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HUMANISTIC PEDAGOGY IN THE CURRICULUM OF HONG KONG KINDERGARTENS

The Promises and Challenges of Implementing Humanistic Pedagogy
in the Curriculum of Hong Kong Kindergartens

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Abstract

This paper reports on two case studies of teachers managing challenges associated with gaining acceptance for “child-centredness” curriculum practices in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. These teachers intended to respond to the newly published Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum (2006) by adopting a more humanistic pedagogical approach in their teaching and learning practices. The research has revealed a gap to what the teachers have expected to be promises associated with the teaching practices and the actual challenges they face while implementing the humanistic curriculum. Implications of these findings, both challenges and promises, were discussed to provide references for practitioners in the field by explaining what has worked for the teachers in the case studies and what has not when readjusting their own ideal school based curriculums. The reactions of the practitioners to educational reform in England and Sweden are discussed as cross reference to the findings of the research.

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Background

For nearly one-and-a-half century, Hong Kong was governed as a colony of the Great Britain. Similar to all British colonies and colonies of other imperial powers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, education was deployed as a means to inculcate in the locals the culture of the sovereign masters.

As a paternalistic colonial ruler, the government had a lofty objective of promoting vernacular education and helping to preserve the Chinese culture. But this had to be done under the premise that, in so doing it would not become a threat to the colonial rule. As a result, education played an important, but unpublished, role of cultivating and training up local talents who can be trusted on sharing the responsibility to govern the colony. The production of suitable candidates to fill government job vacancies must take precedence over other more philosophical and social objectives such as what education is all about or what is best for society. This also dictated that the education system must be based on a highly competitive examination system with emphasis on English, the native language of the governing officials coming from Britain, as the medium of instruction, and on subservience and rote learning. The focus was on academic studies and acquiring technical know-how. To ensure loyalty to British rule, student initiative had to be discouraged, if not suppressed, in schools and elsewhere in society (Lau, 2005, p. 82-83).

This colonial education philosophy of emphasizing academic achievements, subservience and loyalty sits in well with the education values propounded by Confucius, which have already been ingrained in the mass local Chinese subjects by their local Chinese culture. Added to this

was the longing for peace and stability needed for economic development and the creation of material means to improve the quality of life of a predominantly refugee community. This combination of shared cultural value (Confucius teaching of submissiveness and its emphasis on examination and the British colonial rulers' promotion of an elitist education system) and the reality of a need to maintain peace and stability and a fixation on material improvement as a means, and perhaps the only means, to improve oneself and one's family, helps to explain why this colonial form of competitive education system had not drawn too much local criticism (Ibid., p. 83).

Climate for Change

Hong Kong, since becoming a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China in 1997, has been undertaking policy reform in the education arena in response to the global climate of change. Three factors contributed to this change in Hong Kong's education philosophy:

First, the rapid economic development of Hong Kong which began in the early 70s and rose to its zenith in the late 80s and early 90s, plus the advent of information technology, caused a rethink within government and in society of the role played by education in maintaining the competitiveness of Hong Kong and supporting its further growth and economic success.

Second, the growing affluence of Hong Kong society meant that the government could afford to allocate more resources promoting universal education and upgrading the quality of education.

Third, those who grew up in the 50s and 60s under the structured, regimental and competitive colonial education system and who arguable had benefited from it by gaining access to the higher social classes, were now occupying many important government positions or had

become social activists or opinion leaders. They had become parents themselves and, after reflecting on their own – often painful- experience in schools, began to rethink critically whether they would want their children to go through the same rote-learning model of education that they had gone through and suffered themselves (Ibid., p. 84).

These factors combined to trigger a debate on the search for alternatives. Early childhood educators and scholars in Hong Kong began a critique of the current educational system and are aware of the ills of the highly structured and formalized mode of learning and teaching that is characteristic of Hong Kong. Highly structured means that there is a set of textbook for children to learn then follows by rote learning and dictation, which asks for standardized outcomes of learning. This mode of teaching and learning is deemed to be developmentally inappropriate and inhuman by the humanistic and progressive educationists. It is even said that teachers used this old paradigm of education system to control children, like a form of dictatorship. Following on in this line of thoughts, a more humanistic form of citizenship is desirable for enhancing the human rights of young people in Hong Kong.

