

America's Philosophy for Children Teaching Method and the Improvement of Children's Character

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Note: This translation is based on an early draft of a paper delivered by Li Junjie in Honolulu in 1998. A later revised version of the same paper has been published in *Jiaozuo Education Research*, 2001.2, pp 9-11.)

I n June of 1997, sponsored by the Beijing Soong Ching Ling Foundation, Dr. Thomas Jackson and six representatives from the Hawaii Philosophy in the Schools Project visited our country to present a series of demonstrations on the implementation of the Philosophy for Children (P4C). Teachers from various grade levels remember these presentations to this day, and have responded warmly to the idea of combining some innovative P4C educational principles with our own educational practices. In our city, Jiaozuo, teachers from four elementary schools, one middle school, and two kindergartens expressed strong interests in P4C. They began to study and apply P4C and found that it formed a natural combination with their own program of character education. This combination has become part of new educational reform movement among Chinese teachers, the results of which have been quite significant.

There are several differences in the education system, theories, and methodologies in the United States and China, and in some degree, these differences are enormous. Why then was Philosophy for Children so warmly welcomed and enthusiastically accepted by Chinese educators? There are, I think, three reasons:

1. Education is a kind of scientific endeavor, and scientific endeavors should not be limited by national boundaries. Moreover, education is also a kind of social endeavor with its own rules and principles, and when educators probe these out, the results from their efforts can transcend national boundaries and contribute to the

whole of mankind. For example, education today has been shaped by both the teachings of the ancient Chinese educator Confucius, and the more recent American educator John Dewey, whose *Democracy and Education* symbolized the emergence of education as an independent branch of science, and whose emphasis on the importance of the lives and activities of children has persisted as both a practical and valuable idea for educators today.

2. Philosophy for Children tries to change traditional teaching methods and to help children to think for themselves in a responsible way. Hence it is moving in the same direction as education reforms in our own country. For us, the goal of character education is to develop both the physical and mental abilities of children, and Philosophy for Children has proven successful in the development of children's creative thinking.
3. The Hawai'i team impressed teachers with their outstanding workshop. During their short stay, they vividly demonstrated how to do Philosophy for Children in the classroom, and they successfully encouraged all participants to take part in inquiries. In their demonstration, teachers and students communicated easily and students took an active role in discussions. The results of these workshops surpassed our expectations.

Among these reasons, I think the second – that the theories and principles behind Philosophy for Children fit in well with those emerging today in China – is perhaps most significant. To show why I say this, I will first have to discuss

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the emergence of character education in China.

II

In our traditional model of elementary and middle school education, the body of students in the classroom is taken as a single unit, the teacher is expected to play the main role, and the results of both learning and teaching are evaluated by means of an examination. In each classroom, teachers give lectures and students listen. Students must learn a great deal of content and spend an enormous amount of time studying. Most teachers and students take this way of teaching for granted, and believe that this method has many advantages – for example it helps students become adept in memorizing vast amounts of textbook material. But there is an old Chinese saying, “When it comes time to apply what one has learned from books, they will see that they have learned little.” People think that the more students can memorize, the stronger and more useful their foundation must be. It is because they have this strong foundation that so many young Chinese have won top prizes in international academic examinations.

But over the past eighty years, education in China has been adversely affected by the model of “education for taking exams.” Since only a very limited number of students in China are able to enroll in China, the competition for getting into a college is extreme. When children are still in elementary schools, they have to earn top grades in order to get into a good middle school. When they get into middle school, they have to work hard to get into one of the better high schools. After they get into high school, they have to work extremely hard to compete with other students in order to get a seat in college. Therefore, students, schools, and parents all take moving ahead in schools as their only objective, and “taking exams” as the main goal of education.

In “education for taking exams,” elementary and middle schools emphasize filling student’s brains with information, but ignore their moral, physical, and aesthetic dimensions. Teaching methods are directed toward pouring information into students, and not toward the development of thinking skills, personal character, and creativity. In this model of teaching, students are treated like empty cups, and not surprisingly many psychological problems have been reported. In short, “education for taking exams” has become a barrier to the development of education in China.

