

Short communication

Conducting Children's Life Education Based on Tao Xingzhi's Theory of Life Education

[Abstract] The essence of human life serves as the origin of education. From recognizing the preciousness of life, respecting and valuing individual lives, to appreciating other forms of life, the pursuit of the value and meaning of life is an ongoing journey. Tao Xingzhi's life education philosophy encompasses profound insights on life education, offering valuable perspectives for reflection and understanding. Early childhood is a crucial period for forming life concepts. During this stage, implementing life education focused on young children encourages them to explore, engage in critical thinking, and continuously construct their understanding of life's profound meaning.

[Keywords] Tao Xingzhi; Life Education Theory; Children's Life Education

1. INTRODUCTION

Human life is the origin point of education. Life is complete, rich in individuality, free, and creative. Liang Shuming believed that life and living are synonymous: "Life's continuous flow is living itself." Early childhood is a crucial stage for forming life concepts; implementing life education at this stage can help children develop a correct understanding of life and perspectives on existence.

2. Life Education and Children's Life Education

2.1 The Origin and Development of Life Education

The concept of life education originated with American scholar J. Donald Walters, who proposed in 1968 to "guide individuals in fully understanding the meaning of life, allowing a life attitude that encompasses body, mind, and spirit to become a new element in future education" [1]. In 1979, the Life Education Center was established in Sydney, Australia, with the initial aim of promoting a life free from drugs, violence, and AIDS. Since then, many scholars from various countries have explored and practiced the concept of life education, enriching its content over time. Taiwan was a pioneer in exploring life education within China. It has established a relatively comprehensive life education system, which has been introduced to cities and provinces such as Shanghai, Hunan, Liaoning, and Heilongjiang for practical implementation. The introduction of life education in mainland China was largely a response to contemporary societal challenges, including rapid development, diverse value orientations, varied life choices, and intense competition. These dynamics have exacerbated young people's feelings of vulnerability and

helplessness. [2]The approach to life education in China initially focused on middle school students, with plans to extend its coverage gradually to both younger and older age groups, building a holistic system that addresses the increasing need for meaningful life education.

2.2 The Essence of Life Education

Life education is education that is based on, about, and for life itself[3]. It is an integrated form of education that, grounded in an understanding of life's principles, encourages individuals to consider the self in relation to nature, the self in relation to others, and ultimately to reflect on the value of one's own life[4].

"Based on life" serves as the foundation and prerequisite for "about life" and "for life." Life-based education extends beyond individual life to include the lives of others and different life forms, aiming to foster recognition, understanding, respect, and protection of life.

"About life" refers to the fact that the environment in which individuals live is complex and diverse, encompassing rich social relationships. Therefore, life education should cultivate an individual's social adaptability and enhance their social identity, enabling them to become better members of society.

"For life" involves the pursuit of a higher level of life value and meaning. Education for life can be summarized as self-reflection and self-awareness, encouraging individuals to develop rational thinking, continuously engage in self-construction, and seek a more fulfilling life purpose.

2.3 The Essence of Children's Life Education

Kindergarten life education refers to the life education provided to preschool children within the kindergarten setting. It is an education that is both enlightening and comprehensive, as well as an expression of expectations for children's growth. This form of education respects the innate life of children, taking their perspective as the starting point. It involves listening to, understanding, and embracing children's views and opinions on life. Through methods that align with children's physical and mental development, life education guides them to recognize themselves, others, nature, and society. It helps children understand the relationships and meanings between these aspects, allowing them to appreciate the various stages of life development, respect life, and cherish life. The purpose of life education for children is not to create social elites but to help every child realize their fullest potential, contribute to society, find fulfillment in life, and shape the beginning of their life journey.[5]

2.4 The Necessity of Life Education for Children

2.4.1 Life Education as a Return to Authentic Education

Life is an ongoing, dynamic process that directly aligns with human existence and development [6]. Living is a continuous journey of self-construction, renewal, and creation. Therefore, life education is not fragmented or abrupt; it begins at birth and spans one's entire lifetime. Childhood forms the foundation of a person's life, and the education and environment a child is exposed to will influence their future development. Life education is an approach that seeks to honor life's authenticity, emphasizes human care, and integrates practical life experiences[7]. The emergence of education stems from the developmental needs of human life, and its ultimate goal is to promote life's development and enhance its quality. The process of education must be

accomplished by enriching life experiences.[8]In summary, the core and goal of life education lie in understanding, respecting, and cherishing life while continuously pursuing its value.

