

Evaluation of a Moral and Character Education Group for Primary School Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the Moral and Character Education Group with ten Primary Four students. This is a six-session group, conducted in a primary school by a social work student worker on her practicum. Through observation in school and interviews with the school social worker, the student worker identified the need for moral education in Primary Four students. This group aims to introduce the importance of positive social manners and moral education. The group content and intervention were based on positive psychology, Bandura's social learning theory, Kohlberg's moral development model, Beck's moral education needs theory and Berkowitz's social interaction theory. Assignments, observation and feedback session were used as qualitative assessment. Due to its activities-based nature, the interaction of members served an important function in teaching moral education. Pre-tests and post-tests were used as quantitative data to support the outcome evaluation. All members showed improvement in their understanding of the importance of appreciation, gratitude, respect and kindness, as well as a willingness to practice them in their daily lives. This implies that using various activities and games can raise the interest of students and foster interaction. By being part of a group, members can learn proper social manners and attitudes from the student worker, other members and group experiences. More evidence-based interventions can be developed to design tailor-made and interactive character education for Chinese primary school students.

Introduction

The societal background

Hong Kong is encountering a complicated moral culture. We can see critics of the government, the culture of the legislation council, and of the university orientation camp scandal. These all spark the controversy about moral conflicts among mass media and society. Complaints and impolite behaviour are often seen. People are socialised by different agents, including society and mass media (Clausen, 1968). Moral culture will thus have an adverse influence on students, to a certain extent.

The school background

The primary school in the case study promotes “love and integrity, diligence and learning”. It states that the school wants to promote moral and character development in the students. From my observations in the first four weeks, students generally showed their character in team work during recess time. In conversations, they showed little appreciation, respect or the sense to be grateful for other people’s efforts, towards parents, teachers or classmates.

Given its societal background, the school is one of the agents which exerts influence on a young generation’s values. A moral education group is suitable here as it can provide direction for children’s growth and it fits the educational theme of the school.

Rationale for running the group

To promote moral education in primary schools

Schools are not places that focus only on academic performance, but also places to promote socialisation and enhance the whole-person development of students. As stated by the Education Bureau (2013), moral and civic education is an essential element of whole-person education because it aims to foster students’ positive values and attitudes. Schools should promote this in their curriculum, as well as extra-curricular activities, however, the resources allocated to primary schools are rather limited when compared with secondary schools.

The primary school is a suitable place to teach students about good character and morality. According to Power, Nuzzi, Narvaez, Lapsley, & Hunt (2008), a school’s social work can play a role as a social educator to help students to develop positive social values, attitudes and behaviour. In order to promote the components of positive values and attitude, formal and structural sessions are crucial to foster learning. The group is therefore designed to help students gain such attitudes, values and behaviour, and to practice in their daily lives.

The importance of proper value in children’s lives

Proper values are important to children’s growth. Snook (2007) stated that children with the right values can become positive, purposeful and enthusiastic. In middle school age, students aged 5 to 11 are encountering ‘Industry vs. Inferiority’ (Erikson, 1959). They have to develop skills in interpersonal relationships, responsibilities and moral commitment. They need encouragement to develop competence and belief in their skills. If equipped with moral virtue, they can be sensitive to each other’s feelings and understand the effects of their behaviour. They are more willing to show love and care to others. In these circumstances, a sense of confidence can be gained by the fulfillment of psychosocial development.

It is great to benefit to children to start receiving moral education at an early age. Primary Four students are around 7-9 years old, and compared with other years, they have more time for extra-curricular activities.

The group is thus planned not only for the introduction of moral virtues, but also for the cultivation of a supportive and encouraging atmosphere with mutual respect. There are supportive slogans and do-it-yourself (DIY) gifts, for example. It is planned that through the atmosphere in the group, and reflective and cooperative learning, positive attitude, values and behaviour, such as mutual respect and caring, can be reinforced. This is fundamental to children's development.

Literature Review

Positive psychology

Positive psychology stresses the importance of strengths and positive emotion. Clifton and Rath (2005) stated that positive emotion is an essential daily requirement for survival. Identifying strengths and cultivating them can help people achieve authentic happiness and abundant gratification, thus creating a good life. These great values can lead to a well-lived and fulfilling life. They can also increase productivity, and positive emotions, which can also influence others. As suggested by the *Character Strengths and Virtues Handbook* (Christopher & Martin, 2004), the positive psychological traits of human beings can be divided into wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, transcendence.

