

# Characteristics and Reflections on Moral Education in American Schools

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**Abstract:** American moral education has its own characteristics. Firstly, containing a certain degree of permeability and concealment. Secondly, attaching great importance to the joint efforts made by families, schools and society. Thirdly, respecting the subject status of students to arouse their enthusiasm. Last but not least, building psychological counseling agencies to offer consulting services.

**Keywords:** Methods of moral education; Implicit education; Joint efforts; Students' initiative; Psychological counseling

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## 1 Introduction

Many countries in the world regard moral education as an important part of education. The moral education in each country has its own historical details and characteristics. The United States is one of the most developed countries in the world and attaches great importance to moral education. Moral Education in the United States has obvious characteristics. Based on the viewpoints of several famous educators in American history, this paper sorts out the characteristics of American moral education.

## 2 Containing a certain degree of permeability and concealment

From 1870s to the early 20th century, pragmatism blossomed and reached its peak due to its adaptation to America's social development and became an important ideology of Western countries. The representative of pragmatism is John Dewey, an American philosopher and educator. He criticized the traditional schooling and proposed that real education should derive from life and society. In his opinion, "we cannot live without education, so education is life", "education is the transformation of experience", "society is another pattern of school", and "learning by doing". That is to say, society is the major training ground of moral education, so schools needn't offer special curriculum of moral education, but should organize students to participate in social practice to shape their personality and characteristics<sup>[1]</sup>. In the 1960s, Louis Raths of the Theory of Value Clarification advocated that people must make value judgments and clarification based on the real life. American psychologists Bandura and Mitchell believe that human knowledge, behavior and skills were formed in social interaction through observing and imitating others. Under the guidance of these theories, the United States attaches great importance to the influence of social practice and living environment on the generation of one's moral quality. In today's America, they not only set up research

programs including civic education, moral education and religious education, but also actively carry out community activities, social practice, voluntary labor, *etc.* "Permeability and concealment" is the distinctive feature of the methods of moral education in American schools, which makes Americans accept and agree with the Social norms, ideology system and political ruling imperceptibly. "Political socialization has the potential not only to make the legitimacy of state authority be widely recognized and accepted, but also to reduce the cost of social ruling and achieve social stability"<sup>[2]</sup>."

Taking teaching religious morality and patriotism as the core, taking compulsory indoctrination as the main method, the traditional American moral education form from colonial period to the 19th century has been shaped. Although indoctrination can obtain short-term results, it lacks flexibility and long-term vitality. In class, teachers need to explain the connotation of moral rules and students must memorize it and pass the exams. Things are the same from elementary school, middle school, high school to college. The forced indoctrination is the tradition and advantage of moral Education in many countries, but the limitations of this approach are also very obvious. Boring content, single process and compulsory methods easily make people, especially the teenagers, rebel against it, which finally results in people's doubt and even opposition.

In the 21st century, through the critical reflection on traditional and modern moral education modes, indoctrination education and infiltration education gradually become integrated in theory and practice, which promotes the development of moral education in American schools. It is necessary and reasonable to maintain the advantages of the method of Inculcation, and meanwhile to carry out appropriate implicit education methods. The permeability of implicit education methods can make up the disadvantages of the coerciveness of compulsory education methods well. Thus, we need to integrate the moral education into the culture, media, environment and life practice so as to make people cultivate their moral characteristics consciously. For example, schools should offer more cultural activities or social activities, through which encourage students to participate in practical activities instead of being bounded by the text books. Theatrical performances and voluntary labor are effective ways to promote the society's ideas and cultivate students' moral characteristics. Schools should also improve libraries, gymnasiums, museums and other cultural facilities to

create a favorable atmosphere, so that students will be influenced unconsciously. Besides, Internet, television or other media tools can be fully used to promote positive thoughts and deeds. Only by increasing the proportion of implicit education can moral education be truly integrated into students' life and be accepted at their leisure time.

