

# An examination of the effectiveness of in an integrated appreciative curriculum moral education for college students from Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and mainland China--Taking *ethics and life* as an example

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**Abstract.** This study investigates the effectiveness of fusion-based appreciative curriculum moral education through non-experimental research methods involving college students from Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and mainland China who took the Ethics and Life course. The findings indicate that: (1) moral education based on integrated appreciation significantly enhances students' moral cognition and demonstrates a positive but nonsignificant impact on moral behaviour. (2) Both classroom reflection and course papers reveal that integrative appreciation-based moral education promotes moral cognition and fosters value cultivation. (3) Gender can influence the effectiveness of curriculum moral education, warranting attention to the active utilization of this subgroup characteristic in practice. (4) College students' moral cognition and behaviour are not significantly correlated with their academic performance.

## 1 Introduction

For college students from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan, who grow up at the forefront of diverse societal and cultural intersections, appreciative moral education with aesthetic qualities has emerged as a new path for the future due to the alienating nature of the traditional moral education model in mainland China (Tang, 2022). Additionally, appreciative moral education has demonstrated strong affinity, infectiousness, and effectiveness in practice for college students from the mainland (Huang, 2011). Within the integrated system of appreciative moral education, curriculum teaching plays a vital role as one of its organic components. The concept of appreciation-based moral education extends to an educational and teaching practice characterized by aesthetic qualities and

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appreciation-based contexts, aiming to achieve a unified approach to knowledge transfer, skill development, and value guidance through explicit and implicit moral education (Jiang & Sun, 2022). However, the effectiveness of this approach in moral education requires further examination. Simultaneously, due to the relatively weak academic foundation of students from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan, questions arise regarding the appropriate teaching model. Should a streaming-based approach be developed specifically for these students (Jiang, 2007; Yi, 2010; Xiao, 2021), or should the focus be on promoting integration between the two groups of students (Wu et al., 2022; Wang, 2022)? While this remains a topic of debate, some studies indicate that schools implementing streaming-based teaching observe a lack of integration between the two groups of students (Niu & Liu, 2022). In summary, this research employs a non-experimental research method and uses the general education course "Ethics and Life" as a specific example to investigate the effectiveness of fusion-based appreciative moral education for college students from Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and mainland China.

## **2 The theoretical basis of integrated appreciation-based moral education in the curriculum**

### **2.1 Two-dimensional integration targeting the learning subject and the learning object**

In this study, integration refers to the exchange, blending, and mutual appreciation between the learning subjects - Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan nationals and mainland university students. Its necessity and significance are as follows: Firstly, it adheres to the concept that cooperation is more important than competition. While learning inevitably involves competition, it is even more reliant on cooperation, particularly in the context of increasing globalization, where competition and cooperation are becoming more prominent. Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan students, along with mainland students, have different socio-economic and political backgrounds, resulting in diverse and complementary positions and perspectives on various social phenomena and hot issues based on their distinct understanding and observation angles. Their communication, dialogue, and cooperation clearly in-volve listening to and embracing different voices from within and outside the respective groups (Chen & Han, 2015), thus facilitating more comprehensive and enriched thinking and cognition for both parties. Another dimension of integration in this study refers to the simultaneous development of learning objects - cognition, emotions, and values. Herder's emotionalist ethics advocates for the organic integration of cognition and emotions, as well as values and facts (Chen & Chen, 2021). From the perspective of cultivating a healthy personality, individuals' re-reflection on self-cognition and emotions contributes to the realization of a new self-identity (Xu, 2022). Moreover, from the standpoint of shaping values, it is closely related to ideological concepts, emotional attitudes, and moral character (Dai & Yang, 2022). In the cultivation of active citizenship, emotions, rationality, and values jointly form the cognitive system for individuals' engagement in public affairs (Ren & Zhang, 2022).

