

A Comparison of Character Education in Primary and Junior Secondary Schools in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China

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Abstract: Character education have been implemented in schools worldwide from twenty centuries, considering the growing social-moral problems that beset modern societies. The fact of moral decline and negative behavior of youth require character education to provide programs of eliminating such behavior that emerge in social, political, and economic contexts. It was proved that students who received character education and moral values in schools had better test scores and had lower incidents of vandalism, absenteeism, and dishonesty on tests. An interpretive approach has been used in this study and focused on the difference of character education among Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China, seeking how the character education implements in schools and its communication with other subjects on the support of policies, how the teachers make of this curriculum, and whether the program of character education takes the impact on children's character building.

Keywords: Character Education; Hong Kong; Taiwan; Mainland China.

1. Introduction

Character education has been implemented in schools worldwide as a response to social-moral problems that beset modern societies. For example, curricula encompassing human virtues and moral values have been designed to serve the increasing population of at-risk children who have severe behavioural or emotional disorders. Perceptions of moral decline and negative behaviour among youth require character education to provide programs for eliminating such behaviour in social, political, and economic contexts. Some studies have demonstrated that students who received character education and moral values in schools had better test scores and lower incidents of vandalism, absenteeism, and dishonesty.

1.1. Character Education

Different researchers have a different perception of character education. It includes consciousness, behavioural and value dimensions, which emphasises the interaction between human and himself, human and others, human and environment, human and universe commonly. Alan L. Lockwood defines character education as any-school initiated program cooperated with other community institutions, to shape directly and systematically the behaviour of young people by influencing explicitly the nonrelativistic values believed directly to bring about that behaviour. With the hope of freeing the society from the moral crisis as to violence, stealing, cheating, and, not least, self-destructive, some researchers endeavoured to find efficient ways in initiating courses and activities related to character building for the children who are vulnerable to moral danger. Thus, an intentional and proactive approach that is promoting character education began to be placed in crucial status. Schools pay more efforts on implementing character education for young children, who are visibly affected by society's problems. A series of the academic curriculum was established, for example, personal safety and healthy, moral skills,

behavioural habits, and some related educational courses.

The conception of character education emerged in China in lately twenty centuries. Hong Kong, Taiwan have further improvements in character education compared with mainland China against different cultural history. A number of relevant policies, curriculums and activities have been established for an urgent need of building moral capacity with the students. This is worth investigating because implementing character education programs help the students build their characters and advance a moral and sustainable society.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Approach

An interpretive approach has been used in this study and focused on the difference of character education among Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China. The meaning that advance an understanding of character education is essential, which requires seeking the potential detailed insights behind the character programs. Moreover, I am seeking how the character education implements in schools and its communication with other subjects on the support of policies, how the teachers make of this curriculum, and whether the program of character education takes the impact on children's character building. With these considerations of the project, relevant activities of year 1 to year 9 have been selected to make the comparison, in addition to five selected schools as interview targets for the sake of evidence collection and corroboration.

2.2. Sampling, Data Collection and Data Analysis

The study compares the character education among Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China, which represent different cultural backgrounds. Considering the restraint of time and geographic environment, public and government-aided schools that receive unified core-courses organised by

Education Bureau in Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China are involved in this study. Because of the historical issues, western culture left a deeper impression on Hong Kong and Taiwan, which have a profound influence on the development of character education. In addition to that, the boundary of mainland schools narrowed to Zhejiang province in view of curriculum standards vary in different districts. Zhejiang is of competitiveness in promoting high quality and high standard education. By 2004, Zhejiang became the first province that accomplished the basic popularity of fifteen-year education across the whole province. To implement “A Suggestion of Strengthen Ideological and Moral Construction on Juveniles”, Zhejiang launched Moral Education Project to absorb excellent works as to character activities and to enhance its originality and operability. Therefore, it is appropriate to analyse character education in primary and junior secondary schools from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Zhejiang, which could be a chance to make a comprehensive comparison.