As the group will focus on gratitude, respect, kindness and appreciation, they will cover humanity and transcendence in positive psychology. Through different activities, such as role play, games and art, students can learn the importance and skills of paying gratitude. As a result, by cultivating their strengths and positive emotions, students can achieve authentic happiness and have a good life.

Moral development

There are some historical theories about moral development. It is useful for the group to have evidence-based practice based on the stage of their moral education. As a result, the group can become more concrete and be supported by theory.

According to the cognitive-developmental approach, two significant figures are Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg. They both provided a full picture about realising moral stages. Piaget (1965) suggested that moral development is formed and fostered by social interaction. By having constant interaction with others, students have opportunities for personal discovery through problem solving and exploring the norms of the group and society. The group will thus provide a chance for students to accomplish tasks, such as creating art and playing games. It will provide opportunities for students to learn from others and understand their moral education by experiential learning.

Kohlberg's Moral Stages

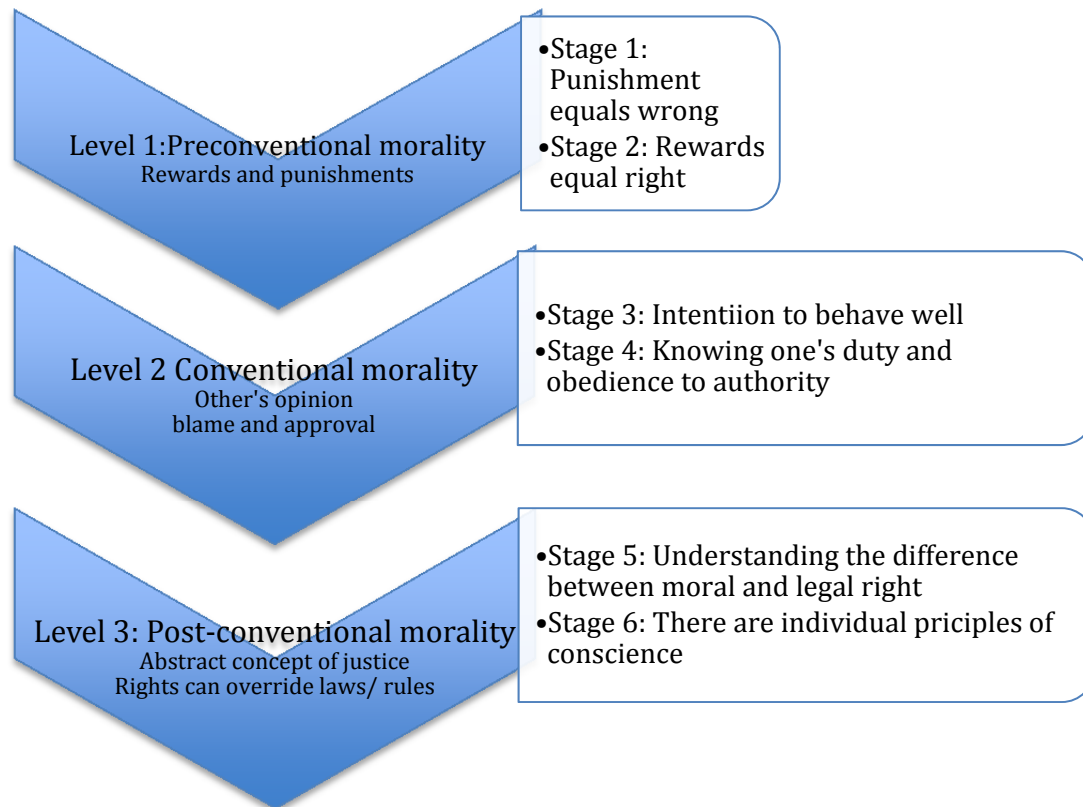


Figure 1. Kohlberg's theory of moral stage (Kohlberg, 1972)

Kohlberg's work considerably elaborated Piaget's model of moral development. As suggested by Kohlberg (1972), moral stages are a sequence. Students at Primary Four are in the Pre-Conventional Stage. They know right and wrong by reward and punishment. It is a means of equal exchange and an agreement. It is suggested that when children reach the stage that above their current level of morals, they will be stimulated to advance their moral development. The topic and element will thus be focused more on Level 1 and supplemented by Level 2. Not only will the rules be introduced, but they will also show concern for others.

