

# On the Construction of Students' Subjectivity: Connotation, Function and Path

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## Abstract

The student agency theory has been proposed for more than 40 years, and it still wanders outside the practice of education and teaching like a ghost. The reason for this is that students' subjectivity has not been constructed, so it is difficult for students to play their main position and role. The essence of the construction of student subjectivity is to cultivate students' subjectivity, determine the main position of students in learning and development, and give full play to students' active role in learning. This has helped the systematic reform of teaching evaluation, from passive learning to active learning, from authoritative teaching to democratic teaching, from knowledge indoctrination to independent construction, from homogeneous development to personalized development, and from being evaluated to mutual evaluation. In practice, it is necessary to promote the construction of students' subjectivity through multi-party collaboration, so that students can become participants in school administrators, active learners with the unity of knowledge and action, and masters of learning and life.

## Keywords

Student subjectivity; Self-directed learning; Teaching reform; Teacher-student relationship.

## 1. Introduction

It is an important contribution of Chinese pedagogy to clearly put forward the "student subject" and demonstrate it as a scientific concept. [1] However, more than 40 years have passed since the student subject theory was proposed, but it has still not been truly implemented in practice, which makes us have to reflect: what is the core of the student subject theory? Why is it so difficult to implement in practice? In fact, the core of students' subjective thinking from theory to practice is still in the students themselves, if students do not have the consciousness and ability of subjectivity, then it is difficult to realize the main position and role of students. Therefore, it is necessary to sort out the connotation and function of students' subjectivity construction, so as to provide reference for students' subjectivity construction.

## 2. The Essential Connotation of The Construction of Students' Subjectivity

### 2.1. Proposal of student subjectivity

As the subject of learning and development, students are inherently required to have subjectivity, and only when students have subjectivity can they become real subjects. The concept of student subjectivity is not created out of nothing, but is constantly innovated and developed in the continuous collision, contention and integration of various educational ideas. Whether it is Eastern or Western, ancient or modern teaching thoughts, the role of students and the relationship between teachers and students have been deeply discussed and defined, and finally two extreme tendencies have emerged.

First, it focuses on "teaching", exaggerates the authority of teachers, and asserts that students are the objects of education. Although many educators have tried to change and emphasize the enthusiasm and initiative of students, they still have not gotten rid of the category that students are the objects of education. Take the ancient Chinese teaching thought as an example, Confucius said that "I will not enlighten my students until they have really tried hard but even so fail to understand. I will not instruct them until they have something to say and make themselves understood." which is essentially optimizing the teaching, paying attention to the enthusiasm and initiative of students in the teaching process, but the students are still subordinate to the teacher in terms of status, and the student's learning is subordinate to the teacher's teaching.

Second, focusing on "learning" as the center, overexaggerating the role of students' direct experience, and ignoring the role of teachers and knowledge. In the early 18th century, the famous philosopher and educator Rousseau put forward the idea of children's education through the study of children, emphasizing that education should follow children's free, rational and kind nature, and children should be regarded as children. He pointed out: "In the order of life, childhood has its place; Adults should be seen as adults and children as children. [2] Dewey, a famous educator in the 20th century, criticized the idea of "classroom-centered, textbook-centered, and teacher-centered" in traditional education, and put forward a new educational idea of "child-centered, activity-centered, and experience-centered". The shift from "emphasizing education" to "emphasizing learning" affirms the status of students as the main body of learning, and it is also a deepening of the understanding of the laws of education and teaching. However, by exaggerating the direct experience of students and ignoring the value of teachers, knowledge, and teaching, the new educational thinking has inevitably entered the trap of absolutism.

The evolution of student-centered research is essentially a process in which researchers strive to overcome the two extreme tendencies and avoid swaying from side to side, strive to comprehensively and deeply understand teaching activities, and strive to reveal the laws of student development. [3] Although China was not the first to put forward the idea of student subjectivity, it was the first to conduct in-depth research and put forward mature theories. In the early 80s of the 20th century, a large number of Chinese educators carried out in-depth research on the relationship between teachers and students in teaching activities, and finally formed the "single subject theory of students", "single subject theory of teachers", "dominant-subject theory" and "dominant-initiative theory". "Dual-subject theory"[3]. Through the continuous exploration of predecessors, the proposition of student subjectivity has gradually developed into a theoretical system of student subjectivity. At present, on the issue of the relationship and status of teachers and students in teaching activities, the academic community basically agrees with the basic idea of "teacher-led, student-centered" [4] put forward by Mr. Wang Cesan. In fact, the concept of teacher-led and student-centered is dialectically unified. As Mr. Wang Cesan said: "The subject of learning is the subject under the leadership of teaching; Dominance of Teaching is the dominance of the subject's learning. [5] The establishment of students' subjective status inherently requires that teaching should pay attention to students' subjectivity and cultivate students' subjectivity.

