



Child-Centred Education for Pacific-Rim Cultures?

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This paper argues that we should exercise caution in considering transplanting theory from one culture to another. The thesis is illustrated by reference to Froebel's supposedly uniform theory of education. Using a historical approach it distinguishes three distinct versions: the *Christian*, the *Progressive* and the *Child-Care*, and raises doubts about the appropriateness of each one in turn. It concludes that the underlying culture in which the theory is intended to take root is of crucial importance.

INTRODUCTION

In this interesting paper on early childhood education in China, Jianhong Wang (1996) reports that children typically absorb a hidden curriculum in which their roles are passive rather than active. They learn to comply with teachers' wishes in conditions of orderliness and control. This behaviour is conditioned by traditional cultural values which families, preschools and schools perpetuate.

While many teachers in turbulent kindergarten and classroom in the West would contemplate this picture with a certain wistfulness, Wang draws attention to some of its disadvantages, pointing out that, as a result, important developments of independence, confidence, curiosity and creativity in pupils are neglected, even hindered by such conditions. Both personal and academic development are affected by this approach.

It may be that this perception of Chinese education is extended to other Pacific Rim countries too by western observers. However, what might prevent their whole-hearted support of more child-centred ideas and methods is the awkward fact that academic attainment in countries surrounding the Northern Pacific seems to be

higher and more widespread than that in Europe and America. Could it be, one wonders, that those self same traditional cultural values are significant factors in high academic attainment?

Futhermore, if one extends the argument to personal development—something which child-centred theorists have always maintained is actively promoted by their approach—is there any evidence that adolescents and young adults in countries of the Pacific Rim are any less well-developed than their European and American counterparts? One has only to raise the question to demonstrate the absurdity of such a view.

The point I am developing is not levelled at Wang's paper which is clearly a serious, well-supported commentary. I am addressing the proposition, frequently voiced in the West, that independence, confidence, curiosity and creativity are undervalued in Pacific Rim classroom and that the introduction of more child-centred theory and practice would help to establish them more securely. My position is that one should exercise caution when advocating child-centred educational philosophy for it is a camouflage term for many different kinds of theory and practice, including some which could be destructive of the very factors which contribute to Pacific Rim success.

Although an educational approach which concentrates on the curriculum is often contrasted with one which concentrates on the child, neither approach need be so extreme as to preclude attention to pupils or to a more or less fixed body of knowledge. What the child-centred teacher deplors is the practice of transmitting a curriculum to an unindividuated class, while what the curriculum-centred teacher condemns is the practice of allowing the child's present interests to be the selectors of what should be learned. Within those extremes there is room for much variation. The call for child-centred education might thus be seen not as a demand for a different sort of education but for an increase in attention to the individuality of pupils. But what it would mean in practice is a rather different matter. It is one thing to operate solely in 'propositionland'—comparing and evaluating principles—it is another to recognise that theories or approaches are embodied in cultures, traditions and practices. Because they do not stay the same long enough, conceptual analysis alone will not suffice; attention to history is needed too.