Moral Education

In order to provide moral education, there is a need to examine the needs of the student and the elements of activities.

The elements based on student need

Beck et al. (1971) suggested that children at different stages had different needs in moral education.

- 1 Personal and social values (5-9 years old)
- 2 Human relationships (10-11 years old)
- 3 Decision making (12-13 years old)
- 4 Human issues in the world today (14-16 years old)
- 5 The theory of value (16-18 years old)

The theme of the target group will be focused on the first two items, personal and interpersonal aspects.

In fact, there is no standardised component or framework of moral education, and reference books for Chinese moral education are rare. To hold an evidence-based moral education group, the student worker needs to refer to different books and consider the characteristics of the primary school students. The student worker consulted her fieldwork supervisor, studied western education books and compared them to education handbooks. The book 'Building Moral Intelligence' (Borba, 2001) is comprehensive. It provides various kinds of systematic methods to morally nurture a child. There are seven virtues in the book which children should acquire in order to become a moral person in daily life: empathy, conscience, self-control, respect, kindness, tolerance and fairness. As there were six sessions as well as a priority of needs, only four values were introduced: appreciation, kindness, gratitude and respect.

Activities fostering social interaction

According to Berkowitz (1998), an effective way for education to promote moral education is through fostering interaction in groups. Activity time offers extensive chances for peer interaction. For instance, pretend play and group games can motivate children to engage with one another and explore the skills needed to cooperate with others. Art, block building, and writing can also be contexts for peer collaboration.

The group will thus include a variety of programmes designed to achieve the moral education of young children, such as videos, games and arts and craft.

Bandura's social learning theory

Both cognitive and environmental factors are emphasised in this theory. The relationship between cognitive operations and human behaviours is explained. Social experience constructs and integrates information. During this process, people start to react to the environment and develop response-outcome expectancies, perceptions of self-efficacy and self-reactions. Observational learning includes modelling, retention, symbolic representation, motor reproduction and motivation (Bandura, 1977).

A group is an ideal environment for members to observe, practice and cultivate. Diversified activities will be used to match children's interests, so as to encourage them to participate in the group. Games are the main tools, together with the debriefing session, and members can learn from first-hand experience. If the worker notices the good behaviour of group members, she will praise and emphasise their good actions in the group.

To retain virtues, practice is needed. Two sessions were held on each topic. The worker made use of different activities in each session to strengthen the message so that members had time to experience and absorb. If there was any conflict or argument, members could come up with solutions and redo the task. Lastly, reinforcement was provided in each session. The worker invited all members to praise and give 'Appreciation Cards' to one member. Booklets were another means for the worker to appreciate members' active participation.

Group Work

Group goal and objectives

The aim of this group was to introduce the importance of positive social manners and to provide moral education. By teaching children the concepts and practical ways to achieve appreciation, gratitude, respect and kindness, their moral standard can be

5	Appreciation	1) To appreciate each other's efforts 2) To acknowledge goodness in one's life 3) To learn from other's lives	Use of game Use of programme: reflection journals let members mark down their grateful things. (see appendix) The process of gratitude is an awareness that we are the recipients of goodness.
6	Gratitude	1) Review last five sessions 2) Consolidate their learning experience 3) Application of knowledge in the future 4) To recognise their contribution and growth	Use of programme: To make gift boxes to review progress and achievements Discussion: to share their own feelings and appreciation with others

Group arrangement

To recruit group members, the student worker spent a week observing students in the playgroup, tuck shop and classroom. If there was minor misbehaviour, such as arguments, fighting, or using violent words, the student worker record names and discussed the students with the school social worker to determine their suitability for joining the group.

There were three criteria for selection, . First, the group member should come from Primary Four. Secondly, their choices and interests were considered. Finally, SEN and ADHD students were not recruited as there was only one worker with the group, which would not provide sufficient care for their special needs.