The documents analysis consists of character education related policies, curriculums, activities, a top-down system that interact with each other. Policy plays a dominant role in the formation of character education. Thus, this study reviewed websites of Education Bureau, which represent Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China (Education Bureau of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administration Region; Ministry of Education of the Republic of China (Taiwan); Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China; Education of Zhejiang Province). It is a web-based content analysis, which is of transparency and authority avoiding personal affection. Latest systems and policies are the main objects to find out detailed statistics of relevant curriculums and activities. Based on the policy and outline issued by Education Bureau, a series of textbooks compiled. Instead of the isolated curriculum set for character building, there is an interplay between various courses and activities penetrating across the instruction. With this view, related textbooks such as “Morality and Legality” of Zhejiang are reviewed. Regarding Hong Kong, due to the difference of textbooks from different publishing houses adopted by many a school with the consideration of teaching requirement themselves, it is necessary to categorise and summarise the common topics according to the curriculum outline. The most important way of investigation is to examine tremendous prior studies published by expertise. According to these journals and books, to confirm the definition and boundary of character education, and to trace the history of Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China related to character education development.

After reviewing the documents, the content of tremendous documents which are of service was required to classify and code for comparison explicitly. In the light of the study of prior journals and books on character education, with the combination of current development of that running in the schools, the key traits of character education were produced based on the classification which made by Sharron L. McElmeel (2002) and the book “Lesson Plans for Character Education”. After the confirmation of topics of character education, policy, outline, curriculum and activity would be evaluated. With respect to policy, the contents of relevant policy and outline were recorded from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Zhejiang. The curriculum is a more complicated concern due to the interaction between each course. Thus, related units of textbooks were highlighted in the diagram that explicit the difference in curriculum. Activities about character education

that are significant were noted in the study. Apart from that, whether the e-learning and e-resources are available for the students, parents and teachers is also an important subject of investigation.

It was introduced semi-structured interviews as a supplement to gather evidence with the aim of increasing the validity and reliability. Because of the time and arrangement of this research, as well as scarce online resources of character education of Zhejiang, interview only carried out in Zhejiang province. As to the sample selection, one primary school and three junior secondary schools attended the investigation. Except one junior secondary school situated in the north of Zhejiang province and one in the south, all of the left are located in the east of Zhejiang. At the stage of preparation, an invitation letter had been sent to each teacher and had them informed of the interview questions after getting the approval from schools. Moreover, the interviewees are the teachers who takes charge of courses related to character education, such as the teacher of General Studies, or the teacher of Morality and Legality. The questions asked to the teachers centre on the implement of character education. For example, does the school have relevant activities or curriculums for promoting character education, how does the school carry out character education, what kinds of activities related to character education do you conduct to help the students build their character. Besides, some questions aim at the meaning or improvement upon teachers' part, for instance, whether the character education programs useful for students and why, is there anything more you think should be improved or advanced. Questions were refined in accordance with distinctive characteristics of each school and additional questions were added based on the response from them. The interview was conducted in Chinese, and it lasted 20 to 25 minutes and the voice recording plus noting were made with permission of interviewees.

The analysis of interview incorporated document analysis that should be carried out prior to the interview. In addition to the content of document review mentioned above, the information of pilot schools from websites was gathered and evaluated before the interview, for example, the background of the school, arrangement of each curriculum, textbooks for the students and assistant books for the teachers. The transcripts of the interview were screened rigorously to see whether the documents from journals and policy and implementation of reality are in conformity or nonconformity.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1. Policy of Character Education on Primary and Junior Secondary School

The policy established by Education Bureau determined to the direction of curriculum outline and the structure of curriculum and course. The contents of the policy of primary school are consistent with junior secondary school in the main, but the objectives have a little difference in extent. Generally, the requirements and extent of character education became more and more detailed and thorough with the grade. Take the example of Hong Kong, in respect to values and national identity, primary students are expected to know how to distinguish right from wrong properly, take responsibility in the family, society and the nation, accept and tolerate pluralistic values. In contrast, junior secondary students are enabled to become a knowledgeable and responsible citizen, appreciate positive values and Chinese culture, and respect

for pluralism in society. From identifying right and wrong to becoming a citizen of criticism spirit, from accepting diverse values to respecting, the changes which indicate that the stage of human character development is growing from making the judgement of moral issues to acting on it, on the basis of the theory from Lawrence Kohlberg and Meriel Downey & A.V. Kelly.

