Juanjuan ZHAO

Confucius as a Critical Educator: Towards Educational Thoughts of Confucius

Abstract This paper is a cross-cultural comparative study in education philosophy. A comparative and philosophical approach is used to interpret texts from the *Analects of Confucius* and to find connections with ideas of critical educators. In comparing Confucius' educational thought with that of Paulo Freire, John Dewey and other theorists in critical pedagogy, this paper finds four common threads between Confucian concepts of education and critical pedagogy: mutual learning, integration of theory and practice, importance of reflection in teaching and learning, and democratic purpose of education. By presenting these interwoven themes, this paper contributes to a cross-cultural dialogue on global understanding in education.

Keywords Confucius, critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire, John Dewey

Introduction

Although Confucius is known as a great educator and philosopher, there is skepticism towards him for he was and still is criticized for focusing on text-based cultural transmission by extolling the virtues of classic books and favoring an authoritative role for teachers in student-teacher relationships. The purpose of this research paper is to unveil the real Confucius in teaching and learning, and connect his educational thought with that of critical theorists in education such as Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, John Dewey and others in terms of cooperative learning, integration of theory and practice, importance of reflection in teaching and learning, and democratic purpose of education. By comparing the core ideas of Confucius in education with those of Paulo Freire, John Dewey and other theorists in critical pedagogy and bringing old to new and East to West, this research paper thus aims to present interwoven themes as a support system for a cross-cultural dialogue on global understanding in education. Despite the cultural differences of East and West, the author hopes that educators

Juanjuan ZHAO (✉)

School of Education, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH 45221, USA
E-mail: juanerzhao@gmail.com

from both sides could engage in and exchange more dialogue on education philosophy, and practice, also learn from each other.

Confucius

Confucius (551–479 BCE), known as Master Kong or Kongzi in Asia, is a great educator and philosopher of the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BCE), approximately one hundred years ahead of Socrates (469–399 BCE). Even though the popular image of him is not that pleasing, “a musty scholar ensconced in a lone cell thinking up pithy sayings-dispensed inside a fortune cookie” (Ng, 2000, p. 312), his educational thoughts are inherited and even remain inspiring to educators nowadays. Confucius was credited with establishing one of the first private schools in ancient China. He charged a small fee for students who wanted to study with him and accepted them regardless of their social status, thus making education available to the non-aristocratic.

The most famous book attributed to Confucius is the *Analects of Confucius*, (2007) a series of conversations carried on between Confucius and his students, the topics of which range from how to maintain a friendship to how to govern a country. The central thought of Confucianism in this book focuses on the notion of *ren* (human kindness, benevolence, goodness) and the *junzi* (enlightened person). Besides *ren*, other themes such as *li* (ritual, propriety), *yi* (righteousness), *zhong* (loyalty), and *xiao* (filial piety) are discussed. Righteousness is the virtue of doing good, generally in connection with morally proper conduct. Filial piety means the respect for, obedience to, as well as service and duty to one’s parents, and ancestors by extension. Loyalty is an extension of filial piety at a different level, referring to one’s duties to family, spouse, friends, country, and more. Social and ritual propriety is about social norms that regulate how people behave such as to family, friends, and superiors. Respect of elders by their children, for example, is one of the rituals practiced. According to Confucius, to acquire and maintain all these virtues, the best way is through learning and self-cultivation.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy which emerged in the 1980s in the US, is a philosophy of education heavily influenced by the works of Marxist theory, the Frankfurt school of critical theory, feminist theory, structuralism and even more recent developments in postmodernism and post-structuralism (Miskovic & Hoop, 2006). Among the earliest and most influential was the Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire (Evans, 2008). His work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is considered one of the foundational texts of critical pedagogy (Friedenberg, 1971). A well-known and widely cited concept in the book is his distinction between

traditional banking education and dialogical education. In the banking education, teachers are in control of knowledge whereas students are passive recipients of knowledge. It is a system that reproduces oppression. Dialogical education, by contrast, is a problem-posing process in which students are “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (Freire, 2000, p. 81). Through collaborative efforts between teachers and learners in understanding the sociocultural reality that shapes their lives and their ability to act upon reality, conscientization is realized (Dajani, 1975).

