

# The Enlightenment of the Moral Education Thought of Comenius on Early Childhood Education\*

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In his book *The Great Didactic*, Czech educator Comenius systematically elaborated the moral education thought of cultivating four main moral behaviors, namely, prudence, abstinence, perseverance, and integrity. Its ideological connotation has produced many important enlightenments to the current moral education of children: (a) starting from childhood, teaching by example; (b) innovating the practical form of moral education to enhance children's acceptance; and (c) appropriately implementing punishment to cultivate children's strict sense of discipline.

*Keywords:* Comenius, *The Great Didactic*, moral education thought, children's moral education

## Introduction

Comenius said, "But what is our real job? It is the study of wisdom, which raises us, stabilizes us, and ennobles our hearts—We call this learning morality, we call it piety, and with it we are above all creation and close to God himself" (2015). Comenius believes that moral education is more important than intellectual education. He hopes to instill students with the art of true virtue and piety through his own moral education methods, so as to make the school a "training ground for human beings".

## The Connotation of Comenius' Moral Education Thought

### To Cultivate the Main Moral Behavior First

The four main virtues in Comenius' *The Great Didactics*, namely, prudence, abstinence, perseverance, and integrity, coincide with the four virtues of wisdom, temperance, courage, and justice in Plato's *The Republic*. Prudence means that students can make sound judgments when facing factual problems. Comenius thinks that the real foundation of all virtues is to be able to make sound judgments on factual problems, that is, prudence is the real foundation of all virtues. As Vives said, "The true wisdom lies in sound judgment, in obtaining truth in this way" (Comenius, 2005). Abstinence is a virtue that students can leave before they are full in all circumstances, which is equivalent to the ancient Chinese saying that "Extremes meet and fall". Excessive doing anything will affect the final result. Therefore, nothing in excess is the golden rule of doing anything

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(Comenius, 2005). Aristotle put forward that “man is a rational animal”, and perseverance just teaches children to act according to reason, not to be under the command of impulse, so that they can become their own masters. In the cultivation of perseverance, Comenius especially valued frankness and patience. In one’s life, “three people, there must be my teacher” and “people are full of toil” have existed for a long time. Everyone should learn to face up to others, learn from others with an open-mind, and learn to deal with real labor without flinching. The ultimate goal of integrity is to help children understand and realize the real goal of life—for human beings, progress, and development. On the surface, these four main virtues are based on personal morality, but they are closely related to the progress and development of human beings. Comenius (2005) believed that “the main virtues should be cultivated first; these virtues are prudence, temperance, perseverance and integrity. In this way, we can ensure that the building will not have any foundation and that all aspects will form a harmonious whole”. That is to say, the four main virtues are the cornerstone of moral education. Without the cultivation of the main virtues, moral education cannot become a complete education.

### **Make Use of Example to Carry out Moral Education as Soon as Possible**

In *The Great Didactic*, Comenius stressed that moral education should be taught early before morality deteriorates, and children should follow the example of those around them who have good morality. According to Comenius, moral education is like sowing seeds. If you do not plant high-quality seeds on the earth, good plants will not grow, and only the worst weeds will grow. That is to say, if you do not cultivate a person’s good virtues, many bad virtues will be derived from him. Why should moral education be carried out as soon as possible? Comenius made two figurative metaphors. The first is to plough a piece of land at the beginning of spring, sow seeds on it, and plough and rake it again. Then, the work after that will be easier and the hope of success will be greater. The second is that the smell that can be contaminated by a bottle when it is new is permanent. The first metaphor is for teachers. For teachers, the earlier moral education is carried out, the easier the teacher’s related work will be, and the final result of education will be more satisfactory. The second metaphor is for students. Only by accepting moral education as soon as possible can students be more likely to benefit from moral education all their lives, and good moralities will accompany them all their lives. Conducting moral education at a very young age can prevent children from being infected with bad moralities. Even if there is only a little bad smell, they will still smell and be “attracted”. Therefore, in order to prevent this kind of situation, moral education for children must be carried out as soon as possible.

As for role models, Comenius thinks that the role models in life are more important than those in books, because children like to imitate what they see just like apes. It happens that the role models in life are more vivid and have a stronger impression. Imitation behavior is a positive and creative learning process. It is the first step for children to perceive and understand the world around them. It has a certain impact on children’s physical and mental development (Wang, 2019). Making use of children’s imitation behavior, we can constantly put the role with self-disciplined life around children in front of them. For example, if the children’s parents are moral, then their family moral education will certainly not be bad, the child’s tutor is carefully selected, with excellent virtue, and then the child will certainly make a great progress. Therefore, it is necessary to carry out moral education by example.

### **Develop Good Morals Through Practice and Instruction**

The essence of moral education is to cultivate children’s good virtues. Comenius believes that good virtues are learned by doing proper things frequently, that is, good virtues are formed through practice. As Lu You said,

“Never know this matter but practice it” (Xiao, 2015, p. 213). Children must learn how to walk from walking, how to speak from words, and how to run from running. Similarly, they must learn to be true from telling the truth, and from being constant to never being (Comenius, 2005). Confucius once stressed that understanding social moral norms should be reflected in life. For example, we should never give in to others. And we can correct mistakes, choose good things from them, and learn from righteousness (Sun, 2008, p. 37). Therefore, in order to cultivate good morality, we must encourage children to do more proper things and learn good virtues from proper behaviors. For example, we should learn to be prudent from sound judgment, moderate from never doing excessive things, perseverance from self-restraint, and integrity from being willing to help others. In short, we should learn good virtues from all proper behaviors and encourage all proper behaviors.