Basically, it was in the latter half of 1990's that the government of Hong Kong began to reform the school curriculum in response to the need of Hong Kong so as to keep align with the global practice of valuing the philosophy of “people-centred and process-centred rather than simply information-centred”, while at the same time for the enhancement of Hong Kong's competitiveness in the world. The alternative paradigm would favour a working model that caters for the enhancement of the human personality, the exercise of freedom and a commitment to social change.

In this connection, a change of the government's attitude towards education can be seen in the Consultation Document on *Review of Education System: Reform Proposals 'Excel and*

Grow'. Education Blueprint for the 21st Century. (Education Commission, 2000a). The main driving force behind the reform of education was the recognition that “The World has Changed, So Must the Education System” Education Commission (2000b).

The then Education and Manpower Branch (EMB), which has since renamed Education Development Branch (EDB), is responsible for the formulation, implementation and overseeing Hong Kong’s education and school system. In 2006 it published A Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum, which provides guidance on this new paradigm. The Guide emphasizes that the curriculum must focus on the child’s “all round development” and it should stimulate children’s interest in learning (EMB, 2006, p. 17, cited in Lorraine, 2009). The Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum issued 2006 reiterates and reconfirms the 10-year old Early Childhood Education Curriculum reform proposal by adopting play for facilitating the “child-centred” concept of children’s learning (Lau, 2008, p. 63). In the Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (2006), it is stated that “following the latest developments in education in the world as well as the momentum of the Hong Kong education system and curriculum reforms at the beginning of this century, pre-primary education in Hong Kong has undergone significant changes” (p. 6). Accordingly, the strategy for the changing curriculum was through the operation of an “informal learning which is integrated, open, flexible and appropriate to catering for children’s developmental needs and interests. Children’s abilities should be developed through play activities that are inspiring and fun” (p. 13). “From the perspective of constructivist learning theory, children are active and self-motivated in their learning process. Teachers have to take up the roles of facilitator, motivator and supporter to help children learn and grow” (p. 7).

Learning by doing, learning through play, interest is the driving force for learning; play is happy learning experience; sensory activities are the media of learning. Observation, exploration, thinking and imagination are the essential learning approaches. A sense of achievement reinforces further learning (p. 12).

In short, the Guide emphasizes the need for ‘whole person development’ and stresses the importance of active learning and the integration of different learning areas. It also stresses that all-round development will occur when children take part in pleasure and effective learning experiences. The basic principle of the Curriculum Guide is to ensure that the curriculum should be “child-centred’ as it is stated in (EMB, p. 8), “Core Value of Pre-primary Education is Child-centredness”.

The Rationale of Child-Centredness Philosophy and Promises of the Humanistic Education

As the new paradigm of the prevalent educational practice in Hong Kong was founded on the philosophical premises which have their roots in the works of Maslow, Rogers; other humanistic psychologists and philosophers; and in the educational philosophy of Jean Rousseau and the pioneer of progressive education, John Dewey, an existentialist and the chief articulator of the progressive education as well as a humanist who drafted and signed the first Humanistic Manifesto in 1933; the values-clarification philosophers and educators; and feminists and black theorists who unanimously advocated the child-centredness philosophy (Nemiroff, 1992, p. 27), it is necessary to examine the humanistic learning theory underpinning this philosophy (Bode, 1998) and the promises accrued to it.

Jean Rousseau

Taken Jean Rousseau's philosophical stance that man is free from original sin and that the nature of man is good, there is a basic assumption that children are inherently good and eager to learn [as active learners] (Rousseau, 1979). Since children are basically good, they want to do right and care for others and for social good. Therefore, education must focus on the affective results in a process of unfolding human characteristics. Rousseau thinks that in order to preserve the 'innate goodness' of the children, the children's desires and expectations must be honoured and cultivated (Lau, 2005, p. 34). Jeol Spring (1994, p. 93), after analysing Rousseau's educational philosophy, says that Rousseau believes the desires of children are a force which could be used to cultivate such virtues as compassion and citizenship.