Critical pedagogy has a strong link with the educational thought of John Dewey (1859–1952), mainly around the ideas of democracy, critical praxis, and progressive education (Breuing, 2011). Although Dewey is not a representative of critical pedagogy, many critical pedagogues such as Maxine Greene (Goldman, 2010; Slattery & Dees, 1998) draw from Dewey. So even though Dewey and critical pedagogues cannot be equated, they are linked. Hence, Dewey is included in this comparison along with critical pedagogy educators due to his influence on critical pedagogy in education. Dewey’s conception of a democratic society is central to the basis and goal of education. For Dewey, a democratic society is a diverse one that has a type of education which provides the opportunity for all to develop their distinctive interests and capacities. Democracy is a dynamic process of daily active and equitable participation that include all spheres of life (Palmer, Bresler, & Cooper, 2001) and involves communication of experiences across gender, race, class, etc. (Dewey, 1916/1966). Dewey advocates progressive education against a traditional form of education that transfers information and skills to students (Dewey, 1938/1997). In traditional education, learning is “acquisition of what already is incorporated in books and in the heads of the elders” (Dewey, 1938/1997, p. 10). Progressive education, however, promotes a more student-centered approach to education that cares about a child’s own instinct and powers (Dewey, 1897). Dewey prefers a cooperative learning relationship between teachers and students with teachers as facilitators who encourage students’ participation through discussion and group work. For Dewey, education is the key to intellectual development as well as social progress.

Many other contributors to the growth of critical perspectives on education include William F. Pinar, Henry Giroux, Jean Anyon, Peter McLaren, Michael W. Apple, Carmen Luke, Elizabeth Ellsworth and others. Despite its various influences and multiple meanings, the basic goal of critical pedagogy is to use education as a means to bring about a more socially just world (Kanpol, 1999; Kessing-Styles, 2003; Kincheloe, 2004). According to Bercaw and Stooksberry (2004), there are three tenets inherent in critical pedagogy: “(a) reflection upon the individual’s culture or lived experience, (b) development of voice through a critical look at one’s world and society, which takes place in dialogue with others, and (c) transforming the society toward equality for all citizens through active

participation in democratic imperatives” (p. 2).

Method

As the basis for this study, literature was reviewed in fields including critical pedagogy, Confucian classics, and current literature on Confucianism. The primary method for exploring the subject areas and topics for this study was an extensive literature review and analysis. Both literature published in English and Chinese have been utilized. The author conducted searches through databases in education and philosophy (Education Full Text, Education Research Complete, and China Academic Journal Network Publishing Database in Chinese). The author also conducted a review of the *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, the *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, the *Journal of the Philosophy of Education*, the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, *Frontiers of Education in China*, and *Teaching and Teacher Education*. The following key words were used alone and in various combinations: Confucian education, Confucianism, Confucian values, Confucius, Paulo Freire, John Dewey, critical pedagogy, educational action research, action research, cross-cultural, culture, cultural values, self-reflection, and cooperative inquiry. Based on the search, the author reviewed 22 articles and eight books on Confucianism and education, nine articles and one book on critical pedagogy, six articles and seven books on Paulo Freire and John Dewey, four articles and two book chapters on education philosophies. In this paper, the author will first let Confucius have his say by quoting his words from the *Analects of Confucius* and then reengage his concepts through discussion of similar ideas in critical pedagogy.

Findings and Discussion

Through review and analysis regarding the *Analects of Confucius* (2007) and literature in critical pedagogy, interwoven themes between the two are discovered and elaborated below. The findings of this paper suggest that there are four major common themes shared by Confucius and theorists in critical pedagogy. They are reflective teaching and learning, cooperative inquiry, integration of theory and practice, and the ultimate goal of education as social transformation. In the following, the author will first let Confucius have his say by quoting his words from the *Analects of Confucius* and then reengage his notion through discussion of similar ideas in critical pedagogy. For citation, the first digit following is for the chapter while the last indicates the number of the conversation in the chapter.

