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Growing the critical thinking of schoolchildren in Taiwan using the Analects of Confucius

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ABSTRACT

According to research, the value of cultivating thinking in the context of dialogic teaching is an effective strategic approach to critical thinking. This study applied an extended comparative intervention to six classes of Taiwanese schoolchildren using two types of experimental groups. Two classes of each different age group were engaged in dialogic teaching over a 12-week period with the use of different materials, either the *Analects of Confucius* or moral dilemma stories. Three further classes served as control groups. The results of a detailed content analysis demonstrated that this dialogic intervention in the class type of the *Analects* contributed significant gains in the thinking of exploratory talk.

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1. Introduction

In early times, Confucian ethics were the main guiding principle in Taiwanese education. This theory arguably also provided a strong and culturally resonant context for stimulating thought about the nuances of moral issues. However, with changes in Taiwanese society, Confucianism has largely disappeared from children's education and many educational experts (although not all) believe that Confucian education is old-fashioned and unhelpful for enhancing children's thinking. It is true that cultural circumstances change and these changes demand a response; however, finding ways to re-use existing resources, such as the *Analects of Confucius*, may be a better way forward, since they are in keeping with the changing demand. Many of Confucius' concepts and knowledge contained in the *Analects* are as applicable today as they were when they were first written. Therefore, this research applies one of the conventional classical Chinese books, the *Analects of Confucius*, to develop children's critical thinking and moral reasoning in a primary school in Taiwan, contrasting use of this with the use of stories about moral dilemmas.

2. Theory

Confucius's educational ideas can be found in the *Analects*. Lee Thomas (2000) quotes a Confucian educational thought, "In old days men studied for the sake of one's own self; nowadays it is for the sake of [showing off to] others", and this prominent sentence, known to generations of pupils, best sums up the educational ideals of conventional Chinese culture. Found in the *Analects* (Lun-Yu), the statement expressively describes the purpose of education, which is that education is

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meaningful as the individual development of one's own self. Although the *Analects* is mainly concerned with moral advancement, the obvious hint is that learning can also be pleasant. Either way, Confucian teaching is centred on personal enhancement, rather than on its helpfulness for acquiring recognition or benefitting one's self. Muller (2000) points out that there are chapters in the *Analects* in which the most significant point of reference may change in certain situations. For example, when Confucius says “filial piety (xiao 孝) is the great root of heaven and earth”, he is describing filial piety as being something comparatively fundamental. This could similarly be said, in terms of the situation, of the ideas of “righteousness” (yi 義), “wisdom” (zhi 智) and “propriety” (li 禮). There is no fixed and absolute “essence” of original Chinese philosophy, and so, no such concept exists in the *Analects*. However, there is one notion which shows its comparative “essentiality”, acting as the most primary foundation for all figures of virtuous behaviour and qualities, and this is the concept of “benevolence” (ren 仁).

In the *Analects*, many particular and replicated key words in Confucius's sayings represent profound meanings from antiquity. Chen (2006) and Waley (1989) describe some characteristically essential words as follows: Ren 仁 is “Benevolence and Humanity”; De 德 relates closely to the Latin *virtus*. It signifies; just as *virtus* does; the explicit quality or ‘virtue’ underlying anything; Yi 義 is the traditional Chinese character for “justice”; Li 禮 translates closely as “Propriety or Rites”; Zhi 知; as knowing; means “realising and obtaining knowledge”; Xin 信 means “Trust”; Zhong 忠 is “Loyalty”; Zheng 正 refers to “Correctness; Propriety; Legality or Rectifying”; Xue 學 is “Learning”; Xing 行 implies “Action and Practice or Conduct”. The *Analects* underline the moral principles by which to educate people. Confucius educated people; not only to acquire knowledge; but also to think in-depth and independently based on morals; to cultivate personal morality. At root then; this is an approach to developing people's thinking; framed in terms of the development of personal morality. However; there had no work to carry out the *Analects* to develop students' critical thinking. Some researches (Chen, 2006; Muller, 2000; Waley, 1989) mainly regarded it as developing people's morality. Thus; this study explored moral philosophy in the *Analects* further to cultivate students' critical thinking.