Rousseau's influence is prodigious in that he has exerted influence on Dewey's progressive thinking, though Dewey has nevertheless criticized Rousseau's individualistic philosophy as not being "democratic" in a real sense - probably because Rousseau did not allow children to have absolute freedom to determine their play. Nevertheless, the teachings and insights of Rousseau formed the foundation of Progressive education, which was later on exemplified by Dewey and others (Lau, 2005, p. 38).

John Dewey

John Dewey, who was the chief articulator of the progressive education movement's aspirations, saw education as an essential factor in the growth of individuals. This growth was to be achieved through controlling an environment "conductive to having experiences that lead to growth." (Dewey, 1938, p.34). Dewey's concept of growth has become the prevailing notion of the humanistic psychologists who succeeded him in the 1960s and 1970s. To him, "growth in

judgment and understanding is essentially growth in ability to form purposes and to select and arrange means for their realization.” (*ibid.*, p.84). Dewey saw education as a means of helping people grow, helping them experience freedom, or giving them power. To Dewey the learner’s experience was an essential point of departure for undertaking to learn something. Dewey emphasized that this preliminary connection was only the first step in a learning process. It had to be followed by a progressive development into fuller, richer, and more organized forms (*ibid.*, p.73-75): “It thus becomes the office of the educator to select those things within the range of existing experience that have the promise and potentially of presenting new problems which by stimulating new ways of observation and judgement will expand the area of further experience.” (Dewey, 1938).

In order to live a meaningful life, according to Dewey, there are necessary conditions for constructing it: freedom, the awareness of one’s own freedom, and the understanding of one’s personal responsibility in valuing and choosing action appropriate to one’s freedom and life. People who choose not to address these conditions of meaning are often relegated to a personal and moral numbness; on the other hand, choosing to choose – recognizing one’s possibilities of creating a life of meaning – creates the possibilities of living in good faith and authenticity. If individuals should strive for authenticity in their life’s experience and moral positioning, then an authentic society is also desirable and possible. In view of the need for freedom in establishing authenticity, freedom from moral or material coercion is essential to the maintenance of an authentic society (Nemiroff, 1992, p. 31).

Abraham Maslow

According to Abraham Maslow, growth is the objective of education, he named the highest form of growth as “self-actualization”. Maslow identifies as necessary condition for self-actualization the satisfaction of a “hierarchy of needs,” which includes basic biological survival and moving upward to needs for security, belongingness, dignity, love, respect and esteem (Maslow, 1943).

Maslow believed that if teaching were carried out in a way that stressed personal discovery, this would encourage learners to have “peak experiences, illuminations, the sense of mystery, and of awe” in the process (Maslow, 1970).

Carl Rogers

Carl Rogers characterized the traditional classroom as a locus where only the intellect is valued, in which authoritarian rule is the accepted policy, with the teacher as powerful possessor of all the knowledge and the student as obedient recipient. There is no place for emotions in the traditional classroom. Teacher-student and student-student trust is a minimum in such a repressive environment. Roger’s response to the conventional education setting and methodology was to develop a theory of “person-centered education” where cognitive skills may be combined with better knowledge of self and of interpersonal behaviour (Rogers, 1969, p. 95, cited in Nemiroff, 1992, p. 36).

Like Maslow, Carl Rogers believed that people can actualize themselves. Rogers emphasized process rather than the transmission of prepackaged knowledge. The key element in this process, to Rogers, was the quality of the personal relationship between facilitators and learners (Rogers, 1983).

The teacher is referred to as a “facilitator” here and is important in initiating the class and helping it get started. However, this leadership role should decline as the class progresses, allowing the students to lead themselves and use the teacher as a resource person (Rogers, 1969).

Aims of the research

Education reform, as a change process in daily teaching and learning activity, has never been easy (Cuban, 1986, Fullan, 2001; Sandholtz, Ringstaff, & Dwyer, 1997, cited in Su, 2005, p. 45). Despite the promises claimed by the protagonists of the child-centeredness approach, it is not uncommon to hear that the task of education for the existentialist or humanist is a complex one in our imperfect world where the human striving for authenticity must perforce take place within the dramatic tensions exist of variably coercive social institutions like the family and the school (Nemiroff, 1992, p. 31). The aim of this study is to explore the explicit tensions as challenges experienced by the two early childhood teachers and the implicit tensions pertaining to the philosophical roots of humanistic pedagogy when realized in the curriculum of Hong Kong kindergartens.