2.4.2 Life Education as Education Aligned with Children’s Development

Young children, though needing guidance, care, and support, possess unique value and are equal in their humanity. Children are individuals, not “little adults.” While children are the future, adults embody the present, and the accumulation of present experiences shapes the possibilities for future life. Life education for young children preserves their earliest state, fosters their life potential, and supports them in building a “possible future life.” In this sense, early childhood life education places the child’s life at the center, with the goal of fostering development, igniting the spark for a child’s life growth.

2.4.3 Life Education as Education Aligned with National Strategy

China’s Outline of the National Medium- and Long-Term Plan for Education Reform and Development (2010) emphasizes the importance of safety education, life education, national defense education, and education for sustainable development[9]. This highlights the nation’s recognition of life education as a critical step in building socialism with Chinese characteristics. The Kindergarten Education Guidelines (Trial) also emphasize that protecting children’s lives and promoting their physical and mental well-being should be the top priority. Therefore, implementing life education in early childhood plays a significant role in national development, making it an education that aligns with national strategy.

2.4.4 Life Education Promotes Children's Physical and Mental Well-Being

Humans naturally focus on, love, and respect life. As a result, life education has garnered increasing attention. Since the reform and opening-up period, China's economy has developed rapidly. However, this economic boom has also led to various issues, including an imbalance between cultural and socio-political development. This imbalance has caused spiritual emptiness, which negatively affects children's healthy growth.

Moreover, in today’s internet-driven era, the virtual world has pervaded daily life. Many children become addicted to online games and social networking, which exacerbates their confusion regarding life’s meaning and value—especially since their value systems have not yet fully formed. Additionally, the utilitarian approach to education has overly emphasized academic achievement. The heavy burden of schoolwork places immense pressure on children, overshadowing the nurturing of their inner development. This neglect of children’s mental and emotional growth often leads to psychological issues, or in extreme cases, even suicide[10].

2.5 Dimensions of Children’s Life Education

Human life encompasses three dimensions: natural life, social life, and spiritual life[11], which correspond to the length, width, and depth of life. Accordingly, children’s life education also has three dimensions.

2.5.1 Children’s Natural Life—Children and Nature

Natural life education, with a focus on the concept of life, forms the basis of life education, serving as education “based on life.” It emphasizes understanding the laws of nature and fostering a sense of wonder. The cycle from birth to passing is a universal experience for all living beings. Thus, natural life education’s main goal is to help children understand the stages of birth, growth,

and passing away. In *The Philosophy of Childhood*, Gareth Matthews also addresses the topic of childhood and death. While many adults find discussing death with children inappropriate, Matthews writes, “Death is part of the wheel, sitting right next to birth. You can’t just pick the parts you like and ignore the rest”[12]. Birth, growth, and end form a complete process. The aim is not to instill fear of death but to help children comprehend and appreciate life. When children understand that every book eventually has its final page, it’s as if a seed is planted within them. With adult guidance, they can contemplate the meaning of life, learn to value their present lives, and cultivate a love for life. From understanding individual life, children can extend this respect to the lives of others, to nature, and to the environment.

Early childhood natural life education aims to help children form a correct understanding of life and existence, fostering a well-rounded and complete personality.

2.5.2 Children’s Social Life—Children and Others

Social life is a unique aspect of human existence, as individuals are continuously interacting with others and forming complex social relationships from birth. Social life education aims to help young children recognize themselves and their relationships within the social world, teaching them how to coexist with others and ultimately fostering societal harmony. Tao Xingzhi’s concept of “society as school” reflects this, as education is fundamentally a social activity.

Social life education seeks to develop children’s “superego” by introducing them to social rules, fostering a healthy awareness of these rules, and teaching them how to express their emotions and needs appropriately. This approach supports their socialization, helps them develop positive values and life perspectives, and contributes to societal progress.