3.2. Arrangement of Curriculum and Course

To examine the arrangement of curriculum and course related to character education, five aspects were classified: related project, focus, major curriculum, requirements and methods of the implement as well as the proportion in all courses. All of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Zhejiang have special projects or well-divided life education centre that raise series of requirements on its arrangement and implement for schools to initiate character education. However, there exist various topics with different emphasis, of which character building and value construction are prioritised mostly. In terms of major curriculum or domain, each place proposes to integrate character education with every curriculum in every site through interesting and meaningful activities. The differences exist in methods, that is, Hong Kong underlines the importance of life events and categorises it into more specific aspects, while Zhejiang focuses on traditional Chinese virtues, by which character education implement. Additionally, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Zhejiang set a dependent curriculum which incorporates with diverse themes from another domain. Both Hong Kong and Taiwan established a succession of character traits that primary and junior secondary students should be possessed, but schools in Zhejiang of character education are inclined to transmit traditional Chinese virtues. Moreover, primary schools in Hong Kong have the highest ratio of character education (19) in the key course and school-based curriculum, but the ratio declined to 8 percent in the junior secondary of character education. Both Taiwan that offers Integrative Activity (10) and Zhejiang (5) that offers Morality and Legality have nothing explicit of quota distributed to character education program.

3.3. Content of Textbooks about Character Education

It respectively summarised the course contents of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Zhejiang that related to character education topics from two domains based on textbooks and curriculum outline, of which is the human being and the other is human with society, community and nation. This classification is based on the guideline which made by schools provided expected direction for implementing character education. Two domain of human himself and human with society are particularly divided and established in three places in common. Similarly, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Zhejiang all put emphasis on the relationship between children themselves and friends or parents, but both Hong Kong (Family domain and School domain) and Zhejiang (You and Me) established independent domain except Taiwan, which integrates it with other domains. In addition to the common domains of all, Taiwan isolated Human and Environment as a single domain.

According to the contents of character education, associated courses performed in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Zhejiang mostly encompass fifteen traits. From the aspect of human himself, it revealed that Hong Kong and Zhejiang pay more attention to children's character construction and behaviour management rather than the exploration of life, in

which Taiwan focus on. That means, there exists a different understanding of character education while implementing it, which distinctively result in various contents and emphasis in instruction. In addition to that, Hong Kong and Taiwan organize several courses about sex education to help students understand the difference between boys and girls so that they are aware of protecting themselves and sex protection. However, though curricula outline of Zhejiang listed one of the requirements that students should understand the psychological change of themselves, there still lacking detailed course and chapters of textbook related to sex education, only depending on the brief instruction of physiological change.

3.4. Activities with Various Forms

Except as compulsory curricula, there are kinds of activities that related to character education. This study divided these activities into five forms: school-based curricula, lecture, competition, field-based learning and workshop. Basically, each school of Hong Kong and Taiwan have carried out related school-based curricula to achieve whole-development. For Hong Kong, there are life education, civic awareness, personal development and life skills (Basic Education Curriculum Guide). Similarly, Taiwan has life education and career prospect as the elective course. However, there lack such school-based curricula about character education in Zhejiang. On the other hand, the forms as to lecture and competition are carried out in all three places. As some teachers from Zhejiang said:

Each school in our district will launch class meeting competition with different themes of character and morality. For instance, there was a class meeting with the topic of filial piety inviting each class to perform at the stage, such as recitation and role-play that related to the theme. Many parents also came and helped their children. Importantly, the students should appreciate their parents for their help and care (Teacher interview, school D).

Our school established based on the theme of Confucius culture, so we promote character education by transferring Confucianism. For example, each class should recite Confucian classics at flag-raising ceremony weekly (Teacher interview, school B).

In addition to that, Hong Kong and Taiwan conduct field-based activity and workshop to encourage the students to take part in diverse activities that leaving from classroom and textbooks, for example, Death Experience Workshop and Close to Nursing Home in Taiwan. In contrast, Zhejiang has little relevant activities in such way. "School often strive to enhance not only the teaching quality of teachers, but the learning efficiency of students in the major course, just like Chinese and Methodology, rather than the minor subject as to character education. Hence, it appears to build students' character and morality by the different curriculum or class meeting." (Teacher interview, school A).

