

Let Each Child Have a Role to Play: A Chinese Teacher's Experience in Human Rights Education*

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The future of a country and society belongs to the children and youth. As a primary-school teacher, I keenly feel the need to educate our children in human rights so they will develop morally, intellectually, and physically. Over the past few years, I have incorporated human rights education into activities in and outside the class. Motivated by respect for children, I have always let them play the main role in those activities.

Children Take the Initiative

As adviser to a class of first-graders fresh from kindergarten, I have tried to let each child feel that he or she is an indispensable part of the collective. I give each child sufficient scope to display his or her talent, resulting in a class that is full of life, and children with a sense of responsibility for the collective. Let children be their own masters—I think that is the essence of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The class runs a school radio station with programs such as “Good Morning, Everybody,” “Lunchtime Remarks,” “Say What You Want,” and “What’s New in Class.” The director, editors, reporters, and announcers are children, mostly elected but also volunteers. The station helps the children become eloquent and build self-confidence.

The class also runs a weekly “newspaper”—a blackboard bulletin published weekly, where the children are free to air opinions on how to

run the class, praise what is good, and criticize what they think is improper or not good enough. The children take turns weekly as the class monitor, recording what the class does and what good things each child does in the day. At the end of the week the monitor proposes ways to improve class performance.

Democracy in Class

Democracy is key to success of the class. Children want to identify with the collective and have their talents and capabilities recognized. Once this is achieved, the children work harder to improve themselves. I never “appoint” the class committee. Instead, I let the children elect it. To become a member, one has to run in an election. I want the children to experience “fair competition.”

I encourage every child to compete, including those who are behind in their studies. I want to make sure that the children, without exception, feel that they have a part to play in running the collective and have the right to par-

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ticipate in decision making. I encouraged a naughty boy who was not doing well in class to run in the election. He said in his "election speech": "I know I often break schools rules. But I like sports and I want to serve the class. Please vote for me. Please trust me. If I win the election, I'll do my best to improve myself and help the physical education teacher organize sports activities." The class responded with warm applause. Another boy who was a "bully" also wanted to be a "leader." The class elected him "classroom manager," charged with switching off the lights and locking the door after school. The boy performed his duty well, even though he had to be the last to go home. Before long, he became everybody's friend.

A "referendum" is held whenever an important decision has to be made. Once, the school held a contest for the best blackboard bulletin design. I helped the committee and got five draft plans. The class then debated on the draft plans

and everybody was invited to pick the best. As expected, our design won the top prize.

Respect and Love

A teacher should be a friend to his students and respect and treat them as equals. To respect the children, you have to love them. Love is the foundation on which respect for children's rights is built. I never scold or mock children who commit mistakes. Persuasion and discussion help them mend their ways. When a child is absent due to illness, I go and see him or her at home or the hospital. I play with children whenever I have the time. Teachers should guide the children in their development, not "lead" them by their nose. Teachers have the responsibility to imbue children with the spirit of independence and self-respect, and to help them develop the habit of treating others as equals.