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SINGAPORE’S EXPERIENCE IN THE WRITING AND TEACHING OF CONFUCIAN ETHICS
AS A SCHOOL SUBJECT  (An Abstract)

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I. A Bold Attempt

At the beginning of 1982, the Singapore Ministry of Education announced that Confucian Ethics would become one of the six options in the Religious Knowledge Programme in the secondary school curriculum. The other five options in this Programme are Buddhist Studies, Bible Knowledge, Islamic Knowledge, Hindu Studies and Sikh Studies. Pupils in Secondary Three and Secondary Four must choose one of these options and study it for the last two years of their secondary course. In this way, Confucian Ethics, as well as the other five options of religious studies, has come to be part of the secondary curriculum in Singapore schools.

The Confucian Ethics Project Team was formed early in 1983 and immediately began the planning of the project. Under the guidance of the Chairman of the Singapore Committee on Confucian Ethics, members of the Committee and Project Team members set to work out a syllabus. The syllabus took a few months to finalise and the writing of instructional materials began after this.

The main aims of the instructional materials are:
1. To inculcate Confucian values in pupils so that they may grow up as moral and upright persons;
2. To enable pupils to understand traditional Chinese cultural and moral values and to know their own roots;
3. To foster in pupils a positive and correct view of life so that they may lead meaningful lives when they grow up;
4. To help pupils establish and maintain proper and harmonious relations with others.
Implementing Confucian Ethics in schools is both an innovative and challenging task because:

1. Singapore is the first country to include Confucian Ethics as a subject in the secondary school curriculum;
2. Confucian Ethics is taught both in Chinese and in English; to compile Confucian Ethics instructional materials in the English language as well as to teach the subject in English at the secondary school level can be considered a new and bold attempt;
3. It is a great challenge to convey difficult and abstract philosophical concepts in simple language and in a lively manner to secondary school pupils.

II. The Main Direction in Our Curriculum Development

Confucian Ethics is part of moral education. In teaching Confucian Ethics, what kind of methodology should be adopted? In ancient China, the Confucian classics were taught by rote and instilled into the learner. This is against modern teaching methods and is not acceptable. In recent years in the West, various innovative methods of teaching moral education have been experimented. Some of these make use of theories of hidden curriculum, value clarification, cognitive development and moral reasoning and judgment. The emphasis is to develop the pupil's ability to think and to judge; it is process-oriented and not content-oriented.

In Confucian Ethics itself, there is an inner logical system of moral values and standards. We cannot merely adopt the ancient method of content-orientation nor can we follow in its entirety the Western way of process-orientation. We have to take in the good points in each and look for a fusion of the two. While desiring to inculcate and preserve traditional Confucian values and concepts, we must also adopt a modern approach to develop our materials. The structure of our curriculum has Eastern values as its content and Western educational principles and methods as its form. With this in mind, the main direction in the development of our curriculum materials has been both content and process-oriented.
III. How To Write the Materials

The basic principles we have adopted are as the following:

1. The materials must be written to match the pupil's language level and his psychological needs. Both the Chinese and English texts must be written in simple, readable language and pegged at the pupil's level of language proficiency. We must also try to arouse the pupil's interest in learning and to satisfy his craving for knowledge so that he will want to study the subject. Hence, in writing the materials, various approaches and styles have been used to make the lessons as interesting as possible. Each lesson has been tried out in schools. On the basis of feedback information gathered from teachers, and discussion sessions conducted among ourselves with our consultants and advisers, the difficult words and structures would then be simplified or modified.

2. Examples, stories, contemporary incidents and other strategies have been used to make abstract principles more concrete and acceptable to the pupil. We have tried to make the lessons more interesting and vivid by the extensive use of concrete examples and stories, both ancient and modern. Poems, dialogues, discussions, newspaper clippings and local news items have also been used to clarify and explain Confucian concepts and ideas. At the same time, we also encourage our pupils to take part in related classroom activities.