## **2.2. The essence of the construction of students' subjectivity**

The so-called student subjectivity essentially refers to the status, role and ability of students in educational activities. The construction of students' subjectivity is essentially to respect the subjective status of students in learning and development, give full play to students' active role, and cultivate and improve students' awareness and ability of subjectivity. In practice, the construction of students' subjectivity can only be realized by properly handling the relationship

between students' subjective status, active role, and subjective ability, and making them promote and coordinate with each other.

First of all, the subjective status of students is the external manifestation of students' subjectivity, and in the triadic relationship of "teacher-student-object", students are the subjects of self-development, self-learning and self-management. When students are the subject of self-development, the purpose of education is always to promote students' self-growth. "What kind of people to cultivate" is the basic question of education, and there are always two theoretical logics in the process of education: one is the top-down educational teleology, the logic of which is that the purpose of education is concretized step by step, "from the purpose of education to the goal of school training, and then to the goal of curriculum, teaching and learning". The second is the bottom-up theory of student development, the logic of which is the process of continuous self-improvement of students, from "the experienced me to the developing me, and then to the ideal me". The reason why Dewey emphasized that education has no purpose is actually to oppose top-down educational teleology, and to determine the purpose of education from the perspective of society and abstract students. He believed that there is no other purpose except for the continuous growth of students, that is, to respect the subjectivity of students' development and determine the purpose of education from the perspective of students' growth and success. Practice has proved that students themselves are the decisive factor in development, and student subjectivity is the logical starting point of education.

When students are the subject of learning activities, teaching students to learn is the core pursuit of teaching. Learning is the basic way for students to acquire knowledge, develop their abilities and improve their literacy, and it is the basic logic for students to learn to learn under the guidance of teachers to actively determine goals, formulate plans, and carry out learning activities, continuously improve their ability to learn independently, and improve the learning practice process.

When students are the main body of learning and self-management, it is an important task of teaching to cultivate students' awareness and ability of learning and self-management. This enables students to become management participants and masters of self-management, exercise their management awareness and ability, and find a balance between control and freedom.

Secondly, students' subjectivity is also manifested in their active role in learning activities, which is mainly manifested in their autonomy, initiative and creativity in learning. In practice, students should be able to carry out various learning activities independently, and should not passively wait for the teacher to explain. In various learning activities, students are not passive recipients of knowledge, but active learning subjects, who should actively participate, think actively, be good at summarizing, and internalize knowledge into their own literacy. Students are not only the main body of learning, but also the main body of active understanding of the world and transforming the world, and the ultimate goal of learning is not to reproduce the knowledge and ideas of predecessors, but to create on the basis of them and develop a better culture, which requires students to be creative.

Finally, the core of students' subjectivity is the main ability of students in learning activities, and only by cultivating students' subjective ability can we truly implement the main position of students and play the main role. Students' subjective abilities include self-awareness, self-planning, self-learning, self-evaluation, self-management, and other awareness and ability. If the student's subjective status and main role are the external manifestations of subjectivity, then the subjective ability is the spiritual core and power source for the implementation of the student's subjective status and main role.

### 3. The Value Function of Students' Subjective Construction

The construction of student subjectivity needs to improve or even reshape the education and teaching system, and establish a new ecology of learning-centered education. Once student subjectivity is constructed, it will play a huge role in the entire education and teaching ecology.

#### 3.1. From passive to active: Promote students' self-directed learning

Students' learning negatively and passively is a common problem in today's teaching practice. Students learn under the pressure of teachers or parents, lack of interest and fun in learning, do not concentrate in class, play after class, and regard learning as a task. In the long run, students will inevitably become bored with learning, unable to keep up with their grades, lose confidence, and become less and less interested in learning. The construction of students' subjectivity is to help students establish the main position of learning and turn passive learning into active learning. Students' subjectivity, learning subject status and independent learning are progressive relationships. As long as students have subjectivity, they will naturally seek the subject status and realize independent learning. If students do not construct their subjectivity, then teachers are excellent and teaching theories are advanced, and they cannot truly establish the main position of students in learning and development, and students will not be able to achieve independent learning. It is precisely because of the construction of students' subjectivity that teachers can face up to the subjective status of students, pay attention to students' active learning and practice, and play a leading role, so that students can also realize the transformation of their roles and status, and truly change from passive educators to active development subjects. In teaching practice, students have shifted from passive to active, which can not only establish the main position and promote the practice of independent learning, but also inject the source power into the integrated reform of teaching, learning and evaluation.

