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# Learning to be a good parent across cultural and generational boundaries

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This article focuses on first-person perspectives of a parent–child relationship. The personal experiences of my son and I epitomise the clash of Eastern and Western, traditional and modern cultures in the social context of Taiwan. As a professor of moral education, I reflect on my son’s upbringing in order to try to understand and reconcile differences of educational principles and styles between cultures and generations. I relate the journey my adolescent son and I endured over six years to overcome the many difficulties he faced, as he did not fit neatly into the traditional education mould. As a result of this moral education process I point to some implications for parents and educators, including: consideration of universal values and educational methods in different cultures; adoption and integration of various educational theories to form a cultural identity; and the application of the theory and practice of moral education to parenting and schooling.

## Professional and personal perspectives on parenting

One main purpose of education is to prepare young people to become morally educated (Wilson *et al.*, 1967). This involves not only building upon the young person’s characteristics and socialisation into the norms of a society, but also some deliberate intervention in the teaching and learning environments of home and school to encourage virtuous behaviour and ongoing moral development. Following Kant’s deontology, the pragmatism of Dewey and in the liberal tradition of Piaget, Kohlberg constructed a cognitive-developmental theory of moral judgement, based on justice, which has entered the mainstream of moral psychology and moral education worldwide. After Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984) proposed an ethics of care from feminist standpoints, the complementary voices of

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justice and care became interwoven in moral education. Additionally, since the 1990s, several character education programmes emerged in the USA: for example, the Centre for the 4th and 5th Rs (Respect and Responsibility) (n.d.) and the Character Education Partnership (n.d.)—two programmes with common characteristics, in theory and practice, emphasising positive school culture, diverse and integrated strategies, systematic step-wise project development and implementation, and research-based programme evaluation (Lee, C-M., 2009). These theories had significant implications for moral education, both by schools and parents. However, although there was a special issue on *The Family Context for Moral Education*, edited by Lawrence Walker, in 1999, in the past 40 years relatively few articles have been published in the *Journal of Moral Education* on parenting from a moral perspective, and most of those recently (e.g. Powers, 1988; Zhang, 2007; Hardy *et al.*, 2008; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2010; Barni *et al.*, 2011).

As a professor in the field of moral education, I admired and was deeply influenced by these Western theories of moral education, even though I never formally studied abroad. I grew up in Taiwan in period of transition from authoritarian to democratic politics. In 1987 I graduated from university just as the then government was abolishing martial law. Like all Taiwanese, from elementary school through college, I had to learn traditional Chinese philosophy, in particular Confucianism and political ideologies, including Dr. Sun Yat-sen's 'Three Principles of the People' (三民主義 Sanmin Zhuyi, i.e., People's Nationalism, People's Sovereignty and People's Livelihood) and former President Chiang Kai-shek's speeches. Following the increasing openness and diversity of social context, which included educational reforms, and my own learning and reflection, I progressively built up my own educational ideals, as part of which I had formed a clear image of a 'good parent' from theories of Western moral education by the time my son was born in 1991. My educational ideal, which is different from the formative experiences of my youth, is to teach my child and other young people by means of democratic and creative methods to discover their autonomy and independence, to engage in critical thinking, and to demonstrate empathy and care for themselves, other people and the world.

But it turned out that there was a gap between my ideals and the realities of parenting. During my son's upbringing, I gradually faced several cultural and generational discordances. The progressive educational approaches of Western theorists emphasised autonomy, multiple-intelligence, child-centred pedagogy and the absence of corporal punishment, while my parents and people who believed in Confucianism or traditional Taiwanese doctrines stressed punishment, heteronomy, respect for elders, filial piety and academic achievement. This is illustrated by some Taiwanese proverbs, such as '天下無不是的父母' 'tianxia wu bushi di fumu' ['Parents never make a mistake no matter how they treat their children'] and '小孩子有耳無嘴' 'xiaohai you er wu zui' ['Children just need to use their ears (to listen to their parents' discipline) instead of their mouths (to express their opinions)']. I was frequently reminded of these proverbs by my parents during my son's upbringing, so I became caught between two generations.