3. In developing our materials, we also have to bear in mind the relevance of the materials to our Singapore society. Outdated ideas or concepts which do not meet our needs, such as the discrimination of women, have been discarded. Also, in the process of writing, we have given certain concepts a new interpretation. In the five basic human relations, for example, we have emphasised the importance of reciprocity in each relationship. That is to say, the relations have been taken as mutual and not one-sided.
4. The instructional materials also come as a package comprising:
a) the print materials: pupil's textbooks, pupil's workbooks, teacher's guides and supplementary readers and b) the audio-visual materials: overhead transparency masters, wall-charts, slides, audio-cassette tapes, educational television programmes and teaching demonstration video-tapes. The whole package can help the practising teacher make Confucian concepts and values more interesting and easier to teach.

5. The instructional materials in Chinese were written first, one year ahead of the English materials. The English materials were based on the translation of the Chinese text, but re-cast, re-organised and re-written by the English writers.

IV. How To Teach the Materials

1. Teacher Training
In order that Confucian Ethics may be effectively implemented in schools, teachers must first be trained to teach this subject and to use the materials developed to achieve maximum results. Since 1983, seven training courses in each medium have been conducted. Those trained in the Chinese medium now number 446 and those in the English number 307 teachers. The training course is made up of five modules:
a) Chinese History and Confucianism
b) Confucianism
c) Singapore Social History and Confucian Culture
d) Confucianism and Japanese History
e) The Confucian Ethics Syllabus and Methodology
The training course planned for teachers is also both content and process-oriented.
We encourage teachers to adopt modern, active teaching methods, make extensive use of audio-visual aids and to encourage pupils to take part in classroom activities as often as they can.

2. Monitoring and Evaluation

Once the Confucian Ethics instructional materials are used in a school, members from the Project Team will visit the school to monitor and ensure the effectiveness of teaching. Evaluation of the instructional materials as well as the teaching effects are also conducted at the same time. Two modes are adopted: a) regular use of the Questionnaire and b) Feedback Seminars for teachers held at half-yearly intervals.

V. Reactions from Teachers and Pupils

1. Pupils opting to study Confucian Ethics

The number of pupils opting to study a subject generally reflects its popularity. As at 1987, there are 14,795 pupils studying Confucian Ethics, comprising approximately 18.7% of the total Secondary 3 and 4 pupil population in Singapore. The number of pupils who have opted to study the subject in Chinese is about three times that of those learning it in English. In the absence of any support from religious organisations, these figures are indeed heartening.

2. Reactions of Teachers and Pupils

This year, we have conducted a comprehensive evaluation - a questionnaire for teachers and another for pupils. From returns of these questionnaires, we have found that most pupils can accept the curriculum materials developed for them. Only those whose general achievement standards are poor find these somewhat difficult.
From questionnaires sent out to teachers, we are also glad to learn that, generally, they are satisfied with the curriculum materials, but they have also put forward some points for improvement at the same time. The Project Team is viewing with an open mind their suggestions and hopes that the curriculum materials may be further improved in the near future.

VI. Future Prospects

Based on our feedback information and our evaluation, we may make a short-term prediction as the following:

1. From the reactions of teachers, pupils and others, it may be judged that Confucian Ethics has received considerable support from all quarters. It is not only accepted by teachers, pupils and parents; the potential to further develop is also there. If the curriculum materials and teaching methodology can be further refined and improved, the effect of Confucian Ethics on the young Singaporeans' attitude towards life, their conduct and relationship with others will show up sooner or later. The objectives and aims of teaching Confucian Ethics will gradually be realised.

2. At present, the number of pupils opting for Confucian Ethics in Chinese is three times that opting for it in English. It appears that the Chinese medium has an edge over the English. However, this year, the National System of Education, in which the medium of instruction in all schools is English, is implemented. In time to come, when the standard of English of our pupils is raised and their level of proficiency in Chinese relatively lowered, many pupils might find the curriculum materials in Chinese hard to follow. This would probably result in more pupils studying the subject in English than in Chinese - a reversal of the current trend. But from the view
point of an educationist, I would much prefer to see an approximately equal number of pupils opting to study the subject in Chinese and in English. Despite the many difficulties encountered in the past five years in developing the curriculum materials for Confucian Ethics, we have found our work very meaningful indeed.

-- The End --