2.5.3 Children’s Spiritual Life—Children and Themselves

Spiritual life education aims to inspire individuals to pursue higher life values. What makes us human is our capacity for thought. Humans continually reflect, self-examine, and self-construct. Socrates’ idea of an “examined life” applies here, encouraging children to continuously reflect on their lives to make them more meaningful. Spiritual education engages children’s rationality, guiding them to observe and explore the world around them and to live lives they aspire to.

This concept of value can be individual or directed toward society as a whole. Socially directed value encourages children to find their role within society, helping them understand the connection between personal and social value, and fostering a sense of patriotism and social responsibility.

In summary, the key to life education for young children is to set aside the authority of adulthood, adopt the child’s perspective, and acknowledge the richness and uniqueness of their spiritual and personal world. The world as seen through a child’s eyes is uniquely colorful. By respecting their imagination and creativity, adults can become partners with children, working together to explore the meaning of life with a positive attitude.

3. The Life Education Philosophy Embodied in Tao Xingzhi’s Theory of Life Education

Tao Xingzhi was a deeply compassionate individual who, during times of social turmoil, dedicated himself to rescuing the Chinese people from hardship. The first question education must address, he argued, is what kind of person it should aim to cultivate. Through his life education theory, Tao offered his answer. In his view, the ultimate goal of life education is to “seek truth in being human,” developing a well-rounded person who embodies moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor-oriented development—a “complete person” who lives among the people as “a person of the

people.”

Life development, in Tao’s perspective, goes beyond mere physiological growth; it encompasses the spiritual elevation of the individual. Although Tao did not explicitly elaborate on his views regarding life education, his works reflect the idea that human life is the foundation for saving China and transforming Chinese education. Life education is not only about “existence” (“sheng”) but also about “living” (“huo”)—a concept imbued with vitality and dynamism. Tao posited that the ultimate purpose of education is to liberate life. It aims to free life from constraints, rejuvenating it and breathing vitality into what might otherwise become stagnant or lifeless[13].

3.1 Respect for Life and a Healthy Body

Human life is the starting point of education, and the foundation of life education lies in understanding individual life, respecting it, and learning to respect the lives of other beings. In the pursuit of “truth in being human,” a truly authentic person must first have a healthy body, as physical well-being is the foundation of all things. Without a healthy life, nothing else can be pursued. Thus, life education must prioritize “education based on life.” Tao Xingzhi emphasized, “Students are people learning the way of life. Learning to enrich life is permissible; learning that harms life is absolutely unacceptable”[14]. Furthermore, in Tao’s concept of a “whole person,” one of the essential components is a healthy body.

In Children’s Science Education, Tao wrote, “We observe living organisms by observing them in natural activity... It is cruel to kill living things, which cultivates cruelty in children’s minds; this is unacceptable.” This shows that Tao advocated for equality of life, hoping that children would understand and respect the equality of all forms of life, thereby fostering respect for others and all living beings.

3.2 Returning to Life: Being a Vital Person

In education and life, individuals continuously construct a complete life experience. To enhance the quality of life, one must live vibrantly and be a lively person. How can one become a lively individual? Tao Xingzhi believed that education should liberate one’s nature and the natural instincts of children, removing various constraints on life. This involves freeing children’s minds, hands, mouths, eyes, as well as their space and time.

It is essential to protect children’s innate nature, preserve their limitless imagination and creativity, and nurture their curiosity and desire to learn by respecting their thoughts and ideas. Respecting children’s thoughts is key. Tao’s vision for education aimed to cultivate citizens who are "independent," "self-reliant," and "self-motivated." "Independent" refers to having self-awareness, maintaining integrity, and being accountable for one’s actions. "Self-reliant" means the ability to provide for oneself without depending on others. "Self-motivated" stems from intrinsic desires and reflects the social responsibility that defines an active citizen. Overall, fostering life autonomy involves cultivating individuals who possess independent living skills, a strong sense of individual character, and an acute social responsibility—qualities of a new generation of citizens[15]. To achieve this, children must be fully liberated from the constraints of “dead education.” Teachers must learn to appreciate children and recognize their growth.

Education is “a slow art”; the seeds planted cannot take root and sprout overnight. Children need ample time to grow, think, and connect with nature and society. Adults must approach this process with tolerance and patience, slowly appreciating the vitality that emerges as children grow. This

way, education can truly return to the essence of life.