Pre-group interviews then took place. As this was a developmental group, participants who were eager to join and liked to learn from others were recommended. The student held informal face-to-face interviews at recess time in order to understand more about the participants and assessed whether they were interested in and suitable for joining the group.

There were six sessions with the group, of 1.5 hours each session over six weeks. Finally, ten members, five boys and five girls were recruited.

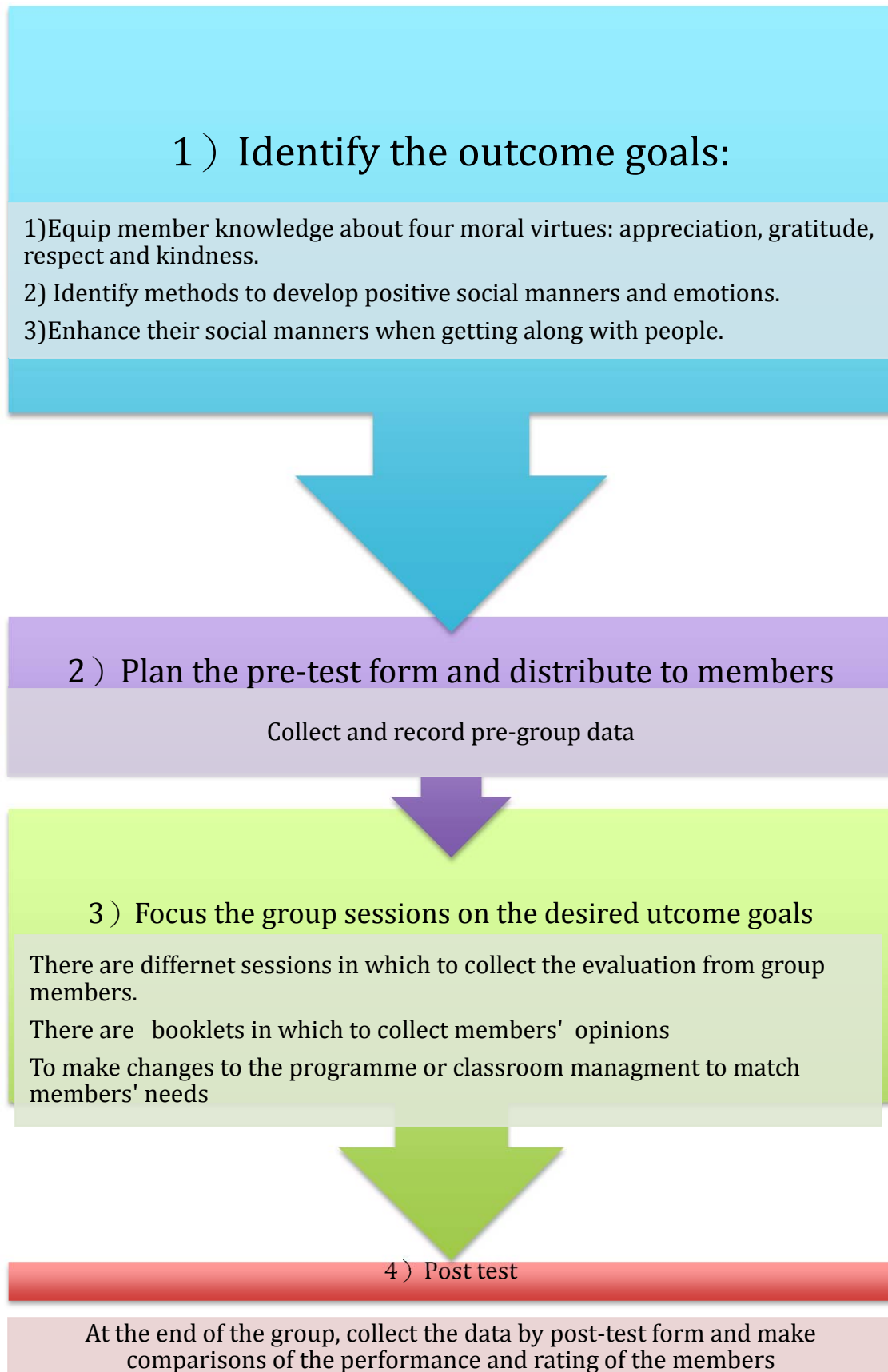
Objectives and method of evaluation

Evaluation is an on-going process, and can allow group members to express their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with a group (Corliss & Corliss, 2009).