During the late 1980s, educators in tune with the deepening call for reform in education suggested that we need to change from “education for passing exams” to “character education,” and their suggestions found support in government. What is meant here by “character education”? It means taking as the main goal in education the improvement of the overall character of each student, and working toward this goal in accordance with scientifically based models of physical and mental development among children. To do this, educators have to respect students’ points of view and intentions, while at the same time focusing on

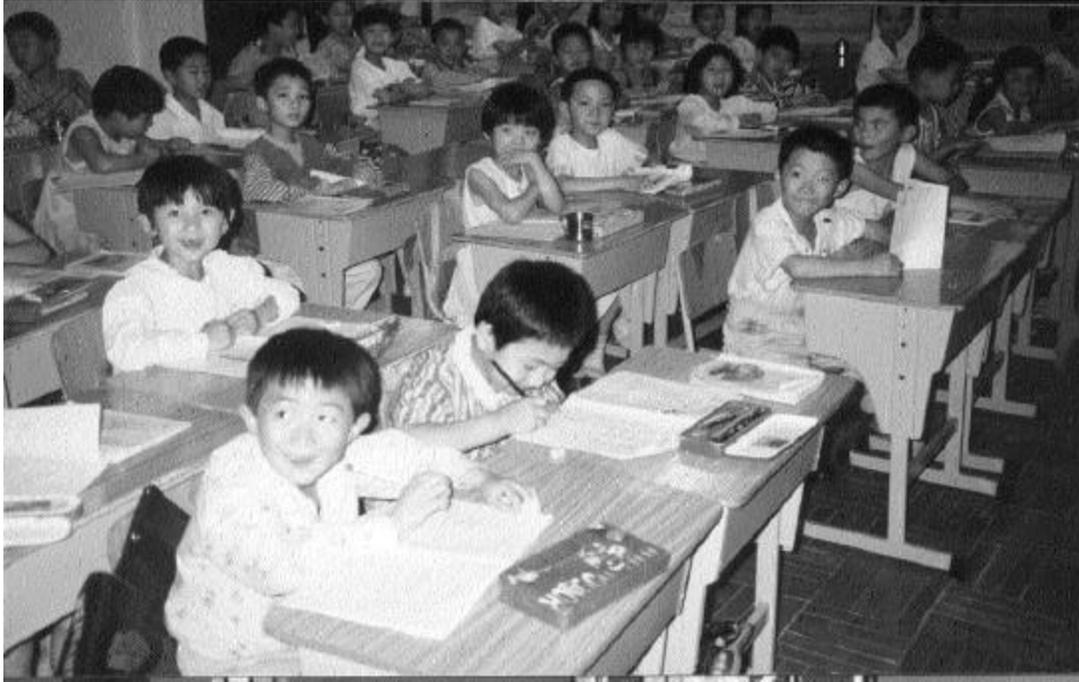
the development of their wisdom and potential. In short the overall goal of education should be the formation of a healthy character.

We are now actively trying to develop a program of character education. We have carefully changed the lesson plans and classroom structure. We created new methods of assessments. But most importantly, we have reformed the way we teach. In terms of their intellectual development, we pay meticulous attention to stimulating students’ curiosity, interest, imagination, and their desire to learn. We replaced the old boring lectures with a form of guidance through fun activities. In the classroom, we now often start with an interesting question or a beautiful story to spark student’s interests, and encourage them to inquire for themselves. We pay attention to creating a harmonious atmosphere since we want students to learn in a relaxing environment. Our teachers’ faces are no longer too serious, but now reveal emotion and feelings. In terms of their aesthetic development, we teach students how to feel beauty through imagination, and to draw, paint, and do calligraphy. We also employ teaching methods suitable to the natural course of the student’s moral and physical development. In doing so, we allow students to enjoy the development of their overall character.