3.3 Elevating Life: Becoming a Social Citizen

Tao Xingzhi asserted that education should not be exclusive to a few; everyone is born equal, and education should be for the masses. “The new mass education aims to truly realize an education that is owned, governed, and enjoyed by the people”[16]. Mass education fundamentally concerns the entire population; it is related to the liberation of the entire nation. Therefore, mass education is not only about individual life but also about the future of society, the country, and the nation as a whole. Its purpose extends beyond achieving individual life value to encompass the liberation of the nation and all of China.

Individuals must ultimately integrate into society and understand their role as social beings. Education aims to guide individuals in becoming citizens of the modern society. “Only through the liberation of the masses can China be liberated; to achieve liberation, we must seek the liberation of the masses”[17]. Humans do not exist in isolation; they live within a society and a nation. The transition from individual life to social life represents another elevation in life education.

3.4 Education is Life; Life is Education

Montessori once stated that education is everything that assists in the development of life. Yang Sigeng believed that education, at its essence, is about life and living[18]. Life is the purposeful creative process of existence or spirit[19]. Therefore, “life is education,” and life inherently contains educational significance.

From the perspective of the complete development of life, there is never a moment when life is separate from education; education is the foundation of life, and life runs through the entirety of education. Living is learning, and as long as one is alive, one must learn. Thus, life education is lifelong, and so is life education in essence. Life represents the experiences and trials of individual existence; it signifies a form of autonomous and free expansion of life and serves as the foundation and nourishment for education. Education is life, and life is education, which embodies the integration of teaching, learning, and doing.

4. Current Issues in Children’s Life Education

4.1 Insufficient Understanding of the Essence of Life Education by Teachers

As previously described, life education is a term with profound connotations and rich implications, encompassing three fundamental aspects in early childhood education: “based on life,” “about life,” and “for life,” which correspond to natural life education, social life education, and spiritual life education. Scholars have reached a consensus on the goals of life education, which include helping students understand life, cherish life, respect life, love life, improve survival skills, and enhance life quality. For preschool education, life education primarily aims to help children gain an initial understanding of life, recognize life, care for life, learn self-protection, and understand death. [20] However, in actual educational practices, kindergarten teachers often neglect social and spiritual life education, equating life education solely with topics such as life and death or survival education.

Often, there is an overemphasis on knowledge-based approaches, where teachers focus primarily

on imparting knowledge to children, overlooking the formation of emotional attitudes and values during activities, and failing to consider the potential impacts of these activities on children afterward. Additionally, teachers may overlook children's intrinsic motivations and reflective capacities, assuming that young children cannot perceive or understand the concept of "life." Consequently, the role of children as active participants is often diminished, with the teacher taking a dominant position.

Despite kindergarten teachers generally expressing a positive attitude toward the necessity of implementing life education, the activities they conduct often remain superficial and fail to address the essence of life education. For instance, activities in kindergartens might involve experiencing "life" through feeding or planting activities, or providing self-safety education. During planting activities, teachers may focus on guiding children through the process of planting, watering, fertilizing, and weeding; however, children may merely complete the tasks assigned by the teacher without understanding the underlying purpose of these tasks.

In practice, education becomes disconnected from children's lives, resulting in the loss of the deeper meaning of life education. The emphasis on absolute, objective knowledge suppresses the spiritual and creative aspects of children's lives. Various educational systems and regulations lead children to lose their freedom of life.[21]

Children's life education should be a holistic educational approach aimed at helping children understand themselves, their relationships with others, their connections to society, and their interactions with nature. This process is intended to cultivate a sense of love and appreciation for life, allowing children to continuously develop their individuality and socialization, ultimately constructing a fulfilling life experience.

4.2 The Limited Forms of Life Education Implementation

Although most kindergartens incorporate life education into their curricula, a complete system has yet to be established. The "Guidelines for Kindergarten Education" [22] emphasizes that due to the physical and mental developmental characteristics of young children, early childhood education should primarily take the form of play, respecting children's individual differences, developmental patterns, and learning characteristics to facilitate the comprehensive development of each child.