The Approach of the Study

Case study inquiry was used for this study as it is an ideal method to investigate the link between teachers’ practical knowledge and the actions to be taken (Shulman, 1988).

One of the participants, Cara was a former colleague of the researcher in a Catholic kindergarten some 12 years ago. Cara had participated in this research as part of an agenda of a staff development programme at the request of her school principal in the year 2006. Data had been collected on four occasions from March 2006 to June 2006 for Cara. The researcher had

participated in Cara's classroom teachings as a participant observer. A post-lesson conference and workshop aimed to collect written feedback from the participant and to respond to their queries by using the child-centered approach was conducted after the classroom observation.

In order to triangulate the data collected from Cara, Candy, a BEd (Bachelor of Education) student of the Hong Kong Institute of Education had shared her case with the researcher on implementing the humanistic pedagogy through the means of "project approach".

Both cases of the research were conducted in the K-three class (children aged five to six) with 15 children. The techniques used in this research involve the use of tape/video recordings and transcripts and interviewing. Tape-recorded interview was conducted in the post-observation conference.

RESULTS

Applying Humanistic Pedagogic Theory to Work with Children

Case Report A

The Promises Realized

Cara is a kindergarten teacher with a teaching experience of more than 20 years. She finished an in-service teacher training course 15 years ago—specifically, Qualified Kindergarten Teachers in Early Childhood Education. At the time when this research was conducted, Cara was eager to try out the child-centred philosophy such as the humanistic approach which she has learnt from the staff development programme conducted by the researcher.

From what Cara has learnt about John Dewey's humanistic ideology that children should take initiative in their own learning, she understands that if children were to array in rows of desks facing the teacher, the teaching mode would be formal and would impede the interactions

among the peers. With an understanding of the importance of the environmental layout of the classroom (Dewey, 1938, p. 34-40), Cara began to reorganize the classroom to make it more spacious by dividing her class of 30 children into two groups. It was found that Cara did agree with the protagonist of the humanist by thinking that young children should not be the victims of the “hurried” academic curriculum.

Cara mentions that the school administrator has adopted a flexible curriculum structure which allows more room for the children to set priority in their choice of activities. Within a time range of one hour and twenty minutes, children need only to finish the ‘required’ activities of tea time, dialoguing with peers and the group work activities, the children are free to prioritize the practice of the above activities. The setting of this flexible curriculum structure is underpinned by the child-centredness philosophy to ensure young children are responsible for their own learning by prioritizing their choices. Cara has observed that when children were given more freedom in their choice of activities, the motivation to participate in the activities of their choice would be enhanced. To this ends, Cara has mentioned to the researcher that she felt grateful to the school management by arranging the environment so as to facilitate her application of the humanistic pedagogy in the lesson.

Supported by the researcher and the school administrator, Cara has tried to implement her ‘ideal form’ of project approach by applying the humanistic pedagogy. By picking up the interest of the children manifested during the introductory lesson on the topic of “amazing body”, Cara has initiated a “project” with contributory ideas from the children. The topic of the project is “Mirror”. In this choice of topic, Cara has tried to refrain from giving suggestions so as to influence the results of the choice. Cara tries to adhere to what the 06 curriculum guide has suggested, that is to help children to learn actively.

With an understanding that the provision of home-school co-operation is in line with the child-centeredness philosophy, Cara began by suggesting children to work with their parents at home in searching for materials that could have the quality to “reflect” an object on the first day of the project work. Although Cara was the one to initiate the suggestion, children were free to express their opinion on whether they would take the suggestion from their teacher.

On the second day, the children were given the opportunity to discuss among their peers of their findings at home. This practice is to ensure children’s learning to involve social negotiation and mediation as well as enabling children to solicit their prior knowledge on the topic. Cara was excited to observe how children were motivated to discuss their findings at home. Cara said that even the quiet children in class have become active in sharing their findings. Children have “discovered” things like televisions, doors, windows and clocks could have the reflexivity qualities. Cara was pleased to have provided children’s opportunity to explore “mirrors” in multiple perspectives.