### **2.2 The connotation and characteristics of moral education in appreciation-oriented courses**

Appreciation-oriented curriculum moral education aims to create a humanistic classroom learning environment with aesthetic features that promote the shared development of cognition, emotions, and values. Compared to general curriculum moral education, its

distinctive characteristic lies in the pursuit of aesthetic qualities in the classroom context, teacher-student relationships, teaching media, teaching orientations, and teaching processes (Tan, 2006). From the perspective of the effectiveness of moral education, classroom learning should shift from the traditional emphasis on indirect knowledge acquisition to a greater emphasis on direct knowledge experience. A humanistic classroom should strive to establish an atmosphere of trust, appreciation, and empathetic understanding, fostering the simultaneous development of students' emotions and cognition. The classroom environment for moral education must be open and authentic (Lu & Wei, 2003). Additionally, because classroom practices encompass cognitive, cultural, and ethical dimensions (An, 2018), they require a classroom model that emphasizes equality, democracy, safety, enjoyment, and tailored instruction, while also addressing the construction of experiential and inquiry-based learning environments (Tang, 2016). For curriculum-based moral education, constructing classroom learning environments that embody the aforementioned pedagogical and aesthetic qualities is of paramount importance, as they represent the pursuit and direction of moral education values.

### **3 Teaching design of moral education in integrated appreciation-oriented courses**

#### **3.1 Teaching philosophy and value pursuit**

At the level of education, we adhere to the principles of "truth, goodness, and beauty" in education, encompassing compliance with laws, alignment with purpose, and embracement of freedom, to cultivate the authenticity, benevolence, and excellence of moral character. Specifically, we emphasize the educational principles, laws, and methods related to moral development in the curriculum. We also clarify the goals of individual and social development in moral education and strive for their mutual integration and promotion. Furthermore, building upon purpose-fulness and compliance, we continuously enhance educational autonomy and freedom based on educational experience and mastery. At the level of teaching, we design and organize teaching activities according to the logical progression of "openness-inquiry-growth." Firstly, we strive to create an inclusive and liberating classroom atmosphere that promotes open interaction among students and teachers. Secondly, we emphasize exploratory thinking and critical reflection on social issues and ethical phenomena. Lastly, we encourage students to learn through trial and error, inquiry, and provide ongoing support to foster the growth of their ethical skills and value beliefs. At the practical level, we adopt the guiding principles of "respect-caring-appreciation" to guide experiential and applied learning. Firstly, we respect the diverse cultural backgrounds and perspectives of students from Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and mainland China. Secondly, we demonstrate care and concern for individual differences in learning abilities, levels, motivations, and goals, prioritizing a humanistic approach. Lastly, we foster generative appreciation by cultivating empathetic respect and ethical care.

#### **3.2 Exploration of teaching strategies and approaches**

**(1) Creation of Classroom Contexts.** First and foremost, it is essential to establish a strong teaching relationship as the foundation. As organizers and guides of instruction, teachers should strive to create a harmonious and constructive participatory atmosphere among students and between teachers and students - one that is characterized by equality, inclusivity, openness, respect for individual differences and diverse backgrounds, as well as an appreciation for multidimensional thinking and multiple perspectives. Furthermore,

emphasis should be placed on the demonstration of pedagogical resourcefulness and the infusion of ethical care. As a general elective course like "Ethics and Life," it is even more crucial to harness the pedagogical resourcefulness of teachers and provide them with ethical care in maintaining the teaching process. It is crucial for teachers, based on the dual subjectivity of caring relationships, to guide students in maintaining interactive, meaningful, and feedback-driven engagement to foster a positive learning environment.

**(2) Curriculum Orientation.** One aspect is to guide and grasp the principles of truth, goodness, and beauty in the teaching process: emphasizing the encouragement of students to engage in deep thinking and comprehensive observation of historical events or social hot topics in pursuit of truth. Also, focusing on leading ethical transcendence based on the richness of the human spiritual world to move from a world that values the power of natural laws to a world that emphasizes ethical norms, and then further towards a world that cherishes aesthetic values and autonomy. Another aspect is to highlight the practicality and applicability of ethical knowledge in course assessments: employing the approach of writing course papers to guide students in conducting in-depth ethical narratives of specific events, and analysing these events from multiple ethical perspectives. Finally, the reflection, analysis, planning, and implementation of students' own development and growth are emphasized.