However, in practice, many teachers often overlook this principle, leading to relatively uniform and simplistic approaches to guiding children. The world of young children is rich and colorful, and life education should be conducted through diverse methods. This diversity allows children to continually understand the essence and extension of life through experience, insight, and observation, thus recognizing the richness and diversity of life and better achieving educational goals.

5. How to Conduct Children's Life Education

In the philosophy of Mr. Tao Xingzhi, education is life, and life is education. Education is everywhere in life. The primary role of teachers is to awaken reason and encourage children to develop their "superego," while respecting their "id." This helps children move away from being self-centered and gradually grow into social beings. Life education involves caring for every activity of the child, where the learning process itself becomes an experience of enjoying life.[23]

Mr. Tao emphasized the unity of teaching and doing, with the core idea being the integration of education and social life. He firmly opposed the separation of teaching and learning, opposed rigid

teaching methods and rote memorization, and rejected viewing the teaching process merely as a simple cognitive process.[24]

Therefore, the implementation of life education should be life-oriented, practical, integrative of teaching and doing, and encompass the entirety of life. This task is not only for teachers but also for parents and society as a whole.

5.1 Life Education Arising from Everyday Life

Life education should stem from life and be conducted within it. Teachers in kindergartens should seize opportunities and attentively observe children's daily lives, gathering teaching resources from their daily experiences. It is not appropriate to conduct life education merely for the sake of it or to follow superficial procedures. Life education should be rooted in children's lives, emphasizing "living education." Life education should be implemented in an environment filled with vitality and life[25].

For example, teachers can take children into nature more often, encouraging them to observe the natural world and appreciate the changes in life while coexisting harmoniously with nature. The "Guidelines for Learning and Development of Children Aged 3-6" also state that teachers should lead children into nature and engage them in diverse outdoor activities[26]. By fully engaging children's senses, they can observe, touch, and experience the changes of the seasons, allowing individual lives to resonate with nature. Life education is a loving education, encompassing love for oneself, others, nature, and the country. This love should be inclusive and should promote respect and care for all forms of life.

5.2 Life Education Requires Freedom and Liberation

Education should liberate children's nature and not confine them. A life-affirming education must be free, natural, liberating, and vibrant, providing ample space for life to unfold. However, freedom does not mean chaos. Education should be full of life, meaning that teachers, in the process of conducting life education, need to respect children's individual differences and their imaginative thoughts. At the same time, teachers should believe in children's innate ability to construct knowledge and not overly suppress their ideas or expressions. It is crucial to find a balanced approach to education. For example, in story-creation activities, teachers can provide children with a brief story beginning, such as, "A little rabbit walked into a mysterious forest," and then encourage the children to freely imagine and create the rest of the story. The children's stories may take wildly different directions: some might say the rabbit encountered a talking mushroom in the forest, which led it to a hidden treasure; others might say the rabbit and the forest animals held a grand musical concert. Teachers listen attentively to each child's story without interrupting or correcting their logic or word choices. If a child gets stuck while narrating, the teacher can guide them with questions, such as, "Who did the rabbit meet next?" Once all the children have completed their stories, they share them with one another. The teacher facilitates discussions, helping children identify the highlights in each other's stories. This approach respects the children's imagination and desire for expression while fostering their language skills and cognitive abilities through interaction and communication. At the same time, the environment should be conducive to exploration while also offering appropriate guidance and support to foster holistic development. In an atmosphere of balanced freedom, children can fully develop their individuality and potential, paving the way for a richer life journey.