3.5. Access to Learning and Teaching Resources about Character Education

In addition to curricula and activities provided by schools, this study simultaneously examined access to learning and teaching resources about character education which provided by Education Bureau or other social organisation. In general, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Zhejiang serve character education through the website with different topics and attractive activities initiated by social organisations. In respect to

related websites, Hong Kong and Taiwan provide amounts of theme websites that related to character education, for example, Sex Education and Anti-Gambling Education website served by Education Bureau in Hong Kong. Also, there are Global Life Education Resources and Taiwan Life Education Association that operated by Ministry of Education and social organisation respectively. However, Zhejiang has less related isolated websites compared with Hong Kong and Taiwan, apart from the targeted subject website which exhibit some teaching resources and guiding for teachers and students, such as Morality and Legality website, and a learning platform which designed by Education Bureau with different topics of safety education. "Each student should accomplish corresponding tasks that distributed in School Safety Education Platform, which is a compulsory app for every primary student" (Teacher interview, school D).

Likewise, numerous social organisations from Hong Kong and Taiwan hold kinds of activities to primary and junior secondary students, just like joining a memorial meeting of deceased teacher organized by Christian association in Hong Kong. By contrast, the local fire department in Zhejiang would organise fire drill to train the students in knowledge of safety and emergency dealing only, which lack workshop or field-based learning or other various forms of character education.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

4.1. Similarities and Differences

This study aimed at comparing and contrasting character education program of primary and junior secondary schools in Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China from different aspects. To some extent, documents findings accorded with interview finding. With regard to policy, Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China enacted comprehensive policies of character education, which provided guidelines and aims for schools to establish and implement curriculum outlines effectively and specifically. Besides, each place has related a curriculum as to life education, drug education and sex education, but none of the schools establishes an isolated major curriculum of character education except the elective course. Nevertheless, there are kinds of activities in divergent forms implementing and transmitting character education in schools, for example, workshop with the theme of feeling death, competition with the topic of Chinese traditional virtues, or passionate lectures hold by expertise. In addition to learning in the classroom, local education bureau that associated with social organisations provided useful information access to students on the internet. Both students and parents can be stimulated their interest and pick up knowledge by themselves. Overall, documents and interview finding manifested that Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China endeavoured to stress character education to the whole society, especially educating it in the schools, to help children construct positive values and morality, and to facilitate children's whole-person development.

Documents comparison showed similarities in the process of character education, as well as tremendous differences in these places because of different culture backgrounds, which contributed to divergent focus of character education in Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China from the outset. "Morality is based largely in human needs, of oneself and others. It grounded in goods such as friendship, fellowship, self-respect, health, happiness, fulfillment, a sense of meaning in life".

According to the classification of character traits that showed as before and analysis of curriculum of three places, Taiwan put more emphasis on pursuing the meaning of life by children themselves, and their value development. For example, Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China ultimately categorised character education into human needs and human with others people or society, except one more Human and Environment divided solely by Taiwan. With regards to the content of curricula of Taiwan, character education was rooted in the nature of life. Human nature, basic human desires and tendencies, or social values such as fairness and loyalty, are all dated from the life nature. Hence, there are volumes of themes of curricula about precious life in Taiwan primary and junior secondary school, from which human character and moral values are taught. Compared with Taiwan, character education in Hong Kong and mainland China have the inclination to personal development. The students are expected to become good people who have the power to tackle social problems confront in their lives. With the view to being good, the course is vested with responsibilities to transmit life skills and moral values, such as, strengthen the importance of self-regulation or self-respect through life events in Hong Kong.

From all aspects of character education implemented in Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China, Taiwan have a more comprehensive institution of character education compared with Hong Kong and mainland China. Taiwan established numbers of life education resource centre in each area. Moreover, a part of schools in Taiwan has life education working group to cooperate with life education program which set up by Ministry of Education. With specific and operational project of character education, a series of institutions were triggered and geared up, such as life education curriculum center which work on research of teaching materials, life education information network which focus on providing educational information of character education, and life education learning center which give teaching and learning plans and case studies on integrating character education into all curriculum. Therefore, character education not only depends on one curriculum as to Integrative Activity, but permeating in every side of courses. The more significant thing is that there are lots of social organisations supporting and sponsoring primary and junior secondary schools on the implement of character education. For instance, Teacher Training Program in Character Education (Fubon Cultural & Educational Foundation) which aimed at enhancing teaching quality of teachers, and Bye-Bye Morak – Environmental Education Theatre, which leded students to experience the change of climate, dangerous of disaster and appreciation of nature and other people who care about them. Character education should run with an emphasis on improving thinking and an emphasis on practising right behaviour both. Taiwan integrated two emphases into the curriculum to make students know what the good is and practice it by actions through penetrated classroom and vivid field-based activities.

