

# *Modern Perspectives on Children's Education and Implications for Children's Education in China*

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**Abstract:** On the basis of a review of modern Chinese and Western ideas on children's education, this article summarizes the views of Chinese and Western educators and argues that "child-centredness" is the core of contemporary ideas on children's education. It also considers the current situation of early childhood education in China and draws inspiration for the development of early childhood education in China.

## **1. The development of modern views on the education of children in the West**

In the 17th century, as the power of religion weakened, the education of children came to the fore and a new view of children and education emerged. The English educator, Locke, in his "Ramblings on Education", proposed the "blank slate", advocating the freedom of the child and completely denying the concept of the child in the doctrine of original sin.

The "seed theory" is an important part of Comenius's Great Theory of Instruction on the education of early modern children. Comenius believed that the greatest principle of education was to teach nature<sup>0</sup> Comenius believed that education did not have to be forced, and that it should not simply span one stage, but should be gradual. Comenius put forward the 'gardener's theory', believing that the child is a seed and that the teacher, like the gardener, should simply tend to it and nurture it, without the need for transformation. It is fair to say that this view has been of great importance to the development of later theories of children's education.

As one of the most influential thinkers and educators of the French Enlightenment, Rousseau became the face of the movement in the mid-18th century. He first introduced the concept of the 'discovery of the child' in the 18th century in *Émile*, which led to the modern concept of child education. Rousseau proposed that "the first impulses of nature are always right".<sup>0</sup> He argued that the fundamental goal of education lay in the education of children. He believed that the fundamental goal of education was to preserve the nature of the child, to respect the laws of the child's physical and mental development, to make full use of the child's potential, and that education should be a natural act from the heart.

After Rousseau came the "educational psychology" represented by Pestalozzi. Compared to Comenius' "gardener's theory", his theory was even richer. Pestalozzi proposed that "the growth of a tree is the same as the growth of a human being, even before the child is born the germ of future ability is already present".<sup>0</sup> He saw proper education as the skill of a florist. According to Froebel, the child is the flowering plant and the teacher is the gardener, who respects the child and follows the laws of growth. The name 'Kindergarden' (which translates as 'children's garden') is a reflection

of Fröbel's 'gardener's theory'. This is also a reflection of Froebel's 'gardener's theory'.

In the nineteenth century, Herbart developed the 'teacher-centredness' of the child as a vehicle of knowledge. Education and life are two very different paths. According to the educator Spencer, education is all about preparing for the future. In a sense, education is separated from the child's real life, his or her experience of life, and is spiritually destructive. Dewey advocated 'education as growth', and on this basis put forward 'child-centredness', advocating a reform of education that puts the child at the centre of education.

By the beginning of the 20th century, Montessori said, "Education requires only one thing: the attainment of self-learning through the inner strength of the child."<sup>0</sup> She believed that the child had an "absorbing mind" and a strong sense of self. She believed that children had an "absorbing mind" and were highly autonomous, so the way to educate them was simply to let them be their own teachers. Montessori believed that young children should not just be taught, but that they needed a wealth of experience and the freedom to experience the world. In Montessori's view, teachers must respect the nature of the young child and help him or her to develop more fully.

It is clear from the above that the core of the modern view of children's education is child-centred, and this is the mainstream of children's education in Western countries today. "The child-centred perspective has evolved with the times and is widely recognised worldwide as the basis of modern educational theory. The modern views of Western educators on children's education show that their approach to early childhood education is one of respect for the child's nature and a child-centred approach.

## **2. The development of Chinese views on children's education**

The development of the concept of children's education in China is a relatively short process compared to the development of the concept of children's education in Western countries. In traditional Chinese culture, children were not valued and there was no status for children. On the contrary, children who were able to enter quickly into reading and understanding learning were often praised and the ancients wanted their children to grow up and become adults as soon as possible and believed that children should be educated from the time they understood. There was also a time before the Song Dynasty when children's education was still valued in society. But in the Song Dynasty, when society became turbulent due to wars and conflicts between classes, and the whole society was plunged into chaos, people proposed pre-school education, but it was not really practised. It was not until the Song Dynasty, when scholars such as Xi Zhu and Zuqian Lu conducted in-depth research in this area and defined the content of education as the relevant parts of the Four Books and Five Classics, that children's education was taken seriously in society as a whole. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the idea of children's education was given a certain degree of importance because of the respect for teachers and the importance of education.

