

The Theory and Practice of Moral Education in American Schools

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Abstract. Chinese society is undergoing transformation, how to deal with social moral problems especially adolescent behavior problems during this period is an important issue. To research the theory and practice of moral education in American school is useful to the exploration of Chinese school moral education.

The Development of Moral Education in American Schools

The history of moral education in American school can be divided into three phases: the traditional moral education period, the modern moral education period and the contemporary moral education period.

American Traditional School Moral Education

From the 16th to end of the 19th century, schools assisted families and churches inculcating the Protestant faith. In colonial times, religious morality was the primary purpose, and after separation from Britain, religious morality and civic education basing on the patriotism education and pro-democratic politics were the main contents of moral education in American schools.

Moral Education in American Schools during the Period of Modernization

From the end of 19th Century to early 20th Century, the United States society shifted from agricultural society to industrial society, and school had become the main undertaker of moral education. During this period, those who supported the traditional characters defended traditional virtue and advocated teaching social virtues and socialist norms. However, progressive represented by John Dewey criticized the traditional moral education for attaching much significance to instilling and lacking of reflection. Progressives believed that moral education should be based on children's life and let children acquire virtue in their own experience. They also advocated for scientific questioning and democratic decision making as methods of moral education. In the practice of school education, in addition to traditional classroom teaching, sports, newspapers and other extracurricular activities were becoming the auxiliary mode of classroom moral education. In this period, compared with the traditional moral education, school moral education was characterized by rich content and various forms, embodying the two ideas about education requirements in different aspects.

In the 1960s, there were two important moral education theories: the theory of values clarification and Lawrence Kohlberg's moral cognitive development theory. The two theories are both deeply affected by Dewey's progressive thought. The former insisted that value education should respect students' individuality and establish their subjectivity. Teachers should help students to discover and establish their own values instead of instilling moral knowledge and value judgments. The latter advocated that students should think and judge for themselves in moral conflicts. In the moral practice, Lawrence Kohlberg also put forward the moral dilemma discussion approach and the just community approach. The two theories upheld the opinion that Moral is relative. With this principle, they thought educators should take a neutral attitude in moral education. In practice, instilling gave place to the

methods like cooperative classes, teaching topic, imitation learning and so on. And besides, the form of extracurricular moral activities became more and more diverse.

The Contemporary Moral School Education in America

As a result of value free raised by the theory of values clarification and moral cognitive development theory, moral education lost the standard and there was no exact way to educate the public and students. As a consequence, American social experienced a crisis of conscience. In 1980s, the traditional character education was taken seriously again. From then on, the traditional character education began to revive and then became the mainstream of contemporary moral education in American schools. The new character education focus on paying attention to a good social relationship and building a caring society [1]. It criticizes the view of value free, and believes that virtue is objective existence and school moral education should be based on moral consensus [2]. On the other hand, the new character education not only re-thinks on the traditional character education, but also absorbs the soul of the theory of values clarification, moral cognitive development theory and other theories. In addition, Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education and all - round moral education law were put forward.

Caring education theory plays an important role in today`s moral education framework. Nel Noddings is the most important representative of this theory. Noddings believes that only moral principle is not enough to lead to moral behavior[3], so she emphasizes that moral education should develop the students' ability to care, love and be worthy of loving by others. Furthermore, she puts forward "care practice "as well as four moral education methods: Modeling, Dialogue, Practice, and Confirmation.

The American school moral education practice is carry out under the direction of new character education, and its main contents are moral character education, the civic education and behavior education, the core of which is teaching virtues. Public schools not only have specialized courses of character education and a variety of methods and activities like the method of moral narration, cooperative learning, students service, the theme of assembly, topic practice, decision-making skills practice etc. [4], but also carefully integrate the contents of virtues into every course. Besides, the school also build campus environment through moral leadership, campus institution and system, class culture and otherwise to help the development of student moral quality.

The Enlightenment of American School Moral Education Development

The moral education must adhere to the correct direction.

In 1960s, the United States once used value free to guide the moral education which lead to adolescent`s disordered behavior and deterioration of social morality. The report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China said that we will develop socialist ideology that has the ability to unite and the power to inspire the people to embrace shared ideas, convictions, values, and moral standards. This also requires that moral education must stick to the right principle and direction, avoiding the moral relativism and moral nihilism.

The moral education should keep pace with the times and social needs.

School moral education should instantly adjust itself to adapt to the needs of the society and student`s moral development. As our society is undergoing transformation, the moral education is facing many new situations and problems. Therefore, school moral education should steadily improve its theory and practice which can provide a solid theoretical foundation for the practice of moral education system. And the school moral education can be carry out under the direction of appropriate theories rather than by the simple organized. Likewise, the content and method should also be adjusted and updated effectively.

Pay more attention to students' moral practice.

Nowadays, normative education are well aligned with the formality moral education in American moral education. With the guidance of teachers, students can take part in many extracurricular activities, and students' moral characters can be well shaped in the interaction of cognition, feelings and behavior.

However, accurate and effective grasp of moral knowledge is still the mainstream of moral practice in our school, and the school moral education pays great attention to moral knowledge's explanations, neglecting moral practice. As a result, the research on the formality moral education is not thoroughly enough in academic circles. So we should make more efforts to explore the form of moral education. On the premise of respecting the subjective consciousness of students, we should design and organize various moral activities which can help students' moral knowledge and emotions internalize moral qualities.

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