Thinking, feeling, and behaving are crucial components in moral education. Basically, each school has an integrated moral system combining classroom-based teaching with forms of activities to achieve both conception and behaviour development. Hong Kong and Taiwan have better performance in delivering abundant and colourful activities in forms of field trip or workshop of character education. In terms of mainland China, documents analysis indicated that

Education Bureau indeed proceeds to strengthen children's moral ability through formal education and tries to make character education as important as the major course. However, the fact that not only the schools confronted, but the parents who worry about their children's grades. A teacher from school D said Morality and Legality was often occupied by other major courses provided that the teacher of those required for it, such as Chinese, math and English. Although character education is attended in all curricula through the transmission of theoretical knowledge, lacking the various type of teaching methods hinder the improvements of character education and deprive children's curiosity of the meaning of life. On the other hand, some schools in mainland China were likely to make the students express their appreciation to parents through a succession of activities, for example, washing mothers' feet or presenting bouquets at class meeting. "Students may have aware of a sense of filial piety and gratitude, but the questions is whether they will show their love to their parents and care about them in the future" (Teacher interview, school B).

In order to test the effectiveness of character education program, Hong Kong established an instrument of self-check, by which each school could evaluate students' performance based on five life events which covered all the traits of character education and seven priority values. This self-check instrument aimed to make the appraisal of Moral and Civic Education Program and to see if targeted program satisfies and enhances student's character development. To some extent, this kind of sheet that only permits tick or circle can neither reflect character and values of a whole person, nor students' action in real life exactly. Similarly, there are schools in mainland China attempting to assess character result by formal examinations, which ask sorts of questions such as what kinds of behaviour are wrong or how to act when you suffer from inequality. William Bennett (1986) stressed that it should tell the truth about drugs in a straightforward way if a school is really teaching its students a clear lesson in moral responsibility (p5). There is no doubt that taking advantage of examination help the students clarify the standards of behavior and morality, especially in terms of the drug. However, ticking or paper testing cannot simply judge some values. In most cases, there are no better answers about some moral dilemma. It does not matter how good the children performed in a character test, but how they "practice the virtues essential to a good life in a good society". Thus, the checklist can be used in conjunction with observations, document analysis, and interviews with teachers, students, and leaderships to evaluate character education from moral knowing, moral feeling and moral action of students.

4.2. Recommendation

School makes a substantial contribution to the character development of children when values clarification strategies and activities are used well and used within a total program of character education, where people want their children to achieve completely improvements in character. However, just depending on identifying their cognitive development and behaviour in schools evidently cannot represent what they value and how they behave in the community. Primary and junior secondary schools in Hong Kong and Taiwan have created more opportunities for students to experience life by themselves and instructed them to discuss what they think is good, but the role of parents is still underplayed exactly, especially in mainland China. School is imperatively

responding to character education by making coordination between school and family. Within schools, teachers should help students involve in the kind of moral and value issues that have meaning in their lives, and create forms of character development activities with social organisations to stimulate them to take part in proactively. Mainland China has some shortcomings in the formation of character education, which can refer to Hong Kong and Taiwan, where initiating role-play, field trip as well as the workshop for students. Various types of moral and character education help to trigger children's curiosity and interest in activities. Meanwhile, "morality begins at home", schools are of responsibility to associate parents who vitally play important roles as moral and character educators. There are nine big ideas raised by Berkowitz and Oser, such as morality is respect; foster mutual respect; set a good example; teach by telling; help children learn to think for themselves; love children, which parents should know clearly how they can act when their children are with them. Active collaboration between the schools and the family must be strengthened in Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China.

Overall, Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China established comprehensive character system from curriculum arrangements, the content of curriculum, and forms of activities. Meanwhile, mainland China still needs to extend and intensify the integration of character education with other curricula, and enhance teachers' quality to provide teaching recommendations, for example, how teachers can build self-esteem in a music class or art drama, which Hong Kong and Taiwan have excellent performance. Furthermore, evaluation is a crucial part in character education, each primary and junior secondary school from Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China could enrich methods of assessing character development of students, and cooperate with parents to give children a positive life.

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