Cara has noted all these findings of children in her diary and then suggested the class to go around in the school campus to seek out objects that could have the reflective qualities. Cara has applied the humanistic pedagogy by not impeding children’s findings in the exploration process, this is to ensure children’s learning to take place in an authentic and real-world environments. Cara has observed that children were highly motivated to “learn” in this activity though challenges by using this humanistic pedagogy were observed. As a result, Cara’s “idealistic” mode of teaching and learning practices could only survive for three days.

The Challenges Confronted

Problems associated with implementing the project work of “mirror”: Since children were “too excited” to do the exploration, the activity had ended up with complaints from other colleagues of allowing children to behave badly, such as being too noisy, impolite and lack of discipline. A way to solve the ‘problem’ would be to instruct children to observe rules set by either the teacher or the children themselves before the start of the activity. Given the limited time scheduled to do the activity, teacher like Cara would simply instruct children instead of giving them freedom to negotiate the rules among themselves. Nevertheless, if teacher is to give direct instruction to the children must entail an exercise of authority. This practice is in direct conflict with what has been advocated by the humanist educators.

When everything is back to normal: As Cara could only carry out her ideal curriculum in three days time, she had to face the normal routine scheduled of teaching on the fourth day. By a sharp comparison of the humanistic curriculum, the “traditional” curriculum was found to be too teacher-directed, leaving no space for children to be active learners.

The situation that Cara confronts is nothing new for the early childhood educators who try to implement the new curriculum by using the child-centred humanistic pedagogy. The mastery of Chinese hand-writing characters, English words and numbers could not be eliminated in the face of parental demand. To ensure children have sufficient time to learn all the captioned, room for free play is decreased. The fight for time to complete a tight curriculum was even severe when time has to be set aside for the teaching of English by a subject teacher.

In the post-lesson conference, Cara commented that even if the school management agreed to delete one or two subjects from the curriculum, it would still be difficult for her to implement the broadened liberal curriculum provided that the teacher-directed didactic mode of pedagogy is employed. The researcher agrees with what Cara has said that with their ingrained

Chinese culture, parents would continue to emphasize academic excellence and the values of tolerance and benevolence, and they would demand teachers to teach didactically to their children instead of letting their children learn from the experimental evidence-based “learning-by-doing” approach.

The Design of the School-based Curriculum as a Means to Tackle the Difficulties Faced

Entangled in the enforcement of the new humanistic curriculum and the social demand for a “tight” and “hurried” curriculum, Cara has to accommodate the “new” and “old” activities but could only find that the situation has further jeopardized the implementation of the humanistic pedagogy. The “mixture” of the old traditional curriculum with the new liberal “balanced” curriculum has made the already packed traditional curriculum more packed, which in turn has asked for a didactic teaching pedagogy to entertain. The usual query raised by the teacher like Cara is, “Why do we need to teach so many to the children when we are told to give more time for children to explore the environment by themselves?” Cara is right to raise this question as this is the essence of implementing the curriculum in a humanistic way.

Cara suggests that one way to tackle the question of the “tight” curriculum is by employing game with rules preset by the teacher instead of play as a means to integrate all the learning development of children. Cara says that since children like to play, in order to motivate them to learn and to have a learning outcome which could satisfy the social demand, game would be the feasible solution to be used.

What Cara suggested was indeed the general remedy taken by most of the teachers to close the gap between what the teachers have expected to be promises associated with the

teaching practices and the actual challenges they faced while implementing the humanistic curriculum.

Case Report B

The Promises Realized

Candy is the principal of a kindergarten and a BEd student of the Hong Kong Institute of Education. She told the researcher that she has been using the “project approach” for over 10 years prior to the newly published 2006 Pre-primary Guide to Early Childhood Education.

Candy mentioned that in line with the philosophy of the project approach, she has used the humanistic pedagogy to foster children to learn actively. In order to encourage children to become active learners, Candy has refrained from instructing children directly. Candy would only scaffold children to look for answers by themselves and she tried to draw from her memories of doing the project work with the children over the years. At the start of the term, Candy would plan with her team of teachers a list of eight topics to be carried out in a year. The teacher would use four weeks to complete each topic. Within the four weeks, teacher would schedule the activities into three stages, firstly, the brainstorming stage by drawing the concept maps with the children; secondly, the arrangement of visits to places with relevant topics; thirdly, to represent the learning acquired by the children through the art work activities.