In a qualitative way, as evaluation is an ongoing process, the student worker asked group members to evaluate their group experience every session. A booklet was also designed for members to write down what they had learnt and their feelings. These evaluated their understanding of four moral virtues, respect, appreciation, kindness and gratitude, in order to identify methods to develop moral habits and good social manners, for social manner enhancement and the design of a programme. The student worker could examine the learning process of the group members and make adjustments to the group to help them achieve their goals if necessary.

In a quantitative way, there was a pre-test and a post-test, which were designed by the student worker and adjusted by the fieldwork supervisor. The items involved 'understanding of personality', 'understanding of strength', 'listen to others' opinions', 'take care of classmates', 'gratitude to parents', 'take care of teacher', 'encourage each other' and 'praise each other'. The mean points for each member were recorded so as to access changes and the effectiveness of the intervention in a quantitative way. Although the questionnaires were set by a student worker, consultation with their supervisor and the school social worker helped ensure their validity and reliability to a certain extent.

Figure 2. Implementation of the evaluation



Findings

Table 2. *The results of the pre-test and post-test*

Items	Understanding of personality		Understanding of strength		Listen to others' opinions		Take care of classmates		Gratitude to parents		Take care of teacher		Encourage each other		Praise each other	
	Pre test	Post test	Pre test	Post test	Pre test	Post test	Pre test	Post test	Pre test	Post test	Pre test	Post test	Pre test	Post test	Pre test	Post test
Member A	5	6	4	6	4	7	4	7	5	6	6	7	4	6	5	7
Member B	6	7	7	7	5	7	7	7	6	6	6	6	5	6	5	7
Member C	5	7	4	6	4	7	4	7	4	5	5	5	2	6	5	7
Member D	5	6	6	7	4	7	6	7	6	6	4	5	4	6	4	7
Member E	6	6	6	7	6	7	6	7	4	5	6	6	5	7	5	7
Member F	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	5	7	4	6	4	7
Member G	4	5	5	6	5	7	5	7	5	6	6	6	4	6	4	7
Member H	5	7	6	7	4	7	6	7	6	7	7	7	3	6	5	7
Member I	6	6	6	6	3	7	6	7	7	7	5	6	5	7	6	7
Member J	3	6	5	6	3	7	5	7	6	7	4	7	4	7	6	7
Statistical analysis*	$p = 0.016$		$p = 0.014$		$p = 0.007$		$p = 0.011$		$p = 0.014$		$p = 0.039$		$p = 0.004$		$p = 0.004$	

* Related-samples Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test.

Analysis

The pre- and post-test ratings of all eight items were analysed using the related-samples Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test, a non-parametric test of statistical significance. Results showed that the differences between the pre- and post-test ratings of all eight measures were statistically significant with a confidence of 95% (p-value < 0.05). The changes were not due to chance.

In the post-test session, there were three extra questions, which aimed to evaluate the arrangement of the programme and the worker's performance.

Table 3. *Extra questions in post-test*

C)The whole group arrangement	Means
9)The six session programme design	7
10)The participation of members	6.6
11)The performance of the worker	7

Members expressed satisfaction about the programme design as well as the performance of the worker, which both scored seven marks.

The participation of members mainly referred to the cooperation and devotion of members. In fact, some members mentioned in the group they observed that some other members did not show a cooperative manner; for instance, they may shout to each other loudly and blame each other. The worker would make use of the conflict and spend time intervening. This sometimes disturbed the progress of the group who sometimes had to wait or be debriefed before continuing the games.

Discussion

A) Attainment of goals and objectives

There are four objectives in the proposal. In this part, the objectives are shown and evaluation made accordingly.

Table 4. Attainment of goal and objective (1)

Contents	Indicator	Method
1)Equip members with knowledge about four moral virtues: respect, appreciation, kindness and gratitude	1)Shown in the role play and game 2)Give the meaning of the virtue.	1) Worker’s observations 2)Member’s feedback in debriefing section 3)Feedback forms

According to their response in each lesson, each member can review the things that they had learnt in the session. During the game debriefing session, they could remark on the significant elements in the session.