The experience which my son and I shared is not uncommon in current Taiwanese society as a new blend of Eastern and Western, traditional and modern culture emerges. The editor-in-chief of *CommonWealth: Education, Parenting and Family Lifestyle*, a popular monthly magazine for teachers and parents in Taiwan, invited me to give a lecture on moral/character education to their reporters in 2007. They were very interested to know how I overcame difficulties in parenting and how to apply the theories I introduced to them in practice. Subsequently, a reporter interviewed me about the story of my son and I (Lee, I-J., 2009). In 2010, at my suggestion and with my son's willing agreement, the same reporter subsequently recorded an interview with him in order to explore his perspective. My son has also freely and explicitly consented to have details of his personal life shared with *JME* readers.

### **My son's struggle in the Taiwanese educational system and socio-cultural context**

Over the past two decades, although an emerging trend from authoritarianism to democracy in Taiwan's political system and social life has led to a number of educational reforms, many aspects of schooling remain unchanged. This is especially so for students in secondary education, who face a great deal of pressure due to the rigid and competitive national entrance examinations which they are required to pass in order to enter senior high schools and colleges/universities. The majority of Taiwanese junior and senior high school students usually go to school at around 7.30 a.m. and take numerous tests on academic subjects throughout the day. After finishing normal school classes at around 5.00 p.m., they usually go to 'cram schools' ('補習班' 'bu-shi-ban'), which offer instruction in certain subjects, such as mathematics, natural sciences, English and in certain skills for gifted and talented students, until around 9.00 p.m. and then they go home. 'Good' students and schools rely solely on their academic achievement. The educational system, which stresses memorisation, repetition and testing without differentiated learning styles, fails to address students' individual needs or to improve their critical thinking.

My son, like others of his age, faced this structure and ethos, but he rejected this traditional education system. There was a sea change in my son's behaviour from elementary to secondary school. From the age of 13 to 15 he usually sprawled across the desk in class, refusing teachers' instruction. He challenged the school's rigid and standardised regulations on such matters as hair style and dress code, and he argued with teachers and particularly with military officers (appointed by the Taiwanese Ministry of Education in high school and colleges/universities for 'students' discipline and safety'), when he felt something was unreasonable or unfair. With the exception of physical education, he frequently received low scores on his school report card. Therefore, when he graduated from junior high school he went to a vocational high school, which is considered as second-rate by most Taiwanese. The reporter who interviewed me quoted my recollection of my feelings and difficulties at that time:

I was doubly frustrated about my son's behaviour whenever I received his school report cards. I usually got excellent scores when I was a student. I didn't know why my son was so different from me. He was a clever boy when he was young. And, both as a mother and a professor of education, I paid great attention to educate him. Sometimes I felt disappointed and powerless, even though moral education is my profession. (Lee, I-J., 2009, p. 172; my translation)

My parents sometimes complained and argued with me about my parenting style, as they thought my approach was too Western. For example, my parents thought it was ineffective to spend time discussing matters with a child they considered too young to understand what he was doing. However, my husband—who shares my progressive values and has been a full partner in our son's upbringing—and I usually discussed with and encouraged each other when confronted with doubts or censure from my parents.

Later, in reply to the reporter's questions about his refusal of instruction and bad temper when he studied in junior high school my son recalled:

I'm sorry to say that even I myself don't know why. It was just like a wild time, a whirlwind, in my adolescence. Maybe I wanted to challenge authority and the terrible educational system. And I didn't want to be a copy of my parents... But I'm lucky that my parents stood by me and helped me to get through this chaotic time. (Lee, I-J., 2010, text of recording; my translation)

### **Crossing cultural boundaries and integrating theory and practice in moral education**

During the six years of my son's disobedient adolescence I faced several difficulties as both a mother and a professor. Nevertheless, I continued to explore how to integrate the theory and practice of education in my son's upbringing by drawing on several perspectives from moral education. I transferred concepts of parenting and education from pluralistic cultures to try to discover Taiwanese cultural and my own identity. I tried to bridge the generation gap by showing respect for the sub-cultures of older people, like my parents, and also of young people, like my son. I also tried to build a positive family atmosphere and relationships which demonstrated fairness, trust and love so as to influence my son. I cooperated closely with my son's school teachers to try to achieve a balance between his moral, intellectual, physical, social and aesthetic abilities. In addition, I took part in boy-scout activities with my son and encouraged him to be a volunteer for community service in the Taiwanese Association for Human Rights. In sum, I continuously reflected on how to connect the theory and practice of moral education with my son's adolescent experience.