#### 3.2. From authority to democracy: to achieve the unity of teaching and learning

As the main channel of student development, the quality of classroom teaching basically determines the quality of student development. So what kind of classroom teaching can help improve the quality of teaching and promote students' learning and development? Examining the history of the development of teaching theory, it is not difficult to find that teaching has evolved and developed from "authority to democracy", and modern teaching theory has basically established the development direction of teaching democracy and affirmed the function and status of teaching democracy. Teaching democracy is the core element of revitalizing teaching resources and optimizing the teaching process. [6] However, the idea of teaching democracy has not been truly implemented in the bilateral understanding activities between teachers and students. Even if many teachers have mastered the ideology of teaching democracy and are willing to introduce it into the classroom, in practice, it will become a mere formality, or even have no way to start. The root of the problem lies not in teachers, but in the fact that students' subjectivity is not valued and cultivated, and the prerequisites for the realization of teaching democracy are lacking. It can be said that the core of teaching democracy lies in the "teacher-student relationship", and if teachers and students do not establish a democratic and equal teacher-student relationship, not only will the subjectivity of students not be brought into play, but also it will be difficult to realize the dominance of teachers. When the majority of students need the help of teachers to master basic knowledge and skills, teachers are reduced to tools to impart knowledge and skills to students, and their dominance is overshadowed. To realize teaching democracy, it is necessary to establish a democratic and equal teacher-student relationship in teaching, and to give play to the leading role of teachers on the basis of respecting and giving play to students' subjectivity. The construction of student subjectivity can essentially lay a solid foundation for the unity of teacher dominance and student subjectivity.

### **3.3. From Indoctrination to Construction: Realize the integration of knowledge and experience**

For a long time, there has always been the problem of "emphasizing teaching over learning" and "emphasizing knowledge over experience" in teaching. Even if the enthusiasm and initiative of students are emphasized, students are only the objects of passive teacher teaching, and teaching alienation is the process of knowledge indoctrination. Dewey even caricatured it as "The use of clever methods to arouse interest, to make the material interesting; Wrap it in sugarcoating; Cover up boring things with reconciling and irrelevant materials; In the end, it seems that the child is allowed to swallow and digest a mouthful of unpalatable food while he is happily tasting something completely different." [7] In fact, high-quality teaching activities must deal with the relationship between teachers, students, and knowledge. In the final analysis, learning is the student's task, and good teachers and high-quality teaching cannot replace self-learning. Whether it is the internalization of objective and indirect knowledge into experience, or the integration of all experiences into a complete experiential structure "literacy", students need to be proactive in cognition, experience and construction. Activating students' subjectivity and promoting self-directed learning is the way to move from passive indoctrination to active construction and realize the integration of knowledge and experience. "It is impossible to achieve any good teaching effect without students consciously and automatically learning." [8] It is precisely because of the construction of subjectivity that students are willing to discover, be good at observation, be good at thinking, and be diligent in reflection, so as to achieve in-depth understanding and transformation of knowledge. Without students' active cognition, thinking and experience, it is not only difficult to internalize objective knowledge into ability, but also difficult for students to construct a systematic and vivid experience system.

### **3.4. From homogeneity to individuality: promote the differentiated development of students**

Since entering the class teaching system, our teaching ideas have been hovering between "unity of pace and pursuit of individuality". Whether we want to focus on a small number of outstanding students or take care of all students is a difficult choice. From a practical point of view, under the requirements of quality education and universal education, and under the restrictions of the class teaching system, our teachers are more oriented to all students, focusing their time and energy on promoting the growth of all students, and not paying enough attention to the individual and personality development of students, which also leads to the more and more serious homogeneity of students and the destruction of students' individualized development. Tracing back to the source, the key to the problem is not the teacher, but the student is the breakthrough. Only by constructing students' subjectivity and giving full play to the role of teachers' leadership and students' subjectivity, can we achieve differentiated development while promoting the synchronous development of all students. The construction of students' subjectivity not only helps to liberate teachers' time, space and energy, but also gives play to teachers' leading role. It can also promote students' independent learning and promote students' differentiated development.