In the development of “character education” we especially want to teach students *how to learn*. As the American futurist Alvin Toffler once remarked, “The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.” We think that teaching students how to learn is one of the most important tasks for teachers. Teachers should use the classroom and after-school activities to teach students how to handle the skills of learning. We want our students to become people with the capacity to learn and who are good at learning.

III

It was under this kind of background that Philosophy for Children was introduced into our country. Having witnessed and participated in Dr. Jackson’s workshop, we came to understand that P4C is about the philosophy of education – that is, it is a philosophy of educating children. This contemporary philosophy does not merely aim to answer questions, but attempts to help children express their own point of view clearly and precisely. It calls attention to the process of inferring, and encourages analysis and dialectical thinking. Therefore, I would say that Philosophy for Children is a practical philosophy, and its life force is found in its ability to continuously give birth to new ideas, an ability which results from the cooperative efforts of teacher and students. As practiced in Hawaii, Philosophy for Children attempts to create a “safe place” for building a reflective community of inquiry. In this community, children sit together in a circle and are encouraged to speak out freely and raise questions. And although children are free to criticize



activities. Students walk in the classroom with a smiling face. The environment of their classroom is relaxing and happy. Some classes use the eight tools from The Good Thinker's Tool Kit, and some ask students to create stories while listening to music. All of these things are the resulting fruits of the educational exchange between Hawai'i and China.

In closing we would like to raise a few concerns and questions that have come up in our research and implementation of Philosophy for

each other's ideas, the environment of this community is quite harmonious. In a P4C session the teacher no longer acts as a representative of the Truth, but becomes another member in the community of inquiry, thereby allowing for the unlimited development of children's imagination and creativity.

In tune with the nature of thought in children, Dr. Jackson has developed an appealing and playful "Good Thinker's Tool Kit" to assist children in thinking critically. Starting with one question, children are encouraged to discover more; starting from a more simple question, they are encouraged to go deeper and deeper. Instead of studying dull and tedious material, children are instead encouraged to seek knowledge and pursue truth in a relaxing and joyful environment. According to our understanding, Philosophy for Children emphasizes the process of inquiring instead of simply trying to offer answers. It probes associations among questions, but does not focus on finding *the* correct answer. It represents the idea that "the nature of philosophy is deny and doubting." By doing these things, P4C leads students to become better learners.

These Philosophy for Children teaching principles and methods have been adopted and used by several schools in our city. Teachers in our kindergartens that have adopted P4C, encourage children to raise the questions that they themselves care about as a means of initiating an inquiry. In some schools, teachers helped children make their own "Good Thinker's Tool Kits," and developed a method for taking turns in a discussion in which a red flower is passed along through the circle in the beat of a drum, and when the drum stops, whoever has the flower gets the opportunity to speak. This is a playful and fun way to have a discussion with a large group of students. Several elementary schools have also introduced P4C in their classes and after-school

Children.

1. The first concern arises from the dialectical relationship between "learning as hard work" and the notion of "joyful education." The traditional Chinese approach to education takes learning as hard, bitter work, but P4C suggests a need to change "bitter" into "joyful" learning. Are these two conceptions necessarily antagonistic or can they be reconciled?
2. The second issue concerns the amount of content or information students need to grasp. In our country, the education plan emphasizes the task of passing knowledge on to students. It requires students to cover and learn a large amount of information and content. At the same time, however, the implementation of P4C requires a lot of class time, and if we use P4C as a general teaching method, it will be hard to cover the required content. Are there any good solutions for solving this conflict?
3. The third issue has to do with the role of the teacher in the pursuit of the truth and in bringing inquiries to a conclusion. We have seen that P4C rejects the pouring method in favor of a more scientific and democratic approach to learning. There are, to be sure, some questions that even teachers can't answer. But in many instances teachers do know the right answer. Isn't there a need for teachers to play leading roles in the process of inquiry?

The above questions are for mutual discussion. We hope to learn more P4C teaching methods, and warmly welcome the Hawai'i P4C team to visit China again.