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From Spencer's Happy Education to Modern Education Reform

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Abstract

This article analyzes Herbert Spencer's theory of happy education and explores the practical value of its core concepts in modern education reform. Spencer proposed that education should have happiness as the core goal, guiding children to become happy and self - educated individuals through means that conform to the laws of children's physical and mental development. This article further analyzes its educational objectives, methods of self-education and natural education, as well as principles of respecting physical and mental development and guiding interests. It discusses the mapping of these ideas in modern reform directions such as deepening quality education, promoting personalized education, and integrating education with life. Through comparison, it is found that Spencer's advocacy of natural experience, interest driven, and self-learning not only aligns with the current trend of education shifting from exam oriented to holistic development, but also enriches and extends through research-based education, diverse curriculum design, and modern information technology assisted self-directed learning. Research has shown that Spencer's idea of happy education has important theoretical inspiration and practical value in contemporary education reform, providing valuable reference for promoting the comprehensive development of students' overall quality.

Keywords

Spencer; Happy education; Modern education reform

1. Core Concepts of Spencer's Happy Education

1.1. Connotation of Happy Education

Plato was the founder of the thought of happy education, but Herbert Spencer, a British educator, was the one who truly studied happy education as a systematic educational theory. Spencer put forward that the purpose of education is to make children happy, and the means and methods of education should also be joyful[3]. In essence, this is a humanistic concept of natural education, which subverts traditional ideas rather than innovates educational methods[1]. If we agree with

happy education only from the perspective of methods, we will fall into the misunderstanding that education is laissez-faire[1]. As a result, children cannot become truly happy people, and education will not achieve good results. Therefore, in general, happy education is to use joyful educational means and methods to make children feel happy and stimulate their interest in the learning process, so as to cultivate children into happy people who can conduct self-education.

1.2. Purpose of Happy Education

1.2.1. Make Children Happy

Spencer insisted that children learn best in a happy state, and education should be full of pleasure, with the ultimate goal of helping children grow into happy individuals. He once pointed out that “savagery breeds savagery, and kindness breeds kindness”[3]. In family education, building a harmonious and loving family environment is crucial, which is the key cornerstone of children’s happiness. Parents should act as guides, treat children with a friendly attitude and positive encouragement, fully respect the laws of children’s development, and resolutely avoid rigidly applying adults’ fixed ideas and experiences to children, forcing them to engage in uninterested activities. After all, every child has unique endowments and shows different interests in different things, and these interests exactly reflect their potential abilities[1]. Learning in this way is joyful for children and improves learning efficiency.

1.2.2. Aim at "No Need to Teach One Day"

Spencer once proposed that “the highest educational goal should be to cultivate a person who can govern himself, reflect on himself and educate himself”[3]. He consistently implemented this view when teaching little Spencer. Instead of giving direct answers, he offered hints when little Spencer raised questions in life or study, encouraging little Spencer to explore and solve problems independently. He did not interfere with little Spencer’s practices, allowing him to explore learning methods and gain happiness in the process. Therefore, in education, we need to leave children enough space for independent thinking and focus on cultivating their ability of self-education. In addition, this also shows that what we should teach children most is not knowledge itself, but the way to acquire knowledge, enabling children to apply what they have learned.

1.3. Methods of Happy Education

1.3.1. Self-education

Spencer emphasized that one of the primary goals of education is to cultivate children's ability to adapt to life, rather than simply imparting book knowledge[3]. He believed that children should understand the laws of life through personal practice. In this process, children can gain valuable experience regardless of success or failure. For example, involving children in cooking helps them learn the cooking

process, understand basic knowledge of "kitchen science", and exercise their practical ability. If the activity fails, children need to analyze the reasons and try to improve, which motivates them to explore continuously and finally achieve success. The knowledge acquired through practice cannot be fully conveyed in books. Only when children try in real situations can knowledge be transformed into their implicit knowledge and truly integrated into their thinking and actions. The "self-education" of children is to help them learn independently and become self-governing individuals when they no longer need adult guidance[2].

1.3.2. Natural Education

Spencer believed that nature is the best classroom[3]. Only when children experience nature personally can nature exert its educational function. The colors of four seasons, the sounds of wind, thunder and rain, the shapes of trees and the laws of all things growing are all lessons that nature can teach children. This is one of the reasons why Spencer took little Spencer for a walk by the river every weekend–it not only helps acquire knowledge, but also liberates the body and mind. The birds, flowers, water sounds and insects in nature can cheer the mood and relieve mental fatigue and pressure[4]. At the same time, natural experience enables children to explore how to live in harmony with nature, thus promoting their pro-environmental behaviors in the future. Just as little Spencer regarded storms as nature's singing, he understood how to treat natural phenomena. Therefore, children with direct experience of nature can better understand the significance of nature protection and sustainable living[5].