Candy says, for instance, in a project called “the bakery shop”, children were encouraged to visit the bakery shop at the school vicinity with their parents. If the children so decided, they could even interview the shopkeepers and the customers by a pre-set questionnaire designed before the visit. Candy says that this activity could really help children to build up the concept of what a bakery shop is like and the variety of breads that sell there.

When the children returned to the kindergarten, the teacher would try to brainstorm them by requesting them to enlist all the relevant concepts relating to the making of bread. After that, the children were found committed to making up their own bakery shops and showing their enthusiasm in putting their ideas into their art work production. In the process of making the “bread”, the children were free to use any kind of materials they think feasible. The role of the teachers is to facilitate. The teacher would provide help for the children at their request in the process. The materials chosen for children to explore are largely real, which is to work in line with what Dewey has suggested.

On one occasion when the children argued with each other regarding the kind of bread to be displayed in the most “catchy” area for the customers, the teacher did not intervene since she understands that the children should be given opportunity to debate before arriving to an agreement. On another occasion when a child wrongly named a bread, the teacher waited patiently for the child to learn from her peers instead of “correcting” her on the spot. In this way, Candy found it easier to let children construct their learning through experience. Having said that, Candy has also acknowledged the kind of danger lurking in the pedagogy as children might commit serious and even irredeemable mistakes before they could learn to “self-correct” and take responsibility of their own learning.

The Challenges Confronted

The dilemma faced by Candy was between exercising her authority by directly teaching children and scaffolding the children by using the humanistic pedagogy of equaling themselves with the children. Candy lamented that such an idealistic curriculum was an uphill challenge because of the social demand of a content-based curriculum by parents in Hong Kong generally.

As most of the prevalent primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong still prefer the didactic teaching mode for transmitting knowledge to students, the smooth transition from kindergarten to primary has become a problem that the school administrators must consider before using the humanistic pedagogy at its full swing.

What seems in the eyes of Candy as quality education does not mean the same for the parents. Although most parents would prefer their children to learn happily and without coercion, their thinking would change when they know that this “happiness” would mean lessening their children’s future chances of entering into a good or famous primary school which excels in academic studies.

Apart from this pragmatic reason that explains parental choice of a school which opts for the humanistic pedagogy, parents with religious belief - Christianity in particular - would not prefer a humanistic pedagogy, which encourages young children to reject traditional teaching of the adult. For the Christian parents, employing the humanistic idea to educate children simply means teaching children how to disobey figures of authority and this idea could not be accepted.

Using School-based Curriculum to Compromise Different Value-systems of the Stakeholders

Candy suggests that in order to ensure smooth transition of educating children from kindergarten to primary school, the second semester of the K-three class children should be provided with the teaching mode and curriculum content similar to those of primary schools. This, however, is contrary to the Guide to Pre-primary school (2006). The Guide suggests a tripartite collaboration among parents, kindergartens and primary schools to help children to make a smooth transition. As stated in the Guide, “to help children adapt to their new learning life, primary one teachers should know the pre-primary curriculum in order to design a transition

programme catering for the children's needs" (p. 71). To the researcher, Candy's suggestion would mean asking the primary school teacher to modify their academic curriculum so suit the curriculum of the kindergarten and not vice versa.

Candy is of the opinion that in order to fully enforce the humanistic curriculum, parents and teachers must change their mind-set. However, Candy did agree with the researcher that her suggestion is not easy to achieve because it would mean asking people to change their established belief system.

Discussion

The finding of the research suggests that there is a long way to go before the ECE practitioners can fully implement educational reform in the direction suggested in the Curriculum Guide. It is because many of the 'problems' encountered by Cara and Candy would not be 'problems' at all when looking from the humanistic perspective. The difference in the views arises basically from how people perceive things in their mindset as values.