Compared with explicit education methods, implicit education methods which penetrate moral education into one's life by using various loved forms tend to achieve better results. But they are not applicable to all occasions and objects. When using implicit education methods, we need to pay attention to individuals' ideological status and characteristics, and try to combine and balance explicit education methods and implicit education methods.

### **3 Attaching great importance to the joint efforts made by families, schools and society**

On the basis of Dewey's pragmatism, American educator Lawrence Kohlberg puts forward "Cognitive Moral Development Mode exerted by the atmosphere that family, school and social create together on the formation of students' moral character and the moral atmosphere of school has the most direct influence on students. Thus he requires that teachers should have profound knowledge and noble morality so that they can infect students with their charisma. He believes that the moral education course is just one of the factors promoting the ethical and cultural quality of students. When we turn to analyze the broader living environment, we will consider the moral atmosphere that family, school and social create together. This is actually a comprehensive education realized through the interaction and cooperation of family, school and society. Today, the United States still attaches great importance to the joint efforts made by families, schools and society. They focus especially on the impact that family atmosphere exert on their children. They require their children to think independently and stand on their own feet from an early age. In addition, American schools not only actively provide moral education and civic education courses as well as a variety of practical activities, but also specially value community education. Some communities and groups often carry out various volunteer service and other activities. It can be said that once the family, school and society work together to improve people's moral

characters, humanities accomplishment and political literacy, they tend to form a huge force and make better achievements.

In fact, it is inappropriate to divide family education, school education and social education because they coexist and intersect with each other. They should be integrated to improve the level of individuals' morals training. For example, schools should engage in launching more social practice, so that students can put what they have learned into practice to solve their own problems and difficulties. During this period, students can accumulate more self-experience and develop their sense of social responsibility and mission. As to the society, it should carry out some charity or volunteer service, publicize positive thoughts and deeds and perfect science museums or other facilities to create a good social environment for the formation of students' characteristics. Meanwhile, the teachers should timely communicate with parents about students' learning conditions, living conditions and state of mind through holding parents meeting or doing home visits. In fact, under the collaboration of teachers, parents and the society, many problems can be solved easily. So don't let our children get away from the society once they enter school or want to go back to school once they enter the society.

Family education, school education and social education are three interconnected segments. Without anyone, the chain of moral education cannot achieve good results. Thus, the joint effects made by the three aspects must be fully used in today's moral education to push the sound development of "education chain".

#### **4 Respecting the subject status of students to arouse their enthusiasm and initiative**

Dewey, the representative of pragmatism, believes that one shortcoming of education at his time was too much interference by educators. He said that there were "too much stimulation and control from teachers." Students can learn from school life consciously, so moral training should not be conducted by the teachers and what teachers should do is to properly guide students with their own experience and knowledge timely. He encouraged students to pursue "academic freedom" and opposed teachers to impose their own values on the students. Lawrence Kohlberg proposed "the Just Community Approach". It requires many persons to form a group and each member of the group should be involved in decision-making and management, so everyone will

comply with the rules of collective behavior. In such a group, each person has the responsibility to maintain the group's peace and order<sup>[3]</sup>. So one can build up the ability of self-discipline, and the ultimate aim of the Just Community Approach is to enable students to educate themselves. L. Raths considers that the formation of individual values ultimately depends on the individual's self-direction and self-clarification. Thus when facing different people, different things, different ideas and behaviors, students should know how to reflect independently and tell right from wrong, and at the same time rethink whether he/she has the same problem. America's moral educators universally respect the subjectivity of students and intend to centre on students' self-development. American psychologist B. R. Hergenhahn said that every student should be taken as an unique person with their own feelings, rather than an object that is granted something<sup>[4]</sup>. Americans emphasize mobilizing the initiative and enthusiasm of students in the process of moral education, and they inspire students to make their own moral judgments and choices on the basis of independent thinking and then give them proper evaluation. Therefore, students can not only learn the relevant knowledge, but also have the ability of thinking, making judgments and solving problems independently.