5.3 Life Education Must Be Practiced

Life education should integrate teaching and practice. Children rely heavily on direct experiences and personal practice. As the saying goes, "Action is the beginning of knowledge, and knowledge is realized through action." Therefore, during life education, teachers need to shift away from traditional "knowledge transmission" methods and provide children with more opportunities for hands-on experiences, allowing them to genuinely grasp the essence of "life." The role of the teacher as a role model is also crucial. They need to embody respect and love for life so that children can inadvertently imitate these attitudes in their daily lives. Through teachers' demonstrations, children can naturally immerse themselves in a positive atmosphere for life education, gradually developing a sense of awe and love for life. The forms of life education should not be limited to traditional lecture styles. Various methods such as play and collaboration can be effective means of conducting life education. For example, teachers can organize planting activities, with some kindergartens offering dedicated planting areas. Teachers can lead children in planting vegetables such as tomatoes and cucumbers, involving them in every step of the process, from soil preparation, sowing, and watering to fertilizing. During this process, children gain hands-on experience observing plant growth, from seed germination to seedling development, flowering, and fruiting. Teachers can provide timely explanations about the essentials of plant growth, such as the need for sunlight, water, and soil, rather than relying solely on theoretical teaching. Moreover, teachers can demonstrate patience and care when tending to plants, such as handling seedlings gently, which subtly influences children. On parent open days, parents can be invited to participate, allowing children to introduce their planted vegetables, further enhancing their understanding of planting and life development. Alternatively, plants that reflect seasonal changes, such as ginkgo trees, can be planted. Similarly, raising small animals is an excellent option, adjusted according to the kindergarten's specific conditions. For instance, some kindergartens keep rabbits. Teachers can guide children in taking turns to care for the rabbits, including feeding them and cleaning their cages. Through these activities, children can observe the rabbits' living habits, dietary preferences, and behavioral traits. A "Rabbit Growth Diary" activity can be organized, encouraging children to document the rabbits' changes.

These approaches inspire children's curiosity, desire for exploration, and creativity, allowing them to intuitively grasp the wonders of life. At the same time, they help children develop a sense of rules and nurture prosocial behaviors. Additionally, integrating parents, community resources, and other support systems is essential. Educators must collaborate with parents and leverage social resources to create a holistic life education environment. This allows children to experience the beauty and diversity of life in various contexts, fostering more comprehensive learning and growth.

5.4 Life Education Should Be Lifelong

Life education has rich connotations and broad extensions; life is profound. Life education should be a continuous thread throughout a person's life. Tao Xingzhi believed that life education should be continuous throughout life, encompassing a healthy body, independent thinking, a self-sufficient career, a well-rounded personality, survival skills, and a full spirit—collectively called a "well-rounded life." He argued that the education for a "well-rounded life" should last a lifetime, thus proposing the concept of "education for a lifetime." In other words, life education

accompanies a person throughout their life[27].

Early childhood education serves as the starting point for lifelong education and is the foundation of all future education, playing a critical role that subtly influences children's future lives. The adage "Live and learn" captures this well. Life possesses inherent learning motivation, and individuals grow through continuous self-reflection. Teachers should stimulate children's intrinsic motivation, encouraging their ongoing growth. They act as guides and facilitators, providing opportunities and environments for learning, fostering children's curiosity and love for life, and helping them choose suitable learning paths at different stages of their development. Lifelong life education aims not only to acquire knowledge but also to cultivate comprehensive qualities and a deep understanding of life. In the limited span of life, individuals should continually expand its breadth, explore its depth, and seek its meaning.

6. Conclusion

In summary, implementing life education for young children during the preschool stage holds profound and critical significance. Tao Xingzhi's philosophical principles provide a solid theoretical foundation and clear practical direction for children's life education.

Theoretically, his emphasis on life as the core of education reveals the intrinsic interdependence between life and education. This perspective helps us understand that children's life education is not merely the transmission of isolated knowledge but a holistic and multi-dimensional nourishment of life and spiritual cultivation. It guides educators to value the individual life of children and gradually expand this respect and care to other forms of life. In doing so, it fosters children's comprehensive understanding and reverence for the life system, laying the groundwork for their lifelong values toward life.

Practically, a life education model centered on young children aligns closely with their physical and mental developmental characteristics. By creating rich, diverse, and life-oriented educational scenarios, it stimulates children's curiosity and critical thinking.

In this process, children are no longer passive recipients of knowledge but active seekers of life's meaning. Through daily life experiences such as caring for plants and animals or participating in group activities, they continually construct and refine their understanding of life. They come to appreciate the preciousness, uniqueness, and interconnectedness of life.

This practice of children's life education, rooted in Tao Xingzhi's life education theory, not only helps preschoolers develop a positive and healthy outlook on life but also illuminates their future path. It equips them with a love, respect, and reverence for life as they face an increasingly complex and dynamic society. With firm beliefs and a positive attitude, they can pursue the richness and noble values of life, achieve holistic development, realize their self-worth, and contribute meaningfully to society.

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