### **3.5. From being evaluated to mutual evaluation: realizing the integration of teaching, learning and evaluation**

In the current educational practice, there is a common problem that students are the objects of evaluation, which not only deviates from the original teaching intention of core literacy cultivation, but also contradicts the current teaching theory advocated. From being evaluated by teachers, educational administrators, parents, and social figures to students' active self-evaluation and mutual evaluation, it is not only the development trend of literacy-oriented evaluation, but also the only way to realize the development of students' subjectivity. The

construction of students' subjectivity inherently includes the subjectivity of students as the subject of evaluation, and the process of its construction is also inseparable from the practice process of students' active evaluation. Whether students have subjectivity or not is not only related to whether students can conduct self-evaluation and evaluate others, but also related to whether the concept of students' subjective evaluation can be truly put into practice. First of all, the construction of students' subjectivity provides students' subjective awareness and ability to participate in evaluation. Students are not only able to consciously analyze and judge their own learning, but also to evaluate others correctly. Secondly, students take the initiative to carry out evaluation activities, which prepares the conditions for the integration of teaching, learning and evaluation to enter into practice, which is not only conducive to the development of evaluation theory, but also conducive to the deepening of the learning process and the development of students.

#### **4. The Practical Path of Students' Subjective Construction**

The premise of putting the student subject theory into practice is to cultivate the subjectivity of students, without which it is difficult to implement the student subject theory in practice. Different from "human subjectivity" in the general sense, students' subjectivity is developed in the active learning practice, and without the management, learning and practical activities of students' subjectivity, there may be the development of "human subjectivity", and there is no improvement of students' subjectivity.

##### **4.1. Implement the construction of student subjectivity in improving school governance**

School management is different from general administration in that it is for the students rather than the school. To achieve the purpose of helping students construct their subjectivity by improving management, we should first clarify what kind of management is conducive to the construction of students' subjectivity. From the point of view of management purpose, management is not to control and limit students, but to allow students to achieve self-management. The purpose of student management is to serve students, and the goal is to guide students to form good study habits, behavioral habits and living habits, cultivate students' self-care, self-improvement and independent living ability, so that students can learn happily, grow healthily, and get comprehensive and harmonious development in moral, intellectual and physical aspects. [9] From the perspective of the main body of management, in order to realize the construction of students' subjectivity in management, students must not be regarded as complete management objects, and they should also become participants in management. As the main body of learning, development and management, students have the right to know about the management of the school and to put forward their views and opinions on school affairs. Schools can cultivate students' awareness and ability of self-management through students' participation in campus management, student management, and class management. From the perspective of the management process, the top-down one-way management is not conducive to the cultivation of students' subjectivity, so it is necessary to shift from one-way management to two-way management and pay attention to the process of students' participation in management. The school should not only pay attention to the educational role of each management, but also give full play to the autonomy and initiative of students in the management process. From the perspective of management methods, from "system" to "governance", changing "rigid system management" to "flexible subject governance", can give full play to the active role of students and other management subjects, and is the way to respect and cultivate students' subjectivity.

To realize the construction of students' subjectivity in school management, it is necessary to give full play to the role of students as the main body, and build an environment and channels

for students to participate in management, decision-making, and implementation. First of all, the school builds a student self-management system. Different from the administration of ordinary units, the core of school management is education, not management. Through the construction and implementation of the self-management system, it not only cultivates students' self-education and self-management ability, but also stimulates students' sense of ownership and responsibility, so that students can become effective assistants in class management and school management. [10] For example, Dayu Middle School introduced the senior system in the management of students in Xinjiang classes, which provided an effective idea for the management of students in Xinjiang classes. [11] Second, schools should value student participation in management. At present, there are many studies on students' participation in college school management, but there are very few studies on the participation of primary and secondary school students in school management. However, students' participation in the management of primary and secondary schools is also a trend, which is not only a way to give full play to students' initiative and enthusiasm, but also an important way to develop students' subjectivity. Giving full play to the subjective role of students in management is not only the purpose of management, but also the art of management. Finally, Schools should pay attention to student self-management. The purpose of management is not to control, but to seek a balance between control and freedom, and management is to "no matter", that is, to enable students to educate and manage themselves.