1.4. Principles of Happy Education

1.4.1. Respecting Physical and Mental Development

According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, children's psychological development is a process from concreteness to abstraction, including the sensorimotor stage, preoperational stage, concrete operational stage and formal operational stage. Therefore, educational methods for children should conform to the laws of their physical and mental development. For example, conduct physical object observation and experiential learning with children in the sensorimotor stage. Children at this stage cannot perform mathematical operations. If educators force children to learn operations, which violates the natural process of mental evolution, it will affect children's correct education and healthy physical experience.

1.4.2. Interest-Guided Teaching

Spencer believed that children's interest is the fundamental driving force for learning. Education should start from children's interests rather than relying solely on external compulsory learning tasks[3]. He emphasized that interest is the engine of learning. Only when students are interested in a certain content will they take the initiative to learn instead of being forced by external factors. Therefore, educators

need to provide positive and correct guidance, respect and protect children's interests, and turn what children find interesting into meaningful things. For example, if a child is interested in a specific animal or plant, teachers can guide them to study the topic, helping them learn more knowledge through observation, experiments and discussions instead of giving conclusions directly. The advantage of this method is that children acquire knowledge through their own exploration, which is internally driven. Students learn spontaneously through interests and then master new concepts and skills. On the contrary, once children's interests are forced into burdensome learning tasks, their interests will fade or even turn into disgust. The original trigger of happy education aiming at stimulating interest lies in "enjoying oneself". No educator wants to make education a cold process and cultivate cold people[6].

2. Directions of Modern Education Reform

2.1. Deepening the Development of Quality-Oriented Education

Quality-oriented education initially emerged to criticize the "exam-oriented education" in the 1980s, but it is not only required to overcome the drawbacks of exam-oriented education. On the whole, it aims to improve education quality, enhance the overall quality of primary and secondary school students, and cultivate high-quality talents. On May 19, 1985, Comrade Deng Xiaoping pointed out at the National Education Work Conference that "the strength of a country and the stamina of its economic development increasingly depend on the quality of workers and the quantity and quality of intellectuals"[7]. Entering the 21st century, the concept of quality-oriented education has been endowed with new connotations of the times. Deepening quality-oriented education is the core of modern education reform. In response to social demands, it focuses on cultivating students' innovative spirit. Students' innovative spirit enables them to generate novel and valuable ideas using known information, thus promoting social and economic development. This is why modern education requires diversified curricula, flexible teaching methods and rich campus activities. Only by providing students with greater space for development can schools help them improve various abilities and literacy while learning knowledge, so as to meet the needs of future society and become talents with innovative spirit and practical ability.

2.2. Steadily Promoting Personalized Education

Respecting students' individual differences and meeting their unique learning needs and development potentials is an important goal of modern education reform. Every student is a developing individual with unique learning styles and hobbies. Modern education advocates teaching students in accordance with their aptitude and providing personalized educational services. According to Howard Gardner's theory

of multiple intelligences, human beings have eight types of intelligence, including linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalistic intelligence. This means that students have different potentials in different intelligences, and educators should fully explore and cultivate students' superior intelligences to promote their personalized development. For example, in school education, stratified teaching, elective courses and interest groups provide students with diversified learning choices, enabling them to study and explore in their good and interested fields, so as to maximize personal value and give full play to their potentials.

2.3. Deeply Integrating Education with Life

Modern education pays increasing attention to the connection with life, advocating that education return to real life, so that students can learn and apply knowledge in real situations and improve their ability to solve practical problems. School education is no longer limited to imparting book knowledge or learning out of context. Instead, it creates situations or tasks connected with life in teaching. For example, in English teaching, teachers raise questions closely related to students' lives in the introduction stage to arouse students' interest in learning. Then, the task situations set in the subsequent expansion stage should be based on students' personal experiences to be more reasonable.

Certainly, extracurricular practical education should be closely integrated with life. Through social practice activities, project-based learning, labor education and other ways, students are guided to combine knowledge with daily life, enhancing their understanding and application of knowledge. For example, carrying out campus farm labor practice enables students to learn biological knowledge while planting crops, understand the value of labor, cultivate practical ability and life skills, integrate education into life truly, and help students learn to learn in life.