In the last session, they wrote down the things that they had learnt, whether they could explain the meaning of the virtue and can review the application of the virtue.

Table 5. Attainment of goal and objective (2)

2) Identify methods to develop moral habits and good social manners.	1)They can list the plan in the handbook 2)They can share their work in the plan	1)Worker’s observations 2)Member’s feedback in debriefing section homework
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From the handbook, they can describe the plan that they expected to implement. They can apply the things that they have learned in the group in their daily lives. The design of the homework was suitable for them, and they were able to finish. It was easy to follow, as well as being a creative design. They could share their efforts with other members. (See Appendices 2 to 5)

Table 6. Attainment of goal and objective (3)

3) Enhance their social manners when getting along with people.	They can show appreciation of themselves and others in the group	1)Worker’s observations 2)Feedback forms
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In the pre-test and post-test forms, as mentioned before, there is improvement in the areas ‘I will encourage others’ and ‘I will praise others’.

From the worker’s observations, members did try to observe other’s efforts in the group and praise them at the end.

Table 7. Attainment of goal and objective (3)

4)Design of the	The comments on	1. Analysis of the average rate
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programme	the feedback form	of attendance and member's involvement in the group 2. Member's feedback in debriefing section
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The average participation rate was acceptable, although some students had to attend tutorial classes.

According to the students' feedback, if there had been more games, they would have enjoyed it more. On the feedback form they gave full marks to the design of the programme, which showed that the design of the programme suited their needs.

B) Evaluation of group dynamics

Conflict resolution pattern

In the beginning stage, members tended to have one-way communication with the worker, that is, to report conflict to the worker, instead of solving it as a group problem.

After the first two sessions, more programmes were changed to cooperative tasks, which meant everyone had a role. The responsibility of managing group discipline was also placed on members. They had the task of reminding other members about game rules and asking other members to cooperate.

Decision-making pattern

When they decided on a method of throwing the ball in Session One, they spoke directly to the worker individually, instead of having a discussion together first.

In Session Three, some leaders appeared, who could lead the group discussion. When they had to decide on a game topic, every member was able to present their ideas first. There was then a discussion about how to decide the topics. Finally, they could come up with a list of topics in order. The worker needed to facilitate their discussion, rather than assigning them the topic.

Group atmosphere

In the first two sessions, members tended to blame each other if there were problems. For instance, when they could not play the game, they would shout to others and complain to the worker. According to the feedback of group members, some members said that they did not feel a cooperative atmosphere. 'I am really disappointed today as everyone shouted to each other. I want a quiet moment to play and learn.' 'I feel sad because they argue.' Usually the conflict happened during games.

The student worker realized the importance of good class management and ensured that the group could serve as an environment to learn. She thus started to make use of group time to utilise conflicts. Members could openly share their feelings about a conflict and suggest ways to solve it. After this sharing, the worker would

conclude the experience and ask members to suggest ways for friendly cooperation. When they could achieve the goal, the worker would invite members to give praise to each other and reward them with stickers in booklets. As it was noted that some members were not eager to express their feelings in group time, other means were used to encourage their participation. Face-to-face conversations and booklets were used to facilitate the learning experience and understand their learning process as well as feelings of each member.

Gradually, there was more cohesion in the group, especially in Sessions 3 and 4. The topic was kindness. Secret angels promoted the act of helping others in the group as well as in school. The 'we' sense was promoted. They were able to cooperate more and consider each other's feelings and the degree of participation.

C) Group developmental stage

Group characteristics at the beginning stage

In Sessions One and Two, the group was in the forming stage.

This is a time of significant testing, and trial and error. From the group content, the student worker observed that some members might scream and disturb the group. There was also a lack of cohesion. When they could not finish a task, the first thing that they did was to blame others.

In Session Three, the storming stage began (Tuckman, 1965). Different ideas were to be completed for consideration. Now, group members open up to each other and confront each other's ideas and perspectives. The student worker would therefore facilitate their decision-making process and let them share their ideas openly so that they could feel that they were accepted. At the same time, the student worker would discover potential leaders and mature members to help the group move out of this stage. For instance, the student worker would ask for their ideas about the situation in the group and give members a review of their performance.