Integration of Theory and Practice

“Learning without thought is pointless. Thought without learning is dangerous” (*Analects of Confucius*, 2007, 2.15). Rote learning and memorization of texts is not real learning. Real learning, according to Confucius, is situational learning in which students have to adapt and extend their learning to illuminate their lived experiences. Thinking in the quote above is to raise questions towards surroundings and to link with one’s lived experiences. Confucius expected students to be critical thinkers of learning by examining textual information in relation with reality. Because learning is reflective and involves critical engagement with meanings in tradition, this then guides learners’ action in current circumstances (Elliot & Tsai, 2008). The quote above illustrates the importance of critical and reflective learning. However, learning does not stop as the purpose of informing action. It goes further by linking theory and cultural legacy to practice and achieves an outcome only through action. The following will present how Confucius’ learning promotes the integration of theory and practice.

Confucius taught six arts, namely, ritual, music, archery, charioteering, classics, and mathematics. His instruction put heavy emphasis on classic literature, history, and poetry, but he also stressed the importance of connecting textual information with lived experiences. He took students with him to neighboring states with the purpose of promoting his philosophy while enriching students’ knowledge and intelligence. During the trips, he provided students with opportunities to link textual knowledge with that in reality by exposing students to social problems and encouraging them to reflect on and debate about the issues. He also encouraged students to serve the government if they excelled in learning, and to continue studying when they become officials. Because he believed that theory can inform practice and practice drives the learning of theory. His way of teaching indicates that learning is acquired through both classic readings and social practice. The latter is significant to learning because it enhances or challenges students’ understanding of texts and can generate new knowledge and theory.

Confucius taught through examples of reality by questioning and by conversations with students (Ng, 2000). He asked questions and expected students to find their own answers.

If they’re not eager to learn, I don’t enlighten them; if they’re not struggling to put it into words, I don’t assist them. I hold up one corner to show them, and if they can’t come back with the other three, then I don’t go on. (*Analects of Confucius*, 2007, 7.8)

He wanted students to be active and motivated learners who can think and

understand not merely memorize facts. Kim (2003) argues that from the perspective of Confucius, materials of knowledge come from two sources: One is first-hand experience that includes observations and experiences in life or indirect sources through reading of classics and the wisdom of others; the second is reflection on the materials of knowledge collected and reflected on by oneself. So what is crucial to learning is first the ability to link one's textual knowledge with lived experience and observations. However, Confucius' conception of truth is not merely acquisition of theory and practice, it is "something achieved rather than recognized" (Hall & Ames, 1987, p. 56), which refers to the ability "to enact and make real what one says." Learning dissolves the boundary between theory and practice (Elliott & Tsai, 2008). To summarize, Confucius way of teaching illustrates the idea that "to learn is to practice and to study is to do it" (Yao, 2006, p. 93).

Similarly in critical pedagogy, Freire encouraged students to recognize the connections between their individual experiences and larger social reality. He even believed that students should be taught how to relate their learning experience with practice (2000). He wrote: "the act of study is an attitude towards the world, the act of study cannot be reduced to the relationship of a reader to a book or reader to text... one who studies should never stop being curious about other people and reality. There are those who ask, those who try to find answers and those who keep on searching" (1985, pp. 2-3). This speaks to situational learning of Confucius who promotes integration of theory and practice for real learning. For Dewey, it becomes teachers' responsibility to provides opportunities for students to identify problems that interest them and help them see their connection to the larger society (Breault, 2003). In this way, students learn the connections between classroom, local and national social problems (Beyer, 1988).

The dialogical approach to education promoted by Freire also resembles the pedagogy of examples and conversations from Confucius. In challenging the banking concept of education, Freire proposed problem-posing education in which students and teachers engage in dialogue with one another to understand and create knowledge (2000). Furthermore, when teachers present learning materials to students, students are supposed to connect them with problems relating to their own experience and the world. Students' ability of comprehension and critical analysis of knowledge tend to grow as they practice more, along with the development of new understanding and breadth of knowledge. Eventually students are expected to be more committed learners.

However, recognition of praxis, theory and practice and their linkage does not define full learning. In critical pedagogy, it is equally important for students to translate their experiences into concrete actions. Freire pointed out that studying is a difficult task that requires a systematic critical attitude and intellectual

discipline acquired only through practice (1985, p. 2). On the contrary, failure to take action or address problems in reality cannot provide students with authentic learning in Freire's view (Giroux, 1988). In this regard, both Confucius and critical educators agree with the idea that "knowledge is only fully achieved in action" (Elliott & Tsai, 2008, p. 572).