Unless the issues identified by Cara and Candy can be satisfactorily solved and that the challenges are no longer be considered as challenges by the stakeholders in the Hong Kong, the successful implementation of the education reform is difficult. Having said that, humanist psychologist like Carl Rogers had great faith that teachers who really want to become facilitators in this manner will learn how to do it: Rogers believed and had provided experiential training for numerous teachers and leaders in order to ease their learning the skills of facilitation (Nemiroff, 1992, p. 40). Following on from that, Rogers claimed that environmental and genetic limitations could often be stretched or transcended if only the person is willing to choose his own future (Evans, 1975, p. 75-76). More importantly, just like what Dewey has said to Chairman

Mao in China before (Youzhong, 2007), Rogers firmly believed that given the time and training, people who have the mindset to accept changes or people who used to be neutral to the changes would be slowly transformed and geared towards the changing paradigm.

Different perceptions of value on the issues (challenges) identified by Cara and Candy when realizing the humanistic educational approaches

1. Children would exhibit bad behaviour, such as being too noisy, impolite and lack of discipline during the free play activities if perceived from the ‘traditional moral perspective’. But the same behaviour would be seen by the humanistic educator as chances for the children to learn to self-regulate through this experience.
2. Parental demand for children’s academic mastery of Chinese hand-writing characters, English words and numbers. To the humanist educators, the parental demand is a form of dictatorship when their children are being forced to do things which they do not want to do. However, for parents, especially those with a low socio-economical background, the mastery of language and innumeracy of their children is essential and is a ladder for upward social mobility and a way to escape from poverty.
3. The ingrained Chinese culture of parents who emphasizes academic excellence and the values of tolerance, benevolence, and consideration would demand teachers to teach didactically to their children instead of letting their children learn from the experimental evidence-based “learning-by-doing” approach. To the humanist educators, this ‘problem’ could only be solved by re-educating the parents to accept the humanistic worldview through the home-school co-operation activities.

4. Parents are not ready to accept the fact that learning through play in a humanistic way would mean their children could not enter a good or famous primary school which excels in academic achievements. To the humanist educators, the implementation of 'genuine' play is a must **since play is a change agent** and is perceived as a means and expression of resistance to the official high culture professed by the nobility, the Church and the State. Hence, in order to commit social change as espoused by the humanist educators (Nemiroff, 1992), play must be fostered in school. On top of that, play is favoured by the humanists since it occupies a central role within the activity of discovering or encountering knowledge (worldly knowledge, extra-sensory knowledge, self-knowledge, etc.) Silberman-Keller (2006).
5. Christianity in particular would not prefer a humanistic pedagogy that runs contrary to their faith. To the Christian, the aim of education is to not only to educate good people but to indoctrinate them as obedient citizens (Kozol, 1972, p. 10-12). On the contrary, what the humanists are aiming for is a critical-democratic citizenship. The moral values that the humanists advocate are not in the form of the transfer of values, but through supervising processes of giving meaning to life by students, the young people's own values development (Veugelers, 2003). Hence, what the humanists advocate is Moral relativism which could shaken the traditional Christian moral values through the revelation of the Christian God.

It is interestingly to understand that what appears to be the promises to the humanists are challenges to the non-humanists and vice versa. It is no wonder why Silberman-Keller (2006) asserts that the nature of non-formal [humanistic] pedagogy can be understood as an alternative

to what has emerged to date as the almost exclusive connotation of education since the nineteenth century, manifested in school and in formal education. This alternative is expressed in the positioning of practices that shape and are shaped by the use of play as one of the central educational practices, according to which non-formal pedagogy operates. In the same line of thoughts, it has become understandable why the newest trend identified by scholars in early childhood education is to see the different educational modes **lying in a continuum**, rather than in two extremes. The reason is most practitioners are mixing up or confusing the two lines of philosophical thought and their practices are reflected in their mixed mode of pedagogical practices. This could be one of the underlying reasons that while Cara and Candy in this research have encountered difficulties in implementing the new curriculum, they have also cherished some of the ideas underpinning the humanistic approach.

Based on the researcher's findings in the case of Hong Kong, an attempt is made to understand whether the phenomenon could be found in countries like England and Sweden.