Group characteristics at the end stage :

In Session 5, the group was in the performing stage. The group could function as a unit as they could find ways to finish their task smoothly. For instance, they were willing to be involved in self-disclosure in the gratitude session. Member F mentioned 'I was in hospital. It was really hard for me to stay alone. When I went back to school, I was welcomed by classmates and teachers. This gave me great happiness.' They can also make decisions by themselves, such as about how to hold a bottle and win a game successfully. During the process, there was no significant conflict or need for the worker's intervention.

Dean, Ronald, Glenda and Kim (2010) claimed that termination is a stage to help members transfer what they have learned in the group to their outside environment. In Session 6, the content was summarised, to include respect, kindness, appreciation and gratitude. Members had time to reflect on what they had learnt and how they applied in their lives. It was suggested that they use a gift box to record their thoughts and share them in the group.

Their feeling had been dealt with. The worker then facilitated an open discussion about the feelings of loss and sadness that accompany the eventual termination of the group: for instance, the worker expressed her feelings about the termination. Members were encouraged to share their fears or concerns about leaving the group.

Secondly, the impact of the group on individuals was examined. An open expression of feelings about the following questions, ‘What does the group mean to you?’ ‘What have we learnt?’ ‘How can we apply the elements in our home, school and society?’, can help members review the group as well as consolidate their growth. Members could recall the experience of each session and reflect on the element that they have learnt. For instance, Member B said ‘I still remember the game we played in Session Two.

Member D said ‘The video we watched in session 5 was really impressive. The good deed is contagious This reminds me that I cannot underestimate the influence of kindness. Even if I cannot do many big things, it is still powerful to pass love to others.’

Implications

Diversified evaluation can be used in group work. Compared with the pre-test and post-test, a booklet or anonymous feedback form can sometimes provide more privacy and security for members to share their feelings. This may be because of the limited time of the fieldwork practicum; a six-session group may not be enough to cultivate a solid trustful relationship among members, even though we can see that there was change in the group dynamic and culture. Both quantitative and qualitative methods should be used together in order to supplement and provide consistent evidence for the worker to work with the group and make adjustments to the group.

Since this was a fieldwork practicum, there was limited time for the student worker to have follow up sessions and examine how members applied the elements in their work. Only assignments and interviews could be used to check the sustainability of the work.

Due to the fact that it used a self-developed scale, the accuracy of the data and research may need to be further discussed. To address this problem, the student worker consulted their fieldwork supervisor and added qualitative methods for evaluation. It was suggested that more assessment tools could be introduced in the school curriculum as well as in the practicum, so that the work of fieldwork students can involve evidence-based practice.

Conclusion

This research was a pilot study for integrating moral values with activities. Together with the debriefing, booklet and feedback forms, members could experience the exchange and transformation of knowledge. In group work, the social worker could identify individual characteristics as well as the dynamics of the group involved in the intervention. Evaluation is an ongoing process, and flexibility should be included,

especially when working with children. It was noted that there was significant improvement in members' self-understanding and interpersonal relationships. More studies and a framework of character education should be developed in the future, and thus, an organised and effective moral education can be introduced to primary students in Hong Kong.

Biographic Note

Wing Sze, MAK is a 2014 graduate with a Bachelor of Social Sciences (Honours) in Social Work at the City University of Hong Kong.

