

# A Preliminary Exploration of the Importance and Pathways of Character Development in Children: Based on Bertrand Russell's Philosophy of Character Education

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## Abstract

**Bertrand Russell's philosophy of character education was profoundly influenced by the psychoanalytic school of thought, emphasizing the cultivation of personal virtues and the assumption of social responsibilities. Russell believed that an individual's character not only pertains to personal behavioral habits but also extends to the nuances of education. He further posited that human character can be developed through three primary pathways: firstly, by stimulating children's innate nature through play and imagination; secondly, by enhancing their cognition through skill acquisition and scientific explanation; and thirdly, by perfecting their abilities through knowledge acquisition and precise cultivation. These perspectives inspire us to actively encourage children to express themselves, cultivate qualities to address various challenges, and guide them towards deep reflection throughout the educational process.**

## Keywords

**Reward notice, Legal nature, Applicable standards, Reward payment, Protection of the rights and interests.**

## 1. The Essence of Russell's Character Education

Bertrand Russell defined character as an individual's qualities, asserting that "character education must begin at birth" [1]. He believed that the purpose of education is to cultivate individuals with ideal character traits and to construct a harmonious life. This character primarily encompasses four universally accepted positive qualities: vitality, courage, sensitivity, and intelligence. Russell advocated for the organic integration of these qualities to nurture ideal individuals.

Russell regarded vitality as a valuable psychological attribute that enriches people's experiences of happiness and effectively mitigates their experiences of suffering. It enables individuals to be energetic and adaptable to external changes, preventing the development of adverse psychological states such as depression.

Concerning courage, he proposed multiple levels of understanding: fearlessness in any situation; the ability to rationally control one's fear; maintaining composure in the face of reasonable fear; and the capacity to calmly handle even irrational fears. Among these, Russell particularly emphasized the courage derived from a selfless outlook on life, which he considered the highest form of courage, embodying the pinnacle of human spirit.

As pure courage often lacks rational consideration, Russell suggested that people might exhibit high sensitivity in emotional fluctuations triggered by external stimuli. He believed that sensitive emotional responses could only be viewed as a positive quality when they were appropriate and reasonable [2]. The ability to empathize with the experiences of emotional subjects is a necessary condition for the development of sensitivity. Based on this, Russell advocated for education in love and emotional intelligence for children.

Cultivating intelligence is one of the goals of education. In Russell's view, intelligence is not merely about the knowledge already acquired, but more about the in-depth understanding and application of this knowledge. He emphasized that knowledge acquisition is a continuous, dynamic process, rather than a one-time static accumulation.

Russell believed that to prevent the formation of bad habits, character cultivation must begin in the early stages of individual growth. Therefore, he paid special attention to the development of children's character, considering it crucial for shaping a sound personality. In other words, the core of Russell's advocated character education lies in guiding and educating children from an early age through appropriate methods, helping them form good moral character and behavioral habits, thereby laying a solid foundation for future growth.

## **2. Insights Derived from Russell's Philosophy of Character Education**

Russell believed that character has a profound impact on an individual's comprehensive development and the educational process. Specifically, the quality of one's character not only directly affects an individual's growth trajectory but also deeply influences the overall societal landscape. Russell posited that by focusing on and cultivating human character, individuals could be guided towards a more positive and healthy developmental path, while simultaneously contributing to the construction of a more harmonious and orderly social environment. Therefore, there exists a close connection between character focus and education, with the two mutually promoting and jointly acting upon the process of an individual's comprehensive development.

### **2.1. The Purpose of Character Focus is to Cultivate Good Habits**

Methods for cultivating good habits include: emphasizing the formation of early habits, maintaining a balance between neglect and indulgence, and fostering children's self-control. To achieve the goal of habit formation, educators should first deeply understand and prioritize the formation of early habits. These initially formed habits are particularly crucial for an individual's subsequent life trajectory, with their influence comparable to innate instincts. Therefore, habit cultivation should be a highly prioritized subject for educators. Furthermore, Russell pointed out that in the process of guiding children, while ensuring all the care and support necessary for their healthy growth, educators should avoid excessive indulgence and permissiveness [3]. Educators should strive to reduce unnecessary external constraints and instead focus on cultivating children's self-control abilities. Striking this balance is both an embodiment of educational artistry and the key to achieving effective education. Consequently, educators should continuously explore and practice in their daily work, aiming to find the most suitable educational path between neglect and indulgence.