Teachers as Learners

"Among any three people, there must be one who can be my teacher. I will select their good qualities and follow them, their bad qualities and avoid them" (*Analects of Confucius*, 2007, 7.22). It is surprising to see a "musty scholar" (Ng, 2000, p. 312) who emphasized so much a commitment to roles and compliance with ritual propriety in a feudal society break rules and hierarchical standards to ask questions and seek knowledge from his inferiors. For Confucius, one who wants to achieve full understanding of the world has to seek for knowledge from the young and less sophisticated and acknowledge the contribution of each member of the learning community (Ng, 2000). Regardless of the role as a teacher or a student, no one can understand every single piece of knowledge, instead people learn from each other. Teaching is not a unilateral process with the teacher in the dominant role passing on knowledge to the students, but an interactive and mutual learning process. In the process, teachers need to reconsider the materials presented to students and adjust their previous understanding of the knowledge and their pedagogy through feedbacks from students. Teachers become engaged as learners when extending and adapting the knowledge presented to their students as objects of teaching (Elliott & Tsai, 2008). Teachers not only help others learn, but also improve themselves by teaching others (Shim, 2008). Obviously, the traditional image of Confucius as a representative of rote learning and of the authoritative role of teacher does not accurately describe the real Confucius in teaching and learning (Hall & Ames, 1987).

Confucius' stance towards teaching and learning indicates his love for knowledge as well as his openness to learning. He was so obsessed with learning that he forgot eating and his age (*Analects of Confucius*, 2007, 7.18). In discussing teachers switching their roles between a mentor and a learner, Ng (2000) writes, "one needs to do so with humility and openness, yet with confidence and conviction" (p. 317) so as to meet students' particular needs. This statement reflects Confucius' attitudes towards learning. His open-mindedness is not only represented in learning from his students but the attitude of humility by acknowledging the limits to his knowledge, a self-acknowledgement possible through reflection and examination. "To know what you know and know what you do not know is the characteristic of one who really knows" (*Analects of*

Confucius, 2007, 2.17).

To adopt the stance of a learner, a teacher should be open and humble by learning from his/her students. In addition, teachers should care for their students by understanding and acknowledging their gifts and needs and thus be able to see the world from their perspectives (Belenky et al., 1986; Edwards & Richards, 2002). This perspective-taking of teachers is reflected in Confucius' pedagogical approach of teaching according to each one's gifts and needs. Because first it requires the capacity for the teachers to learn and observe their students with the purpose of finding out their special characteristics and from there to adjust their teaching pedagogy based on students' needs. Furthermore, teachers as learners can be interpreted as a stance towards students, that is, a way for teachers to see the world through learners' perspectives, which would allow teachers to help students learn by assisting students to make connections with their own experiences. Employing this teaching pedagogy is a recognition of students' diversity, which comes from Confucius' care towards students and their growth. It is also based on the faith towards his students that they can learn well and achieve positive change in society.

Learning from others, irrespective of people's status is grounded in the belief that knowledge exists in each individual. This connects with the idea of talents and knowledge in common people and of "active participants" (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006, p.121) in critical pedagogy. It is a respect for people's knowledge and their ability to understand and address the problems confronting them. Critical pedagogy also has a shared understanding towards mutual and dialogical processes between teachers and students. Freire's dialogical approach emphasizes the interaction between teachers and students and their joint contribution to knowledge. It requires an active participation of teachers and students to produce knowledge through meaningful dialogue through which both teacher and student teach and learn simultaneously (Evans, 2008). In Freire's own words, students are "critical co-investigators" in dialogue with the teacher (1970, p. 81). Teachers are no longer the only one who teaches, but are also taught in dialogue with students. As teachers present knowledge materials to students, they need to reconsider their earlier considerations after students express their own. Teacher and student become "a friendly co-partner and guide in common enterprise" (Dewey, 1934/2009, p. 10) and "jointly responsible for a process in which [they] all grow" (Freire, 2000, p. 80).