Since there is proper behavior in the world, there must also be improper behavior. For children, they cannot distinguish between proper behavior and improper behavior. In their eyes, improper behavior has no improper place. Therefore, teachers must teach children to know improper behavior, so that children can understand where improper behavior is and timely let children stay away from misbehavior, which prevents them from imitating it. Of course, if children are already imitating improper behaviors, teachers should not only teach children the improper behaviors, but also teach them to imitate the improper behaviors, that is, to teach the improper behaviors themselves and the children themselves, so that the children can stop imitating the improper behaviors in time. Teachers should pay special attention to teach children to correct any negligence, rashness, vulgarity or vulgarity.

### **Establishing Strict Discipline to Ensure the Implementation of Moral Education**

Comenius advocated to use strict discipline to stop the tendency of evil, because human nature is corrupt and evil is easy to get close to human beings. Bad social intercourse, immoral conversation, useless books, and so on may become the root of all corruption, all of which will make children suffer from evil. Therefore, strict discipline needs to be formulated to ensure the implementation of moral education. Comenius said that strict discipline refers to a strong force, that is, when necessary, we should use blame or punishment, reprimand or flog. For example, when a teacher discovers that a student is in contact with a person with bad morals, the teacher should first teach him. If the student does not listen to the instruction, it is necessary to take the means of blame or punishment, reprimand or flogging, and this punishment should always be carried out immediately, so that the bad omen can be contained or uprooted, no appearance possibility. Students will no longer be exposed to bad social intercourse, or if they have a little contact with people with bad morals, they will stay away from bad social intercourse with keen awareness. Children must keep strict discipline firmly in mind. If children forget these strict disciplines, the school will become the Bohemian proverb that “a school without discipline is like a millstone without water” (Comenius, 2015, p. 175). Without strict discipline, all education, whether moral education or wisdom education, will lose its driving force.

### **The Enlightenment of Comenius’ Moral Education Thought to Children’s Moral Education**

#### **Start From Childhood and Teach by Example**

As the saying goes, “Good habits are nurtured from childhood”. If you do not develop good virtues when you are young, it is difficult to cultivate good virtues when you grow up. Therefore, teachers and parents should start from childhood to cultivate children’s good virtues and avoid regret when they grow up. Children’s imitation behavior is very strong. Generally speaking, most of their behavior is formed by imitation, and the

object of imitation is often the people around them, including their parents and teachers. Parents and teachers have good morality, and set an example in front of children. Teaching by example, can make children's imitation behavior be positively affected, and gradually develop good morality. *Mengguo in the Book of Changes* says, "Spring comes from the foot of the mountain. A gentleman cultivates children's virtue by his own behavior". Chinese ancients have long emphasized that children are just like spring water flowing out of the mountains. They are clear and transparent, and in a state of ignorance. At this time, a gentleman should cultivate virtue by decisive action (Zhou, 2016, pp. 37-40). Both ancient China thousands of years ago and the modern West hundreds of years ago emphasized that moral education should be carried out as soon as possible, and the power of example should be used. This is also just as Mr. Qian Zhongshu (1948) said, "the East China Sea and the West Sea have the same psychology; learning from the South and learning from the north cannot separate Taoism". In children's learning and life, teachers and elders should teach by example, not only let children understand the social moral norms, but also set up a moral model for children. Children will naturally grow up to be a person with good morality.

### **Innovating the Practice Form of Moral Education to Enhance Children's Acceptance**

Due to the restriction of children's age, some theoretical knowledge cannot be deeply and comprehensively understood (Shi, 2018, p. 10), the role of moral education in books is limited, and so the practice of moral education in children's moral education occupies a very important position. In order to improve the acceptance of children in the practice of moral education, we can combine the practice forms that children are easy to accept for innovation. Love to play games is the nature of children, putting moral education in the game, so that children can develop some good virtue through playing games, which is also a reflection of "know this matter to practice". Design the game of helping the old woman cross the road, let the children learn to respect and help the elderly; design the game of throwing garbage, and cultivate the good habit of children not to litter. In addition, stories about moral education can also be designed into role-playing games, such as Kong Rong rang Li. Children can learn to be humble when playing Kong Rong's role, and can also feel the warmth and happiness brought by humility when playing the role of Kong Rong's brother, so as to learn humility. Children can learn different things in different games, but they are all good virtues. Integrating moral education into the game not only embodies teaching in fun, but also innovates the practical form of moral education, which makes it easier for children to accept the truth contained in it.

### **To Carry out Punishment Properly and Cultivate Children's Strict Sense of Discipline**

No matter the children's class, school or future work unit will have strict organizational discipline. Lack of strict discipline consciousness will lead to disorder of study and work. Strict discipline consciousness is the guarantee of organization and discipline for children in the future school life and work career, which is beneficial to children's life. In the early childhood stage, to cultivate their strict discipline consciousness is undoubtedly a wise choice. In the cultivation of children's discipline consciousness, teachers should be very strict and punish children appropriately, so that children can have strict discipline in mind. For example, when the teacher has said "one, two, three small mouth shut", there are still children talking, which break the quiet atmosphere of the class. The teacher can punish the children who are still talking, so as to establish a strict sense of discipline and avoid the recurrence of the situation that the whole class is quiet and he is still talking. In addition to the cultivation of schools, parents should also pay special attention to the cultivation of children's strict sense of discipline. When adults are talking, children should not interrupt noisily; loud noise is forbidden

in public places to disturb public order; and when queuing, wait patiently to avoid jumping in line. Parents should inform children of these disciplines one by one in daily life. If children make mistakes after parents' repeated emphasis, parents can take appropriate punishment, in order to cultivate children's strict sense of discipline.

### Conclusion

The enlightenment of Comenius' moral education thought to children's moral education needs to be tested through the practice of front-line teachers, and further thinking and exploration combined with the characteristics of children, so as to improve the methods of children's moral education and achieve the purpose of cultivating children's good morality.

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