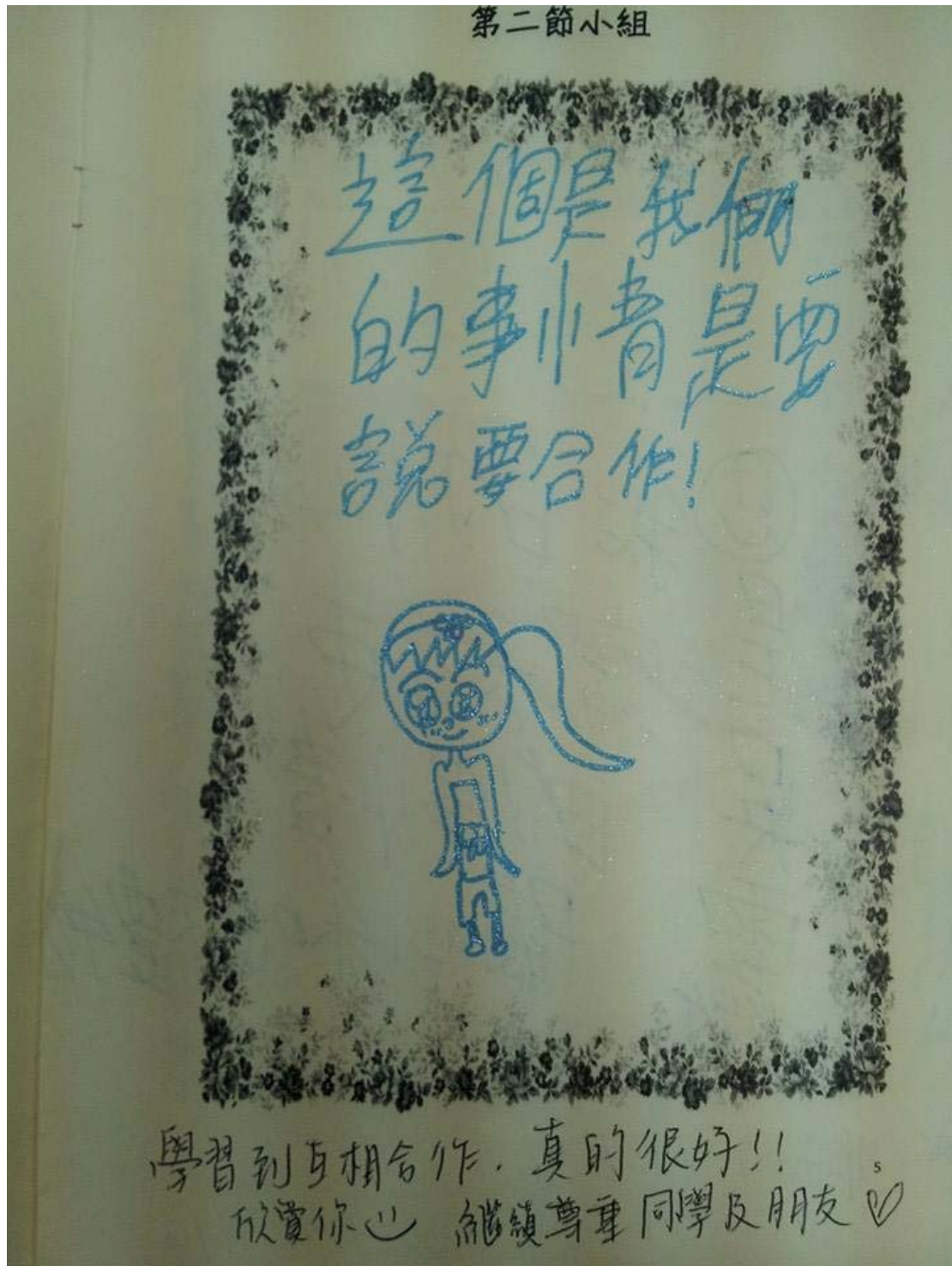
Appendix 1 Session 1: The norm sheet for the group

The hands were drawn by members, and represents their agreement of the group norm.



Appendix 2 Booklet (Session 2: Respect)

This was a session that emphasised the importance of respecting other people's ideas
(Consent was gained from members for educational purposes)



Appendix 3 Session 3: Kindness (The mission of secret angels)

A member recorded the progress of the secret angels. It showed that she did care for others in the school, and practiced what she had learnt in the group in daily life.

(Consent was gained from members for educational purposes)



Appendix 5 Assignments from some members
Reflection journals (Gratitude Sessions 5 and 6)

This is an assignment which recorded things students were grateful for a week. Members knew how to mark them down and express thanks to others. (Consent was gained from members for educational purposes)

互動讓世界更溫暖。的感恩日記

日期	感恩的事 麵包樹 BREAD TREE	表達感恩行動
29 / 11	感恩媽媽每天做早餐給我吃。	每天教弟弟做功課,減輕媽媽的負擔
30 / 11	感言射姑姑和姐姐星期六教導我。	聽她們的教導
1 / 12		
2 / 12	感恩跳舞老師教我跳舞。	每天練習
3 / 12	小弟在生日時給我紅包玩。	每天和他玩
4 / 12		
5 / 12		
6 / 12		

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