### **2.2. Character Education Needs to Focus on the Psychological Details of Children**

"The power of education in shaping character and perspectives is significant and widely acknowledged" [4]. In Russell's view, the purpose of focusing on children's character is not to mold perfect children, but to refine educational details and assess children's psychological qualities. In character education, the maintenance of mental health is an indispensable component. Russell believed that fear is universal and is the root of all defects in a child's character development. Therefore, children's character education needs to pay special attention to preventing and eliminating children's fear psychology. Russell proposed several specific suggestions to educators, aimed at cultivating young children's courage and helping them overcome fear. For objects of fear that young children face, he suggested that educators guide children to gradually approach and adapt to them while providing scientific explanations to dispel their fears. Additionally, he emphasized the importance of exposing young children to

strangers and expanding their social circles to overcome shyness and timidity. In dealing with dangerous situations, he advocated teaching children relevant skills to cope with potential risks. Finally, he particularly pointed out that adults should set good examples in front of children, avoiding displaying fear emotions to prevent negative influences on young children. The second aspect is justice and self-interest. Therefore, educators bear the important mission of deeply rooting the concept of justice in children's thoughts and habits, aiming to alleviate psychological distress caused by excessive self-interest. In the process of imparting the concept of justice, he emphasized that true justice education should not be limited to individual children but should be conducted within groups of children, promoting the natural growth of the concept of justice through collective interaction and mutual influence. Simultaneously, educators themselves need to maintain a high degree of fairness, setting examples for children through their own behavior, helping children overcome selfish desires to exclude others, and adhere to principles of justice. Notably, Russell opposed relying solely on moral preaching to instill concepts of justice or suppress self-interest, believing this approach might produce counterproductive distortions. Instead, he advocated for more natural and vivid methods, such as storytelling and role-playing, allowing children to feel and understand the essence of justice in a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere. The third aspect is love and compassion, which Russell considered the soul of good character. To nurture children's love and compassion, he suggested a series of strategies for educators. Firstly, by guiding children to deeply experience the shared feelings of pain between humans and animals, their empathy can be stimulated. When children's psychological maturity reaches a certain level, they can be guided to encounter and correctly understand complex or unjust matters such as war, broadening their horizons and deepening their understanding. Furthermore, educators need to pay attention to and help children overcome the influence of negative emotions such as jealousy and fear, safeguarding their healthy mental growth. Russell also pointed out that love cannot be created out of thin air but needs to naturally emanate from a happy, joyful, and carefree state of mind. Therefore, he called on adults to lead by example, treat children well, and create a growth environment full of love and care for them. Only in this way can children thrive under the nourishment of love and cultivate deep empathy and good character.

### **3. Analysis of Educational Pathways Based on Russell's Philosophy of Character Cultivation**

Russell's view on character education opposes the mere articulation of moral principles to young children. Instead, he advocates for the integration of moral education with direct, concrete natural situations, guiding children's education by returning to life experiences. Based on this, Russell proposes three pathways to achieve character cultivation: play, skill learning, and knowledge acquisition with precise cultivation. [5]

#### **3.1. The Role of Play and Imagination in Cultivating Children's Qualities**

Russell encourages educators to involve children in diverse games and pretend play from an early age, aiming to stimulate their creativity and imagination while promoting their physical and psychological health. "Play and pretending are essential needs of childhood; children must be provided with opportunities for these activities to be happy and healthy." [6] Russell perceives children's concentration and engagement in play, as well as their intense reactions when their scenarios are interrupted, as natural and normal responses rather than pathological manifestations. During children's play and pretend activities, they not only exercise their imagination freely by envisioning themselves as various unique characters, but they also find joy in roles that may be difficult to encounter in reality, viewing these as sources of dreams and hope. Curiosity is the internal driving force for children to explore the world. Through play and imagination, children can continuously deepen their understanding of their surroundings.

Every intense impulse in a child's life can find an outlet for release in play. Addressing concerns about whether excessive play and imagination might hinder children's participation in other beneficial activities, Russell responds: play and imagination are not only the source of children's vitality but also the cornerstone of their spiritual world. If children are forced to invest all their time in "serious matters" as perceived by adults, their spiritual world may become depleted, leading to mental collapse.

Russell believes that children's precious imagination should not be stifled at the cost of utilitarian external goals. When examining current school education practices, it is not difficult to find that children's imagination is suffering unprecedented suppression, and their creativity is gradually disappearing imperceptibly. In light of this, strengthening the protection of imagination for preschool children appears particularly urgent and important. Educators need to recognize that nurturing and stimulating imagination is a crucial foundation for children's comprehensive development, with immeasurable value for their future learning and creativity.

### **3.2. The Connection Between Courageous Character and Behavior**

Russell defines courage as an individual's ability to accomplish tasks that others fear to attempt. However, he does not endorse courage that merely suppresses fear through willpower, as such suppressed fear may continue to influence the individual in subtle ways. Instead, Russell emphasizes that cultivating good habits to promote the development of courage is a key component in children's moral education. He specifically points out that these habits should not include instilling the notion of participating in war, as such habits might hinder positive educational development. From the standpoint of protecting children, Russell emphasizes that when assessing children's courage, one should not be limited to physical bravery but should also focus on their psychological resilience when facing mysterious or unknown phenomena. He advocates that educators should strive to help children overcome their fear of the mysterious, guiding and supporting them to learn to face life's unknowns and challenges with a more mature and rational attitude.

