.

### **Practicing "Child-Centered"**

In the educational process, teachers should fully understand the significance of "child-centeredness" and implement it in children's activities, becoming steadfast practitioners. When practicing the "child-centered" approach, teachers should pay attention to two key aspects. Firstly, teachers should not overlook or weaken their own roles and identities while focusing on "child-centeredness". Genuine education cannot proceed without the active involvement of teachers; they cannot afford to be passive observers. Secondly, besides managing their own roles and functions, teachers should also carefully balance the degree of "child-centeredness". As participants in children's growth processes, teachers, in their capacity as leaders, cannot entirely relinquish control and allow children free rein. Dewey pointed out that blindly accommodating children's instincts and needs without analysis is "truly foolish", as it cannot achieve the intended purpose; it is a complete misunderstanding of the conditions for independent thinking<sup>[10]</sup>. Therefore, as practitioners of "child-centered" education, teachers must not only fully comprehend the profound implications of putting children at the center but also rationally recognize both the central role of children and the leadership role of teachers. More importantly, they should constantly integrate this awareness into the educational process, serving as guiding beacons for future work.

## **3 Dewey's Teacher Perspective and Enlightenment for the Professional Growth of Teachers in China**

Studying Dewey's educational ideas on teaching aims to provide insights for the reform of teacher education in China. The first consideration is the issue of applicability. The United States and China are two countries with significant differences in politics, economy, and culture. However, considering the historical context, the social background in which Dewey's educational ideas emerged shares some similarities with the current period of rapid development and transformation in Chinese society. China's productivity is rapidly growing, leading to changes in its economic and social structures, as well as deepening modernization of knowledge. Educational reform in China is urgent. Drawing lessons from Dewey's educational ideas can provide valuable insights for the reform of teacher education in China. The main points of enlightenment are as follows.

### **3.1 Establishing a Modern Teacher Perspective to Promote Professional Development of Teachers**

The professionalization of teachers is an inevitable outcome of modern educational development. Placing children at the center of education, as Dewey did, does not negate or weaken the role of teachers, relegating them to a passive position. On the contrary, Dewey raises the bar for teachers, increasing the complexity of their work during the teaching process. It's not enough for teachers to only know what to teach; they must also understand how to teach and which teaching methods are most effective. In modern education, teachers need to be experts not only in subject knowledge but also in pedagogy and educational theory. The notion that "scholars are not necessarily good teachers" is incorrect, as is the belief that teachers do not require high academic standards. Excellent teachers must possess deep academic knowledge, broad academic perspectives, a commitment to continuous learning and staying updated with the latest research, while also understanding the essence of education. Teachers are not just masters of instruction but also navigators of knowledge and guides in life. Only by fulfilling these roles can teachers fully perform their functions, develop students' intellect, unearth their potential, inspire their creativity, and cultivate their healthy personalities.

### **3.2 Transitioning from Technical Teachers to Reflective Teachers**

Dewey's proposed five-step reflective thinking process is considered one of the intellectual origins of the reflective teacher and teacher education movement that emerged in the United States in the 1980s. Reflective teachers are contrasted with technical teachers. Technical teachers view teaching as a technical endeavor, where they primarily play the role of technicians, imparting knowledge based on pre-designed curricula to achieve predetermined objectives. The training of technical teachers emphasizes the development of teaching behaviors and skills but often neglects critical reflection on these behaviors. It tends to encourage teachers to follow prescribed methods and teaching routines without encouraging careful reflection on teaching philosophies, student thinking, and the consequences of teaching actions and alternative approaches. For reflective teachers, engaging in research and theoretical study is not about providing rules and directives for classroom application but rather about offering exploratory knowledge and methods useful for contemplating teaching issues and practices. Teachers should possess not only teaching skills but also inquiry skills. The transition from technical to reflective teaching is not only an essential aspect of the professionalization process for teachers but also a requirement of the modern era for educators.

### **3.3 Expanding Teachers' Knowledge Base and Acquire New Skills**

Before the widespread use of the Internet, teachers and classrooms were the primary sources of knowledge for students, exerting the most significant influence on their growth. Therefore, educators always had confidence in controlling the content and direction of student learning. However, with the proliferation of information technology, students' avenues and means of acquiring knowledge are no longer limited to teachers

and textbooks. Computers, smartphones, and other information terminals have long been integrated into their lives and learning, even accompanying their growth, profoundly influencing their worldview and behavioral habits. They crave flexibility in learning progress, richness in individual learning opportunities, frequent use of digital resources, and even more access to electronic devices for learning resources. This places higher demands on teachers.

To meet these demands, teachers must continuously acquire new knowledge and methods, using a broader knowledge base and rich teaching experience to meet students' increasingly diverse needs. Teachers should not only possess knowledge within their subject areas but also have extensive relevant knowledge. This equips them with the ability to flexibly apply knowledge and skills, enriching classroom content, enlivening the teaching atmosphere, broadening students' horizons, and stimulating their interest and innovation. This enables students to experience each class as a master's lecture, fostering their intellectual and spiritual growth.

## 4 Conclusion

In summary, Dewey's insights underscore the necessity for a modern perspective on teachers, emphasizing their pivotal role, reflective practice, and continuous learning. These findings have profound implications for teacher education and professional development, highlighting the importance of reshaping traditional notions, fostering reflective practitioners, and promoting lifelong learning. Looking ahead, leveraging Dewey's perspective can enrich teacher training programs and enhance teaching effectiveness, ultimately benefiting students' learning outcomes. This underscores the ongoing relevance and significance of Dewey's views in shaping contemporary educational practices and policies.

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