The reporter who interviewed my son and I noted several transformative occasions for my son as a result of what I did. One of the stories I told the reporter was:

On the eve of my son's fifteenth birthday, I wanted to give him a card. At first, I wrote down a number of ways in which I hoped my son would change his negative attitudes and behaviour. But straightaway I changed my mind and listed his ten strong points,

although it was a little bit hard to think what these were. When my son received my card I saw his eyes become bright instead of languid. Then I understood: maybe I need to change myself, not only my son. (Lee, I-J., 2009, p. 171; my translation)

From the beginning of his elementary school days I regularly ate breakfast out in a small restaurant with my son at the weekend. Even if he sometimes remained silent while we were eating, I sat with him patiently. I knew he was interested in sports, especially in baseball, basketball, the National Basketball Association of USA and computer games, so I paid special attention to news on these topics to share with him. Whenever he made a mistake in school or at home I never blamed or punished him directly. I listened to his explanation and discussed with him at length until he knew why he was wrong, even though I was already tired after a long day of teaching or research work. For example, when my son was 13 I caught him peeping at pornographic pictures on the Internet. He argued with me and I spent two hours with him clarifying the difference between pornography and sex education. Later, my son told the reporter:

Although my academic scores were low, I never felt pressured by my parents. They usually encouraged me to do better. They were more concerned about moral values and behaviour than other things. Whenever I did something wrong, my mother spent lots of time discussing it with me... Because my parents always trust and respect me, I am happy, self-confident and able to do many things I want to do... I believed I could depend on myself and finally I was successful and got into a well-known university of technology. (Lee, I-J., 2010, text of recording; my translation)

My son is 20 now. He and three student friends rent an apartment together, although our home is closer to his university than his apartment. In his free time he enjoys sports and cooking. Every weekend we visit my parents together. My parents are pleased at my son's maturity and independence.

### **Implications for parenting and schooling from a moral education perspective**

I reflected on my parenting experience from a moral education perspective because of my profession. I became aware of some interwoven, cross-cultural and intergenerational issues in relation to moral education, which I try to clarify in addressing the following questions.

*Do universal values and styles of moral education exist in different cultures?*

Through his research Kohlberg (1981) tried to find the cultural universality of the sequence of stages in moral development. He and other cognitive-developmental psychologists assumed that 'basic mental structure results from an interaction between organic structuring tendencies and the structure of the outside world, not reflecting either one directly' (p. 59). Walker and Hennig (1999) indicated that parents' interaction styles, ego functioning and level of moral reasoning used in discussion were predictive of children's subsequent development of moral reason-

ing. However, Rudy *et al.* (1999) indicated that support for autonomy is valued more highly than power assertion as a socialisation technique in a North American individualist culture but not a non-Western collectivist culture, and that ways of instilling values may differ from one cultural context to another.

This gives rise to the following sub-questions: ‘Does the cognitive-developmental approach fit in with Taiwan’s academic system and educational practices?’ and ‘Are values and styles of moral education culturally relative?’. In the 1980s several Taiwanese scholars introduced Kohlberg’s moral development theory but limited it to purely academic circles. Many Taiwanese scholars thought of ‘moral education’ as an outdated ideology during the 1990s. Until the millennium the Taiwanese government and non-government organisations promoted and implemented several moral and/or character education policies and projects, some progressive and some traditional.

Moral disagreements and conflicts are unavoidable in an open and free society, but this does not mean there is no truth, nor is all truth relative to individuals or particular cultures. Hinman (2008) proposed four key principles of ethical pluralism—understanding, tolerance, taking a stand against evil and self-reflection—in response to moral conflicts. In my university teaching and as an adviser to the Ministry of Education, I have tried to introduce a cross-cultural dialogue to attempt some reconciliation between Eastern and Western styles of moral education theory. I proposed a character-based school culture model founded on justice, caring and developmental discipline, and integrated theories of moral development and virtue ethics (Lee, C-M., 2009). Transferring this ideal to the education of my son, I focused not only on his moral judgement and moral dilemma discussion but also on several core ethical values, such as respect and responsibility.

*Is there any shared ground, point of convergence or integration between the generations on moral beliefs and life philosophy?*

MacIntyre (1981, p. 226) argued that two concepts—narrative unity and practice—provide the necessary background for a traditional account of the virtues. My parents grew up in the 1930s in the war-torn contexts of China and Taiwan and were not well-educated. Being born in the 1960s I grew up in a society experiencing rapid economic development and political transition from authoritarianism to democracy. My son’s generation, born in the 1990s, lives in a relatively well-off and outward looking society but faces a changing and challenging world. Our three generations have witnessed the Taiwanese history of the last half century. My parents’ and my generation are tied by and dependent on absolute obligations and duties, such as filial piety (孝順 *xiaoshun*), which is not only embedded in our moral culture but also regulated in civil laws. The main purpose of my parents’ life and their upbringing of me was ‘to bring honour to their ancestors’. But what will connect my child’s generation and mine in the future?