In Russell's view of character, children exhibit keen observation skills and exploratory spirit from an early age, being curious about many things, including death. When faced with profound questions from children, adults should answer honestly and in an easily understandable manner, such as comparing death to a sleep from which one never wakes, to reduce children's sense of mystery and anxiety. Simultaneously, Russell profoundly recognizes the diffuse anxiety that children may develop under excessive adult constraints. He points out that when children are instilled with the notion that "childhood should be carefree and happy," if reality does not match expectations, it can create a huge psychological gap, thereby exacerbating anxiety. To address this, he suggests that when children inquire about adult life due to anxiety, adults should provide positive and rational explanations, conveying the joyful and beautiful aspects of adult life to inspire children's aspirations for the future.

Regarding the cultivation of courage, Russell firmly opposes using extreme means such as war or oppression to achieve this, as such environments often lead to a loss of empathy and damage children's sensitivity to abstract stimuli. He firmly believes that only through the power of education can children's keen perception of abstract stimuli be effectively cultivated, thereby shaping a more comprehensive and healthy character. In the process of mastering various skills, children not only deepen their understanding of true courage and learn to discern what constitutes genuine bravery but also imperceptibly cultivate deep empathy for others, thereby regaining the keen perception that gradually fades due to life's trivialities. In this process, adult care and guidance are crucial. As children gradually integrate into diverse life experiences and learning communities free from authoritarian constraints, they begin to learn to set aside self-centeredness and face the world with a more open and inclusive mindset. This selfless outlook on life is key to cultivating the highest level of courage in children.

### 3.3. Cultivating Knowledge and Comprehension in Children

In the discourse on character, intellect undoubtedly occupies a pivotal position. It is not only an indispensable complement to physical and mental health but also a solid foundation for personal growth. Russell views intellect as a dual manifestation of knowledge and comprehension, particularly emphasizing an individual's ability to acquire new knowledge. He criticizes a major flaw in traditional moral education—the disregard for intellect—pointing out that educators often become overly zealous in instilling predetermined value concepts while neglecting the cultivation and exercise of students' intellectual abilities.

Russell believes that intellectual training is inseparable from the cornerstone of knowledge transmission, but knowledge transmission alone is insufficient to ensure the achievement of intellectual training. In other words, imparting knowledge is a necessary condition for intellectual training, but not a sufficient one; conversely, intellectual training can ensure effective knowledge transmission, becoming its sufficient condition. Education should cherish and protect this valuable quality, laying a solid foundation for intellectual training by cultivating children's observational skills, knowledge beliefs, and techniques for seeking knowledge such as patience and diligence. Simultaneously, in the educational process, educators need to guide children to maintain an open mindset, effectively resolving potential conflicts between curiosity and other emotions to promote children's comprehensive development.

However, relying solely on children's curiosity to drive knowledge learning is still insufficient for the comprehensive development of their intellect. Russell believes that education must be committed to cultivating children's precision in learning knowledge, even if this process may be accompanied by a sense of boredom, it is a necessary path to excellence. Russell finely divides knowledge precision into four major categories: muscular precision, aesthetic precision, factual precision, and logical precision, and elaborates on their importance and practical pathways in children's growth and education. Regarding muscular precision, Russell believes that both body control and daily activities reflect the requirement for children's physical precision, and education should guide children to recognize the importance of this point. As for aesthetic precision, he advocates cultivating children's keen perception of aesthetic standards and precise grasp of subtle differences through artistic activities such as performance, singing, and dancing. For factual precision, Russell opposes dry rote memorization, advocating instead for interest-oriented approaches, deepening children's memory and understanding of facts through repeated practice and personal experience. Logical precision, on the other hand, is a profound insight into the internal laws and logical relationships of things. He emphasizes that the cultivation of this ability should conform to the natural rhythm of children's growth, avoiding premature forced indoctrination. Allowing children to enjoy the pleasure of learning in active knowledge-seeking far surpasses passive acceptance of knowledge indoctrination. This concept is not only a profound reflection on traditional educational models but also a wise insight into the future direction of educational development.

## 4. Conclusion

With the transformation of educational philosophies, education is gradually abandoning the traditional "example + principle" didactic model, advocating instead for an educational approach deeply rooted in children's real-life experiences. Bertrand Russell's philosophy of character education aims to guide children's growth and development through positive values by encouraging them to personally experience, perceive, and improve within authentic life situations, providing insights for contemporary education. Specifically, in the classroom, educators need to skillfully design teaching components, integrating elements of daily life into the curriculum content. This allows children to learn and internalize character knowledge in contexts closely resembling their lived experiences. Simultaneously, by organizing diverse

practical life activities, such as community service and nature exploration, educators can stimulate children's inner emotional experiences and reflections, promoting the natural development of their character. Furthermore, teacher-child dialogue, as a crucial component of character education, should be founded on equality and respect. During this dialogic process, teachers and children explore and learn together, inspiring each other, and ultimately reaching a consensus and recognition of character values. This dialogue model, based on equal communication, not only helps enhance children's moral cultivation but also promotes harmonious and developmental teacher-student relationships.

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