Just as the attitudes developed in Confucius' stance on learning with students, according to Freire (2000), the dialogue between teachers and students call for humility from each side. Without humility, dialogue does not exist. Furthermore, it requires love for people, faith in humankind and hope for justice and humanization of the world. Students and teacher involved in the dialogue are also supposed to have critical thinking so that they can understand the reality that

needs to be changed and transformed to a better world. These attitudes and qualities are required in cooperative inquiry between teachers and learners, yet they are also generated in this co-partnership. With the attitudes of love, faith, humility, and the capability of critical thinking, one can have a better understanding of reality and see the need for action. Confucius shared the same understanding towards the purpose of these emotions. The open-mindedness, humility and love for knowledge and for his students all helped him clear the barrier to knowledge and learning. If everyone is able to be open, humble, and full of love for people and society, then eventually we will be able to achieve a harmonious society.

Reflection

Each day I examine myself on three matters. In making plans for others, am I being loyal to them? In my dealings with friends, am I being trustworthy? Am I passing on to others what I have not carefully thought about myself? (*Analects of Confucius*, 2007, 1.4)

For Confucius, reflection is essential to relationships, either with friends, students, or colleagues. In this quote, reflection defined by Confucius turns inward. This self-reflection involves examination on everyday events and of one's consideration of his behavior and attitudes related with daily events (Wang, 2000). It is not to examine what others do to you, but what you do to others. It applies to all human beings that in our daily life or profession that we should reflect on own practice and understand what we are doing before we approach others. Furthermore, reflective learning does not only indicate self-reflection on one's own action, but also an examination and comparison with other's behaviors (Woods & Lamond, 2011). "When you see a virtuous person, try to be like him. When you see someone who lacks virtue, reflect upon your own lack of virtue" (*Analects of Confucius*, 2007, 4.17). Thus, self-reflection is not only on oneself, but is "relational and emphasizes moral and social dimensions" (Kim, 2000, p. 116). For Confucius, it is important to constantly reflect on and examine one's behavior as well as others' in order to monitor one's growth and take corresponding actions.

However, self-reflection is not only for ethical practice, but also to understand one's knowledge, capabilities, and bias. Such reflective thinking, according to Kim (2003), is "the cognitive foundation of humility, open-mindedness fairness and autonomous thinking" (p. 84). The following quote exemplifies the relationship between reflection (self-knowledge) and humility. "If day by day one is aware of what one lacks, but month by month never forgets what one is capable of, one may definitely be said to be fond of learning" (*Analects of Confucius*, 2007, 19.5). It is the self-reflection and knowledge of oneself that

fosters humility. Additionally, for Confucius, the act of reflection which has been constantly reiterated in the *Analects* is one of the abilities needed to be a wise person. It calls for learners to examine and reflect on “materials of knowledge” (Kim, 2003, p. 82) to find out the underlying rules and fundamental structures. Learning itself demands critical reflection of knowledge for guidance of proper action (Elliott & Tsai, 2008). Reflection is closely associated with learning as it is also acquired through learning and built towards learning. The ultimate purpose of reflection is to learn and eventually achieve self-transformation (Kim, 2003). And the learning in the process is knowledge of both wisdom and virtues. This reflective learning is a constant process without end.

Reflection is one of the key propositions of critical perspective on education (Evans, 2008). It is believed that every individual should reflect on his or her beliefs, assumptions and behaviors for the purpose of developing their voices and thus engaging in actions to promote social justice (Rodgers, 2002). Specifically to teachers, it refers to reflection on self, teaching practices, and professional endeavors in order to influence positively students’ learning experiences. “Teaching must be guided by a continuous examination of fundamental beliefs, experiences, and knowledge, a critical discourse” (Evans, 2008, p. 18). This connects with Confucius’ call for self-reflection on oneself in order to understand one’s knowledge, capabilities, bias, and limits. Reflective teaching and learning is required for both teachers and students in order to expand their knowledge towards subjects and their understanding of the world. The other purpose is to establish a type of relationship between teachers and students so that they can subject their fundamental beliefs to the scrutiny of one another and be open-minded to mutual learning (Newmann, 1985). Although reflection is not perceived and emphasized as an ethical practice in critical pedagogy, the act itself still fosters the development of humility and open-mindedness, similar to the second aspect of reflection, reflection on knowledge advocated by Confucius. Similarly, Dewey thinks that people should have the attitudes of whole-heartedness, directness, open-mindedness, and responsibility (Rodgers, 2002).