Confucius employed a heuristic approach to education to develop his students' capacity to think autonomously. He encouraged his pupils to think, observe and study more, and scrutinise their demeanour in order to cultivate benevolence (Chen, 2006). Based on Eastern philosophical concepts, Kim (2003) claims that Confucius' principle of learning is not passive, but contains a critical thinking element in that Confucius supports reflection in learning. Thus, making the *Analects* an explicit tool for teaching moral reasoning within a dialogic pedagogical approaches is one way to develop critical thinking, and the rationale for doing this is explored both theoretically and empirically in the following text.

Critical thinking can be regarded as being as much an attitude of mind and a disposition to reply as it is an exploitation of successful information-processing approaches (McGuinness, 1993). Ennis (1991) categorises dispositions of this kind into three broad aspects; taking care that one's confidence is not misplaced and one's judgment is justified; ensuring that one represents one's own and other people's standpoints openly and evidently; and ensuring that views of every person are acknowledged. A developmental perspective of curriculum materials can be framed to include these dispositions. Both moral reasoning and critical thinking are complex modes of thought, and cannot be learnt as sets of abstract principles. Although such an abstract understanding may be achieved eventually, it must be built by engaging with a range of specific experiences and the perspective of the participants of those experiences (Ennis, 1996; Lipman, 1988; Paul, 1990).

Vygotsky (1962) portrays language as a psychological tool, something each of us employs to make sense of experience. It is primarily through the method of spoken and written language that future generations benefit from the experience of their forebears. Thus, communication through language is a vital means to construct children's knowledge and understanding, and it is also essential for planning teaching activities to develop children's critical thinking. Dialogue is a communication structure that is compatible with the pluralistic standards of a democratic society, and it has long been adopted by teachers who are concerned with helping their pupils to become independent thinkers and active citizens (Dewey, 1966; Freire, 1970; Kuhn, 1992; Reznitskaya et al., 2009). Dialogic methods in classroom teaching have been paid limited attention by researchers, although some of them have been mainly influenced by socio-cultural learning theories. These scholars have recently begun to design and use analytical structures to investigate classroom conversation and its use of dialogics (Alexander, 2003; Mercer, Wegerif, & Dawes, 1999; Nystrand, Wu, Garmon, Zeiser, & Long, 2003; Reznitskaya et al., 2009). These studies provide significant information concerning teacher-student, student-teacher, and student-student interactions in the classroom (Reznitskaya et al., 2009).

According to Fisher (2005), in order to apply philosophy efficiently in curricula to assist children's thinking, Lipman intends to pool children's social forces and apply dialogue as a process to expand their thinking. Lipman believed that the best approach to teach children to think was through stories and in order to prove his theory, he wrote a short children's novel entitled *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* (see Fisher, 2005: 129). What Lipman intends to illustrate in the shape of the story is how children may behave in a real ‘community of enquiry’. He not only uses words to denote daily situations and how to apply them, but also philosophical themes, such as the essence of judgment and the working of the mind. The dialogue between the characters and their findings may be uncommon, but it is not exceptionally so. Thoughts related to the nature of ideas, intelligence, reality, and the exploitation of words have been the subject of philosophical disputes for centuries. Lipman claims that, if we want children to become thoughtful adults, Lipman claims, we must encourage them to be thoughtful children. When children discuss questions, they begin to learn that merely having an opinion is insufficient; rather, they must have reasons to validate their judgment. Their words must obviously express denotation, and they must raise characteristics with instances to be set as counter-arguments, and expand ideas to their logical conclusion. Additionally, the Education Endowment Foundation (2015) conducted Philosophy for Children by means of dialogues to help

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