**(3) Application of Mediation Methods.** One aspect is to emphasize interactivity and effectiveness in the use of "learning mediation" and resources (Tang, 2016). In terms of form, classroom teaching should closely align with media hotspots and real-life events, incorporating rich multimedia resources such as images, text, and audio-visuals to highlight the visual and experiential aspects of appreciation. In terms of content, it is crucial to focus on the integration and application of inter-disciplinary knowledge to enhance the intellectual and profound aspects of appreciation. The second aspect is the pursuit of the teacher's moral exemplar. This pursuit is particularly important for educators of moral education courses. Being a role model as a teacher lies between value neutrality and didactic indoctrination (Sun & Duan, 2017). Hence, teachers should strive to integrate the essence and ideologies of the curriculum into their work and personal lives.

## **4 Testing the efficacy of an integrated appreciative curriculum for moral education**

### **4.1 Research participants and methodology**

The observation group consisted of 128 first-year students from two majors in the business school who were enrolled in the course's educational and teaching model during the first semester of the 2021-2022 academic year. The control group comprised 272 students from four other majors in the same year at the college. Since the first-year students enrolled after the opening of the school's course selection system, they were enrolled in the two-credit general education course "Ethics and Life" in batches by the academic affairs staff according to their majors. Additionally, there should be no significant systematic differences in ethical literacy and cognition among freshmen in similar majors within the same college. Therefore, this study assumed no significant systematic errors between the observation and control groups. Given the aforementioned setup, two natural behavioural events were selected as observational indicators to assess the students' ethical cognitive abilities and moral behaviour performance. These events included participation and awards in an essay competition on the theme of COVID-19 epidemic prevention and control, as well as involvement in volunteer activities related to COVID-19 epidemic prevention and control and other aspects. These events occurred within six months after the completion of

the course, with a relatively short time gap, making them reasonable short-term observational points to evaluate the efficacy of moral education in the course.

## 4.2 Observed events and results

### 4.2.1 Participation and awards in essays on the theme of COVID-19 prevention and control

In April 2022, a month-long essay competition titled "Stories of Resilience Amidst the Pandemic" was organized for all students and faculty members at the campus where the study was conducted. The purpose of the competition was to encourage active engagement and ethical exploration among students and faculty members, as they faced the challenges and difficulties of COVID-19 prevention and control. This initiative aimed to enhance their moral cognition. Preliminary statistics indicate that the participation rate, award ratio, and award rate of students who had previously taken the "Ethics and Life" course in the semester were higher compared to students from other majors in the same year at the college. Detailed information can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Comparison of participation rate and award rate in the anti-epidemic essay contest.

|                           | Number of participants | Participation rate (%) | Number of winners | Award rate (%) | Winning Rate: Number of Winners/Number of Participants (%) |
|---------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|----------------|--|
| Observation group (N=128) | 93                     | 72.66                  | 10                | 7.81           | 10.75  |
| Control group (N=272)     | 157                    | 57.72                  | 12                | 4.41           | 7.64   |

Furthermore, an independent samples t-test (with non-participation = 0, participation = 1, merit = 2, third place = 3, second place = 4, first place = 5) revealed that the mean score of the observation group ( $M1 = 0.87 \pm 0.725$ ) was higher than that of the control group ( $M2 = 0.67 \pm 0.678$ ) and reached statistical significance ( $t = -2.715$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ,  $d = 0.285$ ). Assuming no significant difference in writing proficiency between the two groups of students (from similar majors within the same college), it can be reasonably inferred that the students in the observation group had higher self-efficacy and actual abilities in moral cognition compared to the control group - the former reflected in a higher participation rate and the latter in better performance in the contest. To further explore the factors related to moral cognition, a correlation analysis was conducted between the essay scores of the participating students in the observation group (obtained by contacting the judging panel and averaging the scores of three judges) and their scores in the Ethics and Life course, as well as their gender (male = 1, female = 2) and student origin category (domestic students = 1, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan students = 2). The results showed that the essay scores were not correlated with the students' course performance and student origin category but were significantly and positively correlated with their gender ( $r = 0.271$ ,  $p = 0.009$ ). An independent samples t-test revealed that the essay scores of female students ( $N$  female = 62,  $M$  female =  $83.47 \pm 2.022$ ) were significantly higher than those of male students ( $N$  male = 31,  $M$  male =  $82.19 \pm 2.414$ ,  $t = -2.683$ ,  $p = 0.009$ ,  $d = 0.562$ ).