At the end of the Qing Dynasty, due to social unrest, many major social changes took place in the country, and education reform was one of the most important. China began the Reformation and the intellectuals in the country combined Western methods of education with traditional Chinese education. Kang Youwei talked about the school system in his 'The Book of the Commonwealth', which mentioned nursery schools, where infants had to enter and be educated in kindergartens after they were weaned. Qichao Liang was the first Chinese educator to advocate the teaching of various curricula. He believed that children under the age of five were young and were to be educated at home and in kindergartens. He admired the education of children in the West and believed that children should be given a new school and be taught gradually.

The society of the time demanded that children develop greatly in life and in thought. However, due to the influence of traditional Chinese educational concepts, Western educational ideas could

not be accepted wholesale and there were some who tried to educate young children in their own way. Yangchu Yan was a rural reformist educator who advocated a 'family education' approach to educating children. He argued that rural education was 'education for the common people', an education that could lift the peasants out of poverty and into prosperity, and he proposed that 'education for the common people' should replace 'education for the elite'. He also believed that this was a necessity for social development.

Xingzhi Tao advocates the use of 'education for life' to guide the education of young children, believing that young children's life itself is a kind of education, and that young children actively explore the connotation of truth, goodness and beauty in their lives, which naturally forms the cornerstone of education, and that young children's various questions about life are the reason why education happens; children's various interests in life will become the reference for children's perception of education, thus forming their preferences for education.

Heqin Chen, a renowned children's educator, advocated 'living education' and regarded all knowledge drawn from nature and the wider society as 'living education'. He placed great emphasis on the education of young children, advocating the understanding of young children, the study of young children, and the teaching of young children according to their physical and psychological developmental characteristics. Children are not a microcosm of adults, but have their own physical and psychological characteristics. In terms of teaching content, it should be based on the life experiences and interests of young children, expanding and enriching their understanding of nature and society. In teaching methods, the focus should be on respect for the wholeness and continuity of young children's lives.

Throughout the development of early childhood education in modern China, the aim of early childhood education has evolved from "training talents for national construction" to "cultivating a sound personality". This is a reflection of the evolution of Chinese educational thinking and a worldwide re-examination of children's education, from the original 'fundamentals of the nation' to the current 'cultivation of a sound personality'. It can be seen that the change from a closed to an open philosophy of early childhood education is similar to that of the West.

### **3. Reflections on the education of Chinese children**

The development of modern early childhood education in China can be traced back to the early years of the founding of New China, when early childhood education was still in its infancy. Since then, kindergartens have developed in China for decades, and early childhood education has grown significantly in terms of quality, quantity and teacher quality, while also facing a number of problems. In thinking about early childhood education in China, we need first to understand the nature and purpose of early childhood education, but also to explore the experience of early childhood education in advanced Western countries and learn from their advanced educational philosophies and approaches.

From the perspective of modern child education, Dewey's "child-centredness" does not mean "no education, no guidance, let the child grow freely", but rather that the child's own growth should come before all education. This approach to education stimulates the child's interest in independent learning and enhances the child's ability to learn, thus improving the child's learning outcomes. This educational philosophy is widely used in early childhood education and primary education in Western countries, with good results. Understanding the laws of early childhood development is a must for educators and is fundamental to all educational activities. Traditional Chinese educational thinking emphasizes 'knowledge' and 'learning' and considers learning to be an activity rather than an ability. This approach to education tends to turn children into passive recipients, lacking initiative and creativity. Modern early childhood education theory therefore calls for an

understanding of children's development, a focus on their individual development and interest in learning, and an increase in their ability to learn on their own. Only on the basis of this approach to education can children achieve their maximum potential in learning and life, and achieve all-round development. It is therefore worth thinking about how children can learn to learn and learn to learn on their own.

Early childhood education is an important part of pre-school education, which should reflect the idea of "people-oriented" education, respecting and protecting young children. There is still a big gap between our understanding of children and our love for them. As China's economy and society continue to develop and people's living standards gradually improve, people's understanding of early childhood education is becoming clearer. Looking at the current state of early childhood education, the proportion of early childhood education in China is not small, but it is not balanced. There are many problems with kindergarten education, and many families do not know enough about early childhood education, while early childhood education does not receive the attention and focus it deserves. In this situation, how to let children really get a comprehensive development, how to let children go from kindergarten to primary school and into society, this is the question that Chinese kindergarten educators need to think about.

#### **4. Implications for children's education in China**

##### **4.1 To establish the principle of "child-centredness" in educational thinking**

In today's society, the essence of education is to serve the all-round development of human beings, and children's education is the most basic and important part of the entire education system. In traditional Chinese education, the education of teachers and the learning of students are closely related, and students need to rely on the guidance and supervision of teachers in order to complete their studies and development. In modern education, however, we are paying more attention to the subjectivity of children and the development of their independent learning abilities, as well as respecting the laws of children's physical and mental development. As a result, we need to think about how to make education more meaningful and valuable, how to make teachers and children friends, and how to give children a better learning experience and development.