3. The Consistency Between Happy Education and Modern Education Reform

3.1. Consistency Between Natural Education and Study Tours

Spencer's natural education emphasizes letting children experience and learn in the natural environment, cultivating their perception and exploration spirit of the world. He believed that "children grow up in nature, and the natural environment plays an irreplaceable role in children's growth". Modern education also pays attention to leading students out of campus into nature, broadening their horizons through practical experience. Study tours are characteristic compulsory courses set up by primary and secondary schools according to local conditions, which are comprehensive practical activity courses integrating in-school teaching and off-campus educational resources. Their fundamental purpose is to improve the physical and mental quality of primary and secondary school students and cultivate

their core literacy[8]. For example, students personally feel the charm of nature and humanities through on-the-spot investigation of natural landscapes and historical sites. This method is consistent with Spencer's idea of learning in nature, aiming to help students acquire knowledge in real situations rather than being limited to book knowledge.

However, modern education is more advanced. The form of natural education in Spencer's era was relatively simple, while modern study tours have more systematic curriculum design and safety guarantees, providing students with richer and more professional learning resources. Modern study tours usually carefully design routes and activities according to students' ages and subject knowledge. For example, geological park study tours for geography subjects enable students to deeply understand geological structures under the guidance of professional teachers, which is an expansion of Spencer's natural education in the contemporary era. At the same time, modern study tours can draw on the spirit of respecting children's independent exploration in Spencer's natural education, further optimize practical links, give students more opportunities to find and solve problems independently, give full play to students' initiative in study tours, and truly realize the transformation from "traveling" to "learning".

3.2. Similarity Between Interest Stimulation and Diversified Curriculum

Spencer's idea of interest-guided teaching is fully reflected in modern education reform. Modern education emphasizes meeting students' diverse interests and specialty development needs, and schools and educational institutions are paying increasing attention to the development of school-based and elective courses. Diversified curricula enable students to enrich their learning content and cultivate their interests. For example, the offering of various art courses allows students to choose corresponding courses according to their interests and study in their favorite fields. This is consistent with Spencer's idea of teaching according to students' interests. By providing diversified curriculum content, students take the initiative to explore knowledge in their interested fields and improve learning effects.

In addition to teaching according to students' interests, educators need to continuously stimulate and cultivate students' interests to maintain their motivation and enthusiasm in long-term learning. Methods such as project-based learning and club activities are adopted to let students explore deeply in interested fields and overcome learning burnout. For example, in the science and technology innovation clubs of some schools, students participate in the whole process of designing, implementing and presenting results around interested science and technology projects. In this process, students constantly encounter and solve problems, their interests are further stimulated and strengthened, thus maintaining high

enthusiasm for learning. This interest-based learning model helps students develop a habit of continuous learning, which is consistent with Spencer's idea of stimulating students' internal learning motivation through interests.

3.3. The Influence of Self-Learning on the Innovation of Modern Educational Methods

Spencer's advocated self-education has been endowed with new connotations in the modern educational environment. Modern education pays more attention to cultivating students' new abilities such as time planning and information collection to meet the requirements of rapid knowledge update in the information age. For example, in the online learning environment, students can independently choose learning platforms and formulate personalized learning plans, thus exercising their self-learning ability. This is consistent with Spencer's emphasis on cultivating students' independent thinking and self-management ability in self-education, except that students' autonomous learning has more diverse forms supported by modern technology.

Modern education provides students with personalized learning resources and autonomous learning space with the help of information technology means such as MOOCs and Bilibili, which is consistent with Spencer's emphasis on creating an autonomous learning environment. These technologies can push targeted learning content and exercises to students according to their learning progress, helping them conduct self-education better. For example, intelligent learning software can record students' learning trajectories, analyze their learning weaknesses, and provide personalized learning suggestions, enabling students to carry out autonomous learning more accurately and improve efficiency. This is a powerful supplement and development to Spencer's self-education idea, providing stronger technical support for autonomous learning in modern education.

4. Conclusion

Herbert Spencer's thought of happy education takes "the purpose of education is to make children happy" as the core concept, emphasizing that education should follow the laws of children's physical and mental development, adopt methods such as natural education, self-education and interest guidance, and cultivate students' sense of happiness and autonomous learning ability. These concepts have been inherited and developed in modern education reform. Through analysis, it can be found that the deepening of quality-oriented education, the promotion of personalized education and the integration of education with life all reflect the essence of Spencer's happy education thought. At the same time, modern education has further enriched and expanded these concepts in terms of technical support and curriculum design, such as the systematization of study tours, the setting of diversified curricula and autonomous learning tools based on information

technology, injecting more innovative vitality into educational practice.

Thus, Spencer's thought of happy education is not only a subversion of traditional educational methods, but also an important theoretical support for modern education reform. This student-centered education concept driven by happiness and interest has far-reaching guiding significance for realizing students' all-round development and personalized growth, and provides a valuable historical reference for current education reform.

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