#### 4.2.2 Regarding participation in on-campus volunteer activities within six months after course completion

Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and related control measures, college students significantly reduced their off-campus activities, leading to a shift towards on-campus volunteer activities. In this study, the participation of students from the observation and control groups in volunteer activities within six months after completing their courses (i.e., the following semester) was examined. The statistics showed that the two groups had similar overall numbers and proportions of volunteers. It should be noted that the guiding requirements set by the university for students' participation in volunteer activities, such as the need to attain a certain level of volunteer service points when applying for party membership, limited the extent to which this indicator could fully reflect the students' voluntary nature in volunteer service. Considering that students participating in volunteer activities related to vaccine administration and nucleic acid testing faced objectively higher risks of contracting COVID-19 (and subjectively had a greater understanding and identification with epidemic prevention and control measures), their involvement better exemplified the spirit of dedication and sacrifice in volunteer service. Therefore, this study also compared the participation in these two types of volunteer activities. The data clearly indicated that the observation group's participation was significantly higher than that of the control group (43.73% versus 27.78% in terms of the number of individuals; 62.50% versus 52.78% in terms of the number of occasions), as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Comparison of participation in on-campus volunteering activities.

|  | Observation group<br>(N=128) | Control group<br>(N=272) |
|--|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Total number (N1) and percentage (N1/N) of participants in volunteer activities                        | 16(12.50%)                   | 36(13.23%)               |
| Total number (N2) and proportion (N2/N) of participants in volunteer service activities                | 30(23.44%)                   | 65(23.89%)               |
| Number of people volunteering for vaccination and nucleic acid testing (N3) and the proportion (N3/N1) | 7(43.73%)                    | 10(27.78%)               |
| Number of volunteer services for vaccination and nucleic acid testing (N4) and its proportion (N4/N1)  | 10(62.50%)                   | 19(52.78%)               |

Further independent sample t-tests were conducted to compare the specific participation of the two groups of students who participated in on-campus volunteering activities. The students were categorized into two groups: those who participated in vaccination and nucleic acid testing volunteering activities (coded as 2) and those who participated in other volunteering activities (coded as 1), with scoring based on attendance. The analysis revealed that the mean value of students who participated in volunteering activities in the observation group (N1=16, M1=2.92±1.505) was slightly higher than the mean value of students who participated in volunteering activities in the control group (N2=36, M2=2.31±1.818). However, this difference did not reach statistical significance (t=-1.049, p=0.300, d=0.366). Additionally, when scored by the number of participants, there was no significant difference between the two groups. Furthermore, a comparison of the course learning scores of students in the observation group who did or did not participate in volunteer activities showed similar, albeit non-significant, differences (N participated = 16, M participated = 93.41 ± 2.127; N did not participate = 112, M did not participate = 92.37 ± 2.194; t=1.567, p=0.120, d=0.481). It is worth noting that out of the 16 students who participated in volunteering activities, only 2 were male (4.35% of the 46 male students in the entire group), while 14 were female (17.07% of the 82 female students in the entire group). The proportion of female students participating in volunteering activities was significantly higher than that of male students.

## 5 Discussion and outlook

### 5.1 Discussion

#### *5.1.1 The intrinsic significance and practical utility of curriculum moral education*

This study, using the general education course "Ethics and Life" as an example, reveals statistically significant positive effects on college students' moral cognition and ethical analysis abilities. Additionally, it demonstrates a certain influence on their moral behaviour, as represented by volunteerism (the percentage of students participating in volunteer activities related to the prevention and control of the COVID-19 pandemic was notably higher among those who took the course). Although the independent sample t-test on volunteering participation did not yield statistically significant results between the two groups, this could likely be attributed to the limited sample size (Wu & Yin, 2022). Furthermore, it should be noted that although the aforementioned moral cognition and behaviour are related to taking the course, the correlation analysis revealed no connection with the course's exam scores. On one hand, this exemplifies the separation of knowledge and morality (Gong, 2022), indicating that the main factors influencing moral cognition and behaviour are not the evaluative knowledge assessed in the course. On the other hand, it indirectly highlights the significance of the course learning process and situational context, which serve as essential foundations and elements of moral education within the curriculum (Cui, 2022). Additionally, this study discovered that female students who had taken the course exhibited superior performance in both moral cognition and moral behaviour compared to their male counterparts. This may be attributed to social-cultural and physiological factors that contribute to the richer and more comprehensive emotional development of female students (Lu et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022), which, in turn, positively influence moral cognition and moral behaviour (Zhang & Zhang, 2022).