It's necessary to reform this mode of education ignoring the subject status of students, and promote mutual respect and interaction between teachers and students, which can actively mobilize their initiative and creativity and guide students to think and judge independently. As to teachers, they should carry out different educational projects according to different status quo of the thinking of students. In the class, teachers should not only impart knowledge, but also guide students to think independently by raising questions and creating simulation scenes. In addition, we should organize students to go to the countryside, visit factories and take part in activities of the local community, through which students' ability of moral judgment and collective consciousness of collaboration can be trained and their stable ideological characteristics can be formed.

In fact, only if the content of moral education are accepted and digested by the students can we achieve the goal of improving students' moral quality. During the process of education, from the aspect of "teaching", educators are the subject; but from the angle of "learning", the students are the subject. The relationship

between teachers and students is different from that between the subject and object. There is no denying that teachers and students are both subjects, so we must reverse the situation of over-reliance on educators, adhere to the "people-oriented" tenet, fully respect the subject status of students, understand, care and love students, arouse students' enthusiasm and initiative and make them learn self-experience, self-judgment, self-selection in order to achieve the goal of self-improvement and self-rising.

## **5 Building psychological counseling agencies to offer consulting services**

Based on the absorption of "Cognitive Moral Development Mode", American psychologists Bandur and Mitchell drew on theories of behavioral psychology and studied the psychological impact and the demonstration effect that the behaviors of educators exert on students. In America, numbers of psychologists, sociologists and educators are involved in the process of moral education, and they focus on the impact on the formation of individuals' moral characteristics generated by their psychological changes. Almost all universities have built psychological counseling agencies to offer the consulting service which covers the whole school. "To ensure the freshmen to adapt to college life, one third of universities provide counseling agencies to help students to choose their profession; American Universities also provide counseling programs that are conducted by professional consultants, such as psychological treatment, to help students to solve ideological issues involving personal privacy; many universities set up the Career Guidance Office to provide vocational counseling; and some universities also offer economic advisory services, and some priests and pastors are also involved in providing consulting services to solve matters related to personal beliefs, ideology and ethics. American psychological counseling services are not only established in the University. Across the country, there are also numbers of psychological counseling agencies for the public. Employees of these agencies are generally specially trained full-time staff who not only have professional qualifications, but also have high moral characters that can earn people's trust<sup>[5]</sup>."

Moral education is a discipline concerned education, sociology, psychology and political science, thus learning from related disciplines to expand and

enrich its methodology system has contributed to its scientization. In fact, many moral problems are caused by psychological changes and imbalance, and therefore we should pay particular attention to the psychological theories and methods for reference. In a manner of speaking, lacking of attention to the psychological development of students will not only be a major disadvantage of education, but also will be an important reason for the increasing rate of juvenile crime. In view of all above, It's necessary to focus on individual's psychological changes and learn from the successful experience combining psychology with the moral education in the United States to explore the methods of psychological consultation and psychotherapy. For example, schools can offer psychological courses to help students form a conscious awareness of their psychological state, so that they can know how to increase psychological well-being. More psychological consulting rooms can be established to provide service for free, and professionally trained counselors can be equipped to provide counseling to help people solve psychological problems that cannot be solved by people themselves. What's more, schools can make rules and regulations to demand teachers to care about students' mental health and include it as one of the criteria of teachers' performance evaluation. And one point should be noted is that all measures mentioned above should be implemented effectively and must not become a mere formality.

## **6 Conclusion**

In conclusion, due to historical and cultural reasons, moral education in different countries has different characteristics. Our country(China) is an ancient civilization with a history of five thousand years. Each dynasty in Chinese history attaches great importance to moral education, which has a long history of moral education and profound moral education. Due to different cultural traditions, development paths and people's ideology and culture, China and other countries including the United States have certain differences in the goals, contents and methods of moral education. At present, China cannot refuse to learn from other countries, nor can it worship foreign countries and copy the model of other countries completely. Instead, reasonably absorbing the useful experience of other countries based on the actual situation is the right

choice.

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