As Taiwan has become more of a multicultural and globally-aware country, the influence of an American parenting style which emphasises individualism, indepen-



dence and self-reliance has co-existed with other traditional parenting styles in the modernisation of society. Therefore, Taiwanese people face different degrees of confusion, and gaps between values, attitudes and behaviour occur between the two extremes of liberalism and communitarianism, and between different generations and within the same generation. Noddings (2010, p. 118) claims that care ethics insists that relationship is ontologically prior and critical thinking is essential for ethical caring. According to Noddings's argument, the connection between my child's generation and mine will depend on caring and relationship rather than absolute obligation. This ethical relation is based on love, critical thinking, trust, interdependence and equality between parents and their children. It is manifest in a flexible tie of self-identity and freedom with and between both younger and older generations. I recall how one day when he was 13 my son's mouth was damaged by an accident. He intended to behave as 'a brave adult' and told me 'this is my body, nothing to do with you'. However, I replied to him, 'I am your mother. I always love you. The wound is in your body, but also in my heart.' Then I saw tears in his eyes.

*How can theories of moral education be applied thoroughly in the practice of parenting and schooling?*

Nowadays moral educators are faced with numerous approaches to moral education, with alternative philosophical, psychological, sociological and cross-disciplinary theories from traditional to modern and post-modern. How can we choose, adopt, adapt or transform them into our own local, unique, societal, cultural and political context? How can we cross boundaries of culture, generations of parenting and schooling? Stewart and Bond (2002) observed that parenting styles are postulated to have similar influences across cultures and to create an atmosphere within which parent-child interactions take place; while practices are situation-specific behaviours taking place within defined and limited contexts, and may have different meanings to different cultural groups.

According to my personal observation and participation in moral education through parenting and schooling, Western and modern moral theories keep coming to the surface in Taiwan. Borrowing from Habermas's (1981) concept of 'lifeworld', these introduced theories usually lost their social meaning and cultural identity for people in the new context and thereby led to anomie. In Taiwan's situation, if some 'new' strategies do not work or do not prove immediately effective, parents and teachers lose confidence in, and abandon them. Therefore, I argue that the connection to the theory and practice of moral education should be an ideal lifeworld, which secures continuity of tradition, coherence of knowledge and stabilisation of group identities and individual life histories in harmony with collective forms of life (Habermas, 1981, p. 141). My motivation and support for insisting on my ideal-image of parenting was that I understood the social context and I had a sound rationale for what I was putting into practice.



## Personal and professional learning

I wrote about this topic not because I am now experiencing the happy outcomes for which all parents hope, but which unfortunately not all parents enjoy, but because I learned a lot from my child and the experiences of parenting. Therefore, I wanted to share my experiences, based on my professional reflection and societal-political understanding, with other parents, educators and researchers. I conclude with three main observations across the boundaries of culture and generation regarding the theory and practice of moral education.

First, children are not the property or copies of their parents, because every one is unique with his or her dignity, autonomy, critical thinking and potential for full-development. As parents, we need to learn an essential idea of moral education, namely that we have to tolerate, accept and appreciate our children with all their diverse characteristics, to build a good relationship with them and to stand firm with them through times of suffering.

Secondly, moral education is an indispensable element of schooling, which should not only focus on socialisation but also on innovation. As teachers, we need to care for every student fairly and to foster his or her moral development, including moral knowledge, feeling and action. In addition, we need to pay special attention to a few students who are resistant to traditional schooling and educational methods. Particularly in Taiwan, and also other countries in the Asia Pacific region, both teachers and parents need to modify the supreme importance of academic achievement in examinations.

Finally, as researchers we need to pay more attention to several aspects and issues of moral education which have been somewhat neglected in the past. They include: the theory and practice of moral education in parenting; the sustainable application of moral theory into practice in different cultures, particularly Eastern–Western and traditional–modern; the clash of moral beliefs between different generations and the possibility of shared ground; and how to surmount difficulties in practice and further reflect and insist on an ideal of moral education in parenting and schooling.

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