The Case in England

Traditionally, according to a Cambridge scholar, Young-Ihm Kwon, early childhood education in England has been child centered in contrast to approaches that are subject centered and teacher directed. Traditional early childhood education has emphasized individual children's interests, free play, firsthand experience, and integrated learning. However, in 1996, the government introduced a new framework, redefined the child-centred educational model and initiating reform for raising standards. The national preschool curriculum framework (Early Learning Goals) emphasizes not only integrated learning but also literacy and innumeracy. The framework also specifies particular achievements to be expected of four- and five-year-old. In

the case of England, though it can be seen that the education reform is directing to different pedagogical mode as of the case in Hong Kong, the challenges and promises of implementing the education reform also exist. To solve the ‘problems’, Siraj-Blatchford (2008) has identified a model which could reflect the common transition towards more structured teaching and learning contexts that children experience as they get older. The model has roughly placed the child-centred approach and the programmed approach as bi-polar of the continuum while having the open framework approach in between. The open framework approach is being described as the one which provides the teacher with a strong pedagogic structure (or framework) that supports the child in their explorations and interactions with the environment.

The Case in Sweden

Similar to the case in England, traditionally the Swedish curriculum of pre-school is play-based. Since 1998 the Pre-school integrating early education and care is considered to be the first step in the child’s lifelong learning, a perspective which is obvious in the first national curriculum for one to five year old children (Swedish Ministry of Education and Science, 1998, [cited in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Report, 2004, p.21](#)). As observed by Ingrid Pramling, Professor of Gothenburg University, Sweden, “an interesting development is that as the perspective of learning and knowledge formation has been refined by the Ministry, and as the values and content of the national curriculum have become more clearly formulated, pre-school – during the same period – has gradually become decentralized and deregulated” and on one hand “a fundamental notion in the new approach of the Swedish pre-school is that the child’s learning is grounded in play and meaning making. For this reason, the child’s search for knowledge should be developed through play, social interaction, exploration

and creativity, as well as through observation, discussion and reflection (Swedish Ministry of Education and Science, 1998).”

On the other hand, the Swedish curriculum outlines five groups of goals that each pre-school centre should aim to achieve. Under this new education reform direction, it is no longer possible for teachers to retain the idea that mathematics or writing was something children should learn later in school or to say that the children’ social competence is the most important issue to work on with young children. In this connection, teachers were found to be confused of whether the pre-school was turned to a formal traditional school in which children were taught content whether or not they desired it. In some evaluations conducted in 2001 (Sheridan, 2001; Skolverket, 2001), it was found that varying quality exists in the Swedish pre-schools in response to the captioned change of paradigm. In parallel, Brostrom (2003, cited in OECD document in 2004) has criticized the Swedish Curriculum for being too loose and vague, and suggests to teachers that they can decide by themselves what content to work. Would the combination of these phenomena a reflection of the various degree of realizing the education reform along the continuum of practices? Although there is no strong evidence to suggest that the ‘mixed’ practices are stemmed from different ideologies, it is suffice to suggest that teachers in Sweden too have faced ‘challenges’ and experienced ‘promises’ while striving to achieve their desirable educational goals.

And indeed as revealed in the findings of this research, challenges that were identified as “challenges” could be non-existence or be eliminated to a great extent if only the practitioners could adhere loyally to their ‘idealistic’ ideology and foster their ideology by taking a persistent and consistent approach to their practice. It follows that if people at all levels of society embrace the humanistic worldview through the subtle permeation of the humanistic curriculum and the

persistent pedagogical application via the school practitioners, the chance for a successful implementation of the prevalent education reform in Hong Kong would be great. However, if a school chooses to adhere to a nonhumanistic ideology and foster its ideology by a consistent pedagogical practice even at the risk of going against the prevalent trend of education reform, would it be considered a problem? This question is worth further discussion by society.

Conclusion

The present investigation shows that simply adopting the western approaches to Hong Kong early childhood education without scrutiny has presented challenges to the ECE institutions in the reform process, though promises associated with the predestined pedagogy did pay off. The finding of this research suggests that ECE institutions, working together with the teachers as stakeholders and teacher educators, should be ready to change in the light of their discoveries and should evaluate their own unique situations, thereby locating the most appropriate curriculum and pedagogy based on the needs of the schools. (6756 words)

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