

Practicing Philosophy for Children in the Search for a Better Society

Mitsuyo Toyoda

University of Hyogo

My Belief in p4c

My first impression of the philosophy for children program in Hawai‘i (p4c) was a strong, intuitive feeling that this approach to education can be a vehicle to change the world. This feeling has not faded at all in the course of my five-year commitment to p4c. Rather, it has been growing into a deeper belief that p4c has an important role in society, not only to improve education at schools but also to develop a democratic, responsible community. Yet, as I have exchanged my ideas about p4c with teachers and researchers, I have come to realize that these beliefs are not necessarily shared by others. Some of them have expressed a serious concern that p4c might result in value relativism.

This concern might be articulated in the form of two rhetorical questions: If the cultivation of thinking abilities per se is the central concern of p4c, is there a danger in this form of education of directing children to a relativistic position that any idea is welcome as long as it is generated as a result of a careful collaborative deliberation? If free thinking is one of the values of p4c, should we let it go when children reach a conclusion that might discriminate, scorn or hurt other people? These questions become critical, especially when the focus of inquiry moves into sensitive moral areas. Inquiry, for example, might end up with the idea that it is OK to destroy the earth because nothing in nature stays the same and the earth might be destroyed by the collision of a meteorite anyway. One might argue that in this example, at least, there is no need to worry about arriving at such an extreme conclusion because, in actual dialogue, it is not likely that all children support this sort of controversial answer. Yet, it seems theoretically impossible to show that an open-ended inquiry will never generate morally problematic ideas.

As a p4c practitioner, I would answer NO to both of the above questions. I believe that not all ideas can be given

equal standing even if they are produced through the process of inquiry. There is an important distinction between “all outcomes have equal value” and “all views need to be given a fair hearing.” What, then, are the reasons for my belief that p4c does not promote value relativism? If this form of education should not be identified with moral relativism, what else do we need to emphasize in practicing inquiry other than the value of children-oriented, open-ended thinking? In this essay, I will consider a role of philosophy for children in conducting moral education at public schools, particularly on the basis of my experiences with the p4c Hawai‘i-Japan exchange program, in which I have explored the application of p4c to moral education.

A Gap Between p4c and a Standardized Moral Education

The p4c Hawai‘i-Japan exchange program, funded by the Uehiro Foundation on Ethics and Education, has been providing important opportunities for teachers and researchers to consider the possible contributions of p4c toward the improvement of moral education. I have been participating in this program as a coordinator since it began in 2006. Every summer, Hawai‘i teachers demonstrate p4c inquiries with elementary students in Japan and observe moral lessons conducted as a part of a standard curriculum. Teachers from Japan then attempt moral lessons with students at Waikīkī Elementary School and participate in the p4c workshop coordinated by the p4c practitioners at the University of Hawai‘i (UH). One of the greatest benefits of this program is the advancement of a cross-cultural inquiry concerning schooling and education. Although the educational systems are not the same, it is stimulating to exchange ideas from both countries about current worries and hopes for better schooling and to promote dialogue on what they can do in order to improve the quality of education.

It has been pointed out that p4c does not necessarily fit into the framework of a standardized moral education in Japan because the latter is designed to teach a predetermined set of moral values. The guidelines on moral education developed by the government of Japan set the framework for the lessons by designating approximately twenty moral values that need to be covered within one school year. Most teachers build their lesson-plans in accordance with the governmental guidelines. Thus, even if the teacher respects students' thoughts and encourages them to think for themselves about moral issues by attempting student-centered moral dialogues, it seems difficult to conduct fully open-ended inquiry: students are encouraged to think only within a provided framework. This content-driven aspect of moral education in Japan is somewhat incompatible with a key requirement of p4c Hawai'i that we should follow the argument where it leads in inquiry. Because of this difference, some people think that p4c is not fully applicable to moral education in Japan.

I witnessed a critical gap between p4c and Japanese moral education when I observed a first-grade classroom lesson at a Japanese elementary school. In the class, students read a story about a girl massaging her grandmother's shoulders that had become stiff from her everyday domestic duties. The grandmother, being happy with this girl's kindness, promises her a small tip. But the girl says that she does not want a tip and keeps massaging her grandmother's shoulders even after her arms start to hurt. Students exchanged ideas about the grandmother's feelings—why she wanted to give a tip to the girl, and the girl's feelings—why she said she wanted no tip and why she did not stop massaging her grandmother's shoulders after her arms started to hurt. Students considered these points from various angles and broadened their interpretations of this story. Since I observed children actively participating in the exchange of ideas, I was surprised to hear the teacher say, "The class was not successful. It was supposed to be about filial piety. But most children's ideas had different foci such as familial love, kindness, and self-renunciation."

From a prevailing view of moral education in Japan, the evaluation of the class often depends upon whether students could obtain a shared understanding about a particular moral value. If the teachers have to teach twenty or more values in a limited timeframe, it is inevitable for them to prepare each lesson with a particular focus. The major difference from p4c lies in this point. One of the important aspects

of p4c is to provide an appropriate environment in which students are able to explore their own interests and to seek a deeper understanding of things. According to the educational perspective of p4c, the lesson I observed seemed quite successful because it provided the students with the opportunity to identify various moral meanings in a daily context with which they are familiar.

Moreover, the difference in the expectations about educational outcomes leads to different notions and methodologies in preparing lessons. The content and the direction of p4c inquiry cannot be fully prepared in advance: they develop through dynamic interaction in dialogues among students and teacher. In a p4c-style lesson, it is, therefore, not appropriate to determine the end point of an inquiry before the lesson. People who are not used to this style of teaching might ask, "Can we really teach morality in such an unprepared framework?" The misidentification of p4c with value relativism is partly rooted in this worry. In contrast to Japan where moral education has been included in a standard curriculum, the state of Hawai'i does not provide a statewide proposal for this area of education. However, moral growth is still regarded as an important issue in schooling, and some schools are developing unique approaches to teaching it. Waikiki Elementary School regards moral education as their highest priority and works on cultivating a morally sensitive, intellectual community through everyday school activities. *Mindfulness* is the main value that guides the philosophy of this school. Based on the work of Art Costa's "Habits of the Mind," the school identifies mindful behaviors, such as cooperation and caring, flexibility in thinking, listening with empathy, and managing impulsivity. These habits are shared with teachers and students through the use of signs that are posted around the school facility. Students are encouraged to reflect on the educational values in these signs and express their understanding of them through essays, pictures, and so on. Furthermore, p4c inquiry has been providing important opportunities for children to share ideas about moral issues, and it has helped provide ways to practice mindfulness. The sessions of p4c allow for actual moral dialogues in the classroom, which serve to integrate both critical and caring aspects of thinking.

The p4c Hawai'i-Japan exchange program has not only provided educators with an opportunity to explore the gap articulated above, it has also provided evidence that p4c does not entail moral relativism.