#### *5.1.2 The positive significance of integrated appreciative curriculum moral education for college students from Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and the mainland*

Due to the limited number of Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan students studying "Ethics and Life" (only 13 students) and their inability to attend offline learning and activities regularly due to pandemic control measures, this study was unable to quantitatively observe their performance. Nevertheless, positive educational effects arising from integrated teaching could be observed in their learning process and through the course papers they submitted. Firstly, these effects were evident in classroom learning, exchange, and comparative analysis. For instance, when teaching about altruism as a helping profession, the instructor provided examples of healthcare workers from mainland cities who volunteered to participate in the "anti-epidemic" efforts (supplemented by media video appreciation to create an emotional atmosphere) and invited Hong Kong students to share their experiences in Hong Kong. As students discussed instances where thousands of healthcare workers in Hong Kong collectively went on strike, a stark contrast emerged, facilitating a profound and intuitive understanding of the distinctions between egoism and altruism and the significance of the collective (society) versus the individual. Secondly, these effects were reflected in the cognitive reflection evident in the course papers. In terms of routine learning assessments, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan students often face difficulties in achieving results equivalent to their mainland peers due to disparities in academic foundations. The rigidity of competition and a sense of failure can significantly impact their cognition, attitudes, and values. Therefore, this course adopted a course paper

assessment format, emphasizing practical reflection, to guide all students in engaging in open and in-depth learning, resulting in favourable outcomes. For example, a Hong Kong student shared a course paper that highlighted a negative instance of a secondary school teacher guiding students towards "Hong Kong-independence" during the "Occupy" incident. Through diverse observations and sharing of such experiences, students from Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and the mainland were able to deepen their understanding of the necessity of national education from different perspectives, fostering harmony and unity in the relationships among regional citizens, national citizens, and global citizens (Saina, 2022).

### **5.1.3 Shortcomings and prospects**

As this study is non-experimental research, it has limitations regarding sample size, follow-up time, observation indicators, and measurement scales. On the one hand, this limitation is due to the scarcity of related research, with few studies only focusing on students' self-assessment of learning outcomes (Zhao & Su, 2022) or merely listing the job performance of graduates. On the other hand, ethical considerations in education prevent the implementation of experimental studies. In future research, it is recommended to build upon existing studies, including this one, and further expand the number of courses (particularly those with a higher proportion of students from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan), increase the sample size of students (including both Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan students and mainland students), incorporate more observation points of moral behaviour, and extend the duration of longitudinal tracking. This will enable a more comprehensive and continuous examination of the effectiveness of curriculum moral education in cultivating moral values among students from Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and mainland China.

## **5.2 Conclusion**

Based on the aforementioned research results and discussions, the main conclusions of this study are as follows: (1) The integrated appreciative curriculum moral education aimed at college students from Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and mainland China has shown a significant improvement in students' moral cognition. However, its impact on moral behaviour is relatively limited and does not reach a statistically significant level. (2) Due to external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to quantitatively examine the moral effectiveness specifically for college students from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. Nevertheless, through activities such as classroom case discussions and course paper exchanges, it was found that integrated appreciative curriculum moral education can promote moral cognition and value cultivation for both Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan students and mainland Chinese students. (3) The effectiveness of a single course in the moral development of college students, particularly in enhancing moral behaviour, should not be overstated. Externally, it requires the synergy of other courses and environmental factors. Internally, there are interactive influencing factors, such as gender, and attention should be given to the positive utilization of these subgroup characteristics in the practice of curriculum moral education. (4) There is no significant correlation between students' moral cognition, moral behaviour, and their academic performance in the course. This suggests that the value of curriculum moral education is primarily reflected in teachers' grasp of the teaching process and the creation of a conducive teaching context, rather than students' course learning achievements. For instance, the integration of students from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan with mainland Chinese students contributes to the emergence of diversified thinking and effective inquiry. The integrated appreciative classroom

emphasizes the aestheticization of teaching content, combining intellectual beauty, ethical beauty, and educational beauty in an organic manner.

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