First of all, it is very important to clarify that children's education serves human development and to establish the principle of "child-centredness" in educational thinking. In "people-centred" and "child-centred" education, we must insist on the pursuit of development on the basis of all-round development and focus on the child's individuality, creativity and ability to think independently. Only by treating children as individuals, respecting them and allowing them to grow up in a natural, free and happy way can education be more meaningful and valuable.

Secondly, teachers should be a mentor to children and respect and understand that children are loved. Teachers should learn to listen to children, respect their opinions and ideas, and provide help and guidance according to their characteristics and needs. At the same time, teachers should also pay attention to the development of children's personalities, allowing them to develop their own potential and talents and to continuously improve their own independent learning and independent thinking skills.

Finally, we also need to pay attention to cultivating and shaping a new ideological outlook on education in the new era, and promote the transformation of China's children's education concept. Modern society has an increasingly high demand for talents, so we need to break with traditional education models and teaching methods and focus on cultivating children's practical abilities and comprehensive qualities. In this process, we need to respect the laws of children's physical and mental development, follow their learning characteristics and needs, and focus on cultivating their creativity and innovation.

## **4.2 To pay attention to the differences of individual children and teach them according to their abilities**

In modern society, every child is unique and their development and growth has unique characteristics and differences. Therefore, for children's education, it is very important to pay attention to the differences of individual children and to teach them according to their abilities. To effectively implement teaching according to the needs of the child, it is first necessary to understand the physical and mental developmental characteristics of each child and to develop suitable teaching methods and strategies.

In practice, some educators focus more on the development of knowledge and skills, while neglecting the development of children's psychological and moral qualities. In fact, it is only by developing children's psychological and moral qualities in a holistic manner that we can truly help them to grow into a complete human being. Therefore, the goal of children's education should be to nurture a well-rounded child, rather than focusing solely on the transfer of knowledge and skills.

For early childhood education, individualised education is very important. Teachers need to take a developmental view of the physical and mental developmental characteristics of children and combine individualised education with teaching according to the needs of the individual. In education, teachers cannot use a uniform approach to each child. Such a teaching approach may lead to teachers not understanding the characteristics of children and thus misdirecting them. It is important to use different approaches to educate children at different levels. Let each child show his best at the right time and in the right way, thus promoting the better development of each child.

In the kindergarten, teachers need to create a relaxed and harmonious environment in which children can grow up in a relaxed and enjoyable way. Kindergartens should provide each child with toys and other teaching materials that are appropriate to their physical and mental development. Teachers should create a relaxed, pleasant, equal and harmonious learning atmosphere for the children in their games or activities. Each child should be encouraged to speak up and express their ideas positively, and learn to listen to others' ideas and respond appropriately. In this way, children will be able to interact more confidently with others, develop good interpersonal relationships and lay a solid foundation for their future lives.

## **4.3 Schools should serve children by developing good behavioural habits**

Schools are places where future talents are trained, and one of their important tasks is to foster the all-round development of students. Children's education should not simply be about imparting knowledge, but should focus on the characteristics of children's physical and mental development, respect their subjective status and allow them to grow up in an autonomous education.

As children progress through different stages of their development, their educational needs differ. At the nursery level, children's curiosity and imagination need to be fully developed and schools should provide them with a safe, comfortable and creative environment where children are free to explore and discover. Children's education should not simply instil knowledge in children, let alone simply lecture, order and punish. Educators should pay attention to children's interests and needs and guide them to learn in their own way. Schools should provide an adequate learning environment where children have a good learning experience and the space to play freely. Educators should respect the subjectivity of children and allow them to grow in their own education.

Apart from formal teaching, kindergartens should also provide children with colourful and meaningful extra-curricular activities. For example, more competitions or activities that are beneficial to children's physical and mental development should be organised after school, such as sports days and art festivals, so that children can have more opportunities to showcase their talents and interests. At the same time, schools should also pay attention to the cultivation of children's



emotions, attitudes and values, and provide children with rich and diversified spiritual food so that they can become morally qualified and socially responsible human beings.

In children's education, educators should focus on developing children's creativity and independent thinking skills. Children are encouraged to express themselves in a free and open environment and educators should provide them with sufficient time and space to think and explore freely. This will not only enhance children's interest and motivation in learning, but also promote their self-growth and development.