#### **4.2. Realize the construction of subjectivity in the learning practice of the unity of knowledge and action**

Learning is the main channel for students' development, and the construction of students' subjectivity is inseparable from the process of learning. The theory of student subjectivity can only be integrated with students' cognition and practical activities, to understand and implement students' subjectivity from the perspective of students' learning and development, and then prepare conditions for the cultivation of subjectivity. Students' subjectivity and self-directed learning are complementary to each other, and students can achieve self-directed learning if they have subjectivity, and the cultivation of subjectivity is pregnant in the process of students' self-directed learning. Therefore, the construction of students' subjectivity should be implemented in the learning practice of the unity of knowledge and action, and the subjectivity of students should be respected and cultivated in the complete learning process.

To cultivate students' subjectivity, it is necessary to reconstruct classroom practice with students' learning as the center, and pay attention to and attach importance to students' self-directed learning. " Let students be the masters, be sincere, do not be half-hearted and false; It is necessary to let students be true masters, educate themselves, manage themselves, learn and live by themselves, choose, participate and discuss by themselves." [12] However, students' self-directed learning is not done behind closed doors, but guided and active learning. Without the guidance and support of teachers and other subjects, students' self-directed learning will lose its direction and control, and will be alienated into simple direct exploration, which is not only inefficient, but also has no guarantee of quality. As mature teachers with rich knowledge and rich experience, they play a leading role in students' learning. Self-directed learning is not a one-man show for students, but a stage for the common development of teachers and students. To advocate students' independent learning and cultivate students' subjectivity, the first condition is to guide students to participate in the complete learning process and cultivate students' awareness and ability of independent learning. The so-called complete learning process does not only refer to the cognitive process, but also includes the complete practice of setting goals, making plans, carrying out learning, and reflecting on evaluation. Only by attaching importance to students' subjectivity at every step and guiding students to learn to learn, can we promote the construction of students' subjectivity.

### 4.3. Realize the construction of students' subjectivity in the cooperation of "home-school-community"

Cultivating students' subjectivity is inseparable from the power of family education. Children's growth includes all-round systematic engineering including family education, social education and school education. [12] The functions and status of family education in different eras are different, and the ways of its implementation are also very different, but they are all indispensable ways to educate people. From the perspective of historical evolution, the function of family education has undergone evolution and development of four stages: whole family education, strong family education, weak family education, and home-school cooperative education. The future will be the stage of the modernization of family education, which will be the stage of joint development and co-construction and co-education of school education, family education and social education. [13]

Traditionally, The home-school cooperation model of "principals control decision-making, teachers control teaching content, and parents provide support" [14] is not enough to cultivate students' subjectivity. It is necessary to establish a cooperation model of school guidance, social support, family participation, and student subjectivity, and focus on students' independent learning and practice, and work together to build an environment conducive to students' growth and success. Under the new cooperation model, school, society, and family are all important places for students' learning and development, and they need to cooperate uniquely to help students build their subjectivity.

First of all, based on campus learning activities, we should build an environment that reflects the main position of students, gives full play to the role of students, and enhances students' subjectivity. The theme of the activity is rich, selective and central, and students should be able to choose the activities they participate in independently, and they should be the planners and implementers of the activities. Secondly, based on social practice, it helps students to carry out practical activities independently around their social life. Students are not only the main body of learning, but also the main body of social activities, and it is necessary for relevant social institutions to provide students with various places and material conditions for practice, so as to provide guarantees for the social activities of teachers and students. Finally, based on family open activities, we should give full play to the guiding role of parents and cultivate students' subjectivity. Parents are children's first teachers and role models for students to learn, and it is not advisable to blindly demand that they do this and that. "When the important development links of self-rules, self-organization and self-implementation in "open" peer play are replaced by time-slotted, purposeful and planned arrangements by adults, children become simple practitioners in the structure of adults' established activities, and children's "play" is increasingly replaced by "training" that lacks autonomy." [15] It is important for teachers to know that their parents' role is not to supervise their children's homework, but to guide students to take the initiative in learning and practicing. Parents are not nannies, and family education is not training, but should be guided on the basis of children's independent activities, and children's awareness and ability to learn independently should be cultivated.

## 5. Conclusion

The construction of students' subjectivity is the basis for realizing the status of students' subjects and giving play to their main role. Respecting students' subjectivity and giving full play to their role is a necessary condition for the construction of students' subjectivity. Students' subjectivity is constructed in the active practice of "unity of knowledge and practice", which enlightens education: learning is students' own business, and education should provide students with a broad space and a good atmosphere for independent learning, self-management, and self-growth. It is necessary to return the rights of students to them, change

the way educators control education and teaching, and all educators should become guides and supporters of students' growth, rather than controllers.

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