The Future of Child-Centered Early Childhood Education in China

Lina Zhang (张黎娜)
Hu Bei University of Science and Technology

Like all education, Early Childhood Education is shaped not only by political, economic, and demographic factors, but most importantly, by culture. As a teacher educator within the Chinese Early Childhood Education sector, I have seen this firsthand.

China has undergone rapid “modernization” in nearly every sector of its society over the past generation, but question of culture remain predominant. Education has increasingly become the preferred method for dealing with the tensions of social change.

Such social change impacts not only Early Childhood Education, but everyday life, especially for children, teachers, and parents. Can Chinese educational practices be “modernized” under a global neo-liberal regime without losing touch with traditional Chinese and socialist virtues, including diligence, self-sacrifice, frugality, and communalism? And can the health and well being of children be supported through such a process?

This paper explores these questions within the Chinese context.

The Confucian Past

Increasingly in China, there is a focus on the rights of the child as well as on cultivating independence and creativity within children. This is a “modernist” discourse that can be understood as promoting either child-centeredness or global competitiveness. This “modernist” dis-
urged to cultivate the potential of children as much as possible.

But what does this mean?

Nowadays, the typical family pattern in China is “four grandparents, two parents, and a child.” Traditionally, the relationship between grandparents and a grandson meant the continuity of the whole family. A generation raised under the one-child policy means that attention and resources are increasingly focused on the young.

In urban areas, grandparents often have retirement savings that buoy family incomes. Urban parents often therefore seek part-time tutoring for children (this, despite the government prohibition against extra tutoring sessions in afterschool hours or during summer and winter holidays). They also often enroll their child in part-time extra-curricular lessons, such as dancing, painting, speech, music, English, computers, Olympic math, and so on.

These families’ hopes are seemingly in line with governmental policies: to develop the child’s “comprehensive quality.” Yet is this really the case?

Generally speaking, the prices of an apartment price in China are among the highest in the world. Due to rapid economic development, transportation is more convenient in China than ever before, and more and more people are migrating to cities to seek a higher standards of living. This creates a climate of extreme competition. Parents want their child to have a head start in life.

They hope that “their daughter will be the phoenix and their son will be the dragon in the future.”

In these situations, parents often require their child to obey them: that is, to study hard inside and outside of school, during the week and on the weekends. Some parents will abuse and spank the child. Regardless, the pressure means that some children will become rebellious. Some will even choose extreme acts to relieve their resentful feelings, such as committing suicide.

This led Ji Quang Zhang, principal at the Wuchang Experimental Elementary School in Wuhan City, to exclaim that “our educational aim is to make our students sleep well.” A Confucianism backed by neo-liberal values is simply not healthy for a society, as many Chinese educators are increasingly recognizing.

Children and Parenting in Rural Areas

China still has a large rural population. However, as noted above, with the push for economic development, migration to larger cities is now common. Over twenty years ago, Deng Xiaoping’s push for the development of the coastal cities, while successful in many ways, has also brought unbalanced development.

An increasing phenomenon in many rural areas are children who live with their grandparents while their parents are off working in the larger cities. We call such children liu shou er tong. Many fear that these children are overly sensitive and fragile. Spectacular cases can catch media attention, such as the famous case of a poor undergraduate student from a rural area who brutally killed his wealthy, urban roommates.

The Chinese National Education Commission has become more and more focused on programs to support rural students and mitigate these concerns. Every year, the Central Educational Ministry allocates funds to local governments to promote better facilities, eliminate college tuition, and supply living allowances. Yet these funds do not change the fact that people continue to shun rural areas once they graduate, especially teachers.

As a response, the government called for teacher volunteers to aid in rural areas since 2007. If a teacher taught for three years in a
rural area, the government would allow her to sit for a Master’s Degree without paying tuition. In addition, a plan was put into place that would allot free tuition for normal college student contingent upon taking up a rural teaching assignment once completing.

While these steps help to ameliorate some of the problems, they do not address the core issue: the pressing sense that Chinese children are growing up in an extremely competitive global society where only the urban elite can enjoy a healthy standard of living.

### Progressive Visions of Teaching

Over the past twenty years, China has aggressively imported progressive ideas about Early Childhood Education. Many aspects have changed, especially related to teaching methods.

Prior to this, many teachers were born and trained in the examination-oriented system. The teacher was usually the focus and made use of a very traditional didactic approach. But as international agencies put forward the conception of a “Quality Education” in the 1990s, more and more of my colleagues focused their attention on Early Childhood Education.

Scholars worked with the Central Educational Ministry to formulate new guidelines for Early Childhood Education in the 1990s. Referencing ideas from John Dewey and Maria Montessori, an emphasis on children’s development was brought to the fore:

> Referencing ideas from John Dewey and Maria Montessori, an emphasis on children’s development was brought to the fore ...

Outdoor play, role-play, and learning stations were some of the results. Teachers are encouraged to allow children to choose painting, role-playing, building blocks, and other activities, depending on the child’s own will.

An old Chinese proverb says that a healthy body is the foundation of a person’s ability to act. Ministry guidelines for the Early Childhood Education system require that every teacher put an emphasis on taking bodily care of the child, and only then to take up the building blocks of literacy.

> Everyday activities like drinking water, eating a healthy lunch, going to the restroom, and napping are taken seriously. These are the basic important things that a teacher should know and teach children to practice. Hence, a teacher will fix a time to remind children to drink water, go to the restroom, eat some fruit, and so on. They hope children can develop these good living habits as they grow up.

> On the whole, the goal is for early childhood educators to take time to listen to and respect children, to understand their feelings about themselves and others, and to teach them how to respect teachers, other classmates, and themselves. “From the behaviors and words of the three-year-old, you can see that development of the child in the future.”

### The Future of Child-Centered Chinese Education

The government continues to struggle with its vision for how to reform the current nine-year compulsory school system. Should it extend the system upward to high school or downward to connect with the kindergartens of the Early Childhood Education system?

And if it extends the system downwards, will the play- and health-based focus of the Early Childhood Education system survive? Or will the focus on the child’s “comprehensive
qualities” be co-opted by the logic of economic competition?

Right now, child-centered educators in China must maneuver between “traditionalist” discourses rooted in a Confucianism and “modernist” discourses rooted in neo-liberal thinking about the role of globalization and competition. The search for an integration of the best elements of each is a goal that remains for the future.

I was born in China’s Hubei Province. I received my B.A. (2004) and M.A. (2007) in English Language Education from Central China Normal University in Wuhan. After graduation, I was an Assistant Professor in the College of Education in Tong Ren University (Guizhou Province), before later joining the faculty at Hu Bei Science and Technology University in 2013 as an Assistant Professor in the College of Education. I teach courses about the Pedagogy of Preschool Education, Survey Research Methods in Education, Management of Preschool Education, and Education Policy. I also supervising undergraduate students in their fieldwork. I have published over ten articles and a book. I also host three research projects in Hu Bei Science and Technology University.