#### **4.4 Emphasis on the humanistic aspects of education and the development of children's emotional qualities**

In addition to establishing the principle of "child-centredness" in educational thinking, paying attention to the differences of individual children, the need for schools to serve children, and the need to develop good behavioural habits in children, there is also a need to emphasise the humanistic aspects of education and to develop the emotional qualities of children.

The ultimate goal of education is to develop a well-rounded person, which includes not only the accumulation of knowledge and the development of skills, but also the development of the child's emotional qualities. Emotional quality refers to an individual's ability to perceive, experience, express, regulate and control emotions, and is one of the important aspects of human development.

Firstly, it is important to strengthen family education and give children adequate care and companionship. The family is a child's initial socialising environment and is an important foundation for the child's emotional and cognitive development. Therefore, family education should focus on nurturing the emotional qualities of the child, allowing the child to feel the warmth and care of the family, and developing the child's empathy and interpersonal skills.

Secondly, it is important to focus on the curriculum to enhance emotional education. In kindergarten education, it is important to develop the emotional qualities of children through the curriculum and teaching methods. For example, children can feel the power of beauty and enhance their emotional identity and concern for life, nature and society through literature, music, art and many other forms.

At the same time, kindergartens should also pay attention to children's mental health education and provide emotional support and psychological counselling services. Kindergartens should establish a sound mental health education mechanism to help children solve their psychological problems and enhance their mental resilience and adaptability through psychological counselling, psychological counselling and psychological courses.

In addition, humanistic care in education should be strengthened, and children's personality and values should be respected. Educators should focus on emotional communication with children, pay attention to their personality characteristics and emotional needs, respect their personality and values, let them feel the warmth and care of education, and enhance their self-esteem and self-confidence.

In conclusion, Chinese children's education needs to pay attention to the emotional qualities of the child, so that the child can receive comprehensive attention and development in education. Educators should take the principle of "child-centredness" as the basis, pay attention to the individual differences of children, teach them according to their abilities, serve them and cultivate good behavioural habits, and at the same time strengthen the humanistic care of education, cultivate children's emotional qualities and lay a solid foundation for their all-round development. Only in this way can we truly achieve the goal of education, so that every child can grow happily in learning and become a pillar of the future.

## 5. Conclusion

Throughout the ages, both Chinese and Western ideas on children's education have had a significant impact on society. Chinese children's education has been developed from Confucius to the present day, and is in line with, influenced by, promoted by and complemented by the modern idea of 'people-centred' children's education. Western educators who have had a profound influence on the education of children in China include Comenius, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel and Montessori, while traditional educators who have had a strong influence on China include Confucius, Xi Zhu, Youwei Kang, Yangchu Yan, Xingchi Tao and Heqin Chen. In different periods of history, there was a focus on children's education and innovation, each with its own emphasis. In modern times, when Western educational concepts were introduced to China, some people absorbed them wholesale and applied them without refinement, which is what we now call 'Westernisation'. Although we have to admit that some Western ideas are worth learning from, we should also understand that 'child-centred' is not a wholesale copy of what others have done, but rather a process of analysis and reflection; when 'child-centred' is implemented, it must be adapted and innovated according to the Chinese context. When 'child-centred' is implemented, it must be adapted to the Chinese context. For example, in the early childhood education mission set out in China's Kindergarten Work Regulations, it is stated that "the implementation of comprehensive developmental education for young children is the basic starting point for Chinese kindergartens". This is a reflection of the principle of child-centred education, which places emphasis on the physical and mental development of young children.

The study of children's education requires in-depth analysis and exploration from a theoretical perspective. We need to explore educational concepts and methods that are appropriate to the development of children in our own country, taking into account the local cultural, political and economic context. While drawing on Western educational ideas, we must not simply copy them, but innovate and improve them according to the national context and actual situation. Because different cultural, political and economic contexts have different educational philosophies, and studies on the same issue may yield different results, we need to conduct in-depth research and explore methods and pathways that are appropriate for the education of children in our own countries.

Early childhood is the most intellectually active period of a person's life and an important stage for developing various abilities. Therefore, in early childhood education, we need to focus on developing children's abilities in sports, art and games, and to stimulate their interest and motivation in learning through a variety of activities in an interesting way. At the same time, we attach importance to language learning and guide children to read story books and children's books with a certain level of written skills, etc. to improve their language expression and reading skills. In our educational practice, we must always adhere to the core concept of 'child-centredness', respect the differences of each child, give full play to their strengths and potential, pay attention to the developmental problems of each child and the satisfaction of each child's own needs, so that in a caring and supportive educational environment, they can become socially competent and adaptable. In a caring and supportive educational environment, they can become well-rounded individuals who meet social development and the requirements of society, as well as having the ability to adapt and create.

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