Liberatory education from Freire focuses on the development of critical consciousness (critical understanding of reality), which is the first step of praxis configured as an ongoing reflective approach to taking action. Praxis involves engaging in an iterative cycle of reflection and action, and reflection itself is also an action (Freire, 1970). Reflection for Dewey is not an end itself, but also an ongoing process from practice to theory and theory to practice (Rodgers, 2002). In action research, a methodology deeply influenced by John Dewey, Paulo Freire and other critical theorists in education, the act of reflection is part of a cycle of planning, action, monitoring, and reflection (Waters-Adams, 2006). According to Coghlan and Brannick (2005), learning is a continuous cycle through life and reflection is one of the activities (experiencing, reflection,

interpretation, and taking action) for learning. It involves thinking about and critically analyzing one's actions with the goal of improving professional practice. Engaging in reflective practice requires individuals to assume the perspective of an external observer in order to identify the assumptions and feelings underlying their practice and then to speculate about how these assumptions and feelings affect practice (Bashyal, 2007). Reflective practice is a mode that "links thought and action" (Bashyal, 2007, p. 25). On the one hand, in reflective practice, practitioners continually reinterpret their beliefs and values in the process of reflection "in" and "on" action (O'Hanlon, 1994). On the other hand, reflection is built towards action because reflection is a personal activity, thus no one can see it until they take an action (O'Hanlon, 1994). Reflection is a skill required for action researchers (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005).

Social Transformation

"A man of humanity establishes others in seeking to establish himself and promotes others in seeking to get there himself. Being able to recognize oneself in others, one is on the way to being humane" (*Analects of Confucius*, 2007, 6.30). Education for Confucius is character building. If a person is not honest and trustworthy, what good is he? (*Analects of Confucius*, 2007, 2.22) The aim of education is to help people cultivate themselves and build their characters. "*Analects*" demonstrates that Confucius' teaching practiced rituals, read poems, played music, studied mathematics, archery, charioteering and calligraphy, all together six arts. In addition to intellectual education, moral education played a significant role in Confucius' theories and practice in education (Shen, 2001). In the *Analects of Confucius* virtues covered include *ren* (human kindness, benevolence, goodness), *li* (ritual, propriety), *yi* (righteousness), *zhong* (loyalty), *xiao* (filial piety), *zhi* (knowledge, know) and *xin* (trustworthiness, sincerity, faithfulness, and authenticity) (Rosemont, 1986). A *junzi* is a person of kindness and of ritual propriety, of righteousness and all the other virtues mentioned in the book. The purpose of learning is to acquire all the virtues and to become an enlightened or educated person. It is the most important path towards perfection (Yao, 2006) and central to building a strong society (Cooney, Cross, & Trunk, 1993).

To love humanness without loving learning is liable to foolishness, to love intelligence without loving learning is liable to deviation from the right path. To love faithfulness without loving learning is liable to harmful behavior. To love straightforwardness without loving learning is liable to intolerance... (*Analects of Confucius*, 2007, 17.8)

Ren manifested in many aspects of our lives is considered the supreme virtue and the total of all virtues (Shen, 2001; Sim, 2009). Confucius also emphasized

the importance of *ren* in governing for he believed “if the person himself is correct, then although you do not order him to do so, he will act” (*Analects of Confucius*, 2007, 12.17). For Confucius, virtues start from self-cultivation. *Ren* is an existential goal which Confucius attempts to achieve for himself through his own self-cultivation. Teaching of virtues is based on Confucius’ belief that virtues are teachable (Yao, 2006). As human beings are “interrelational” (Cooney, Cross, & Trunk, 1993, p. 36) and stand in interdependence with the social context (Roetz, 1993) the virtues of one person can reach and influence others. A *junzi* as a truly cultivated and disciplined person, helps others develop virtues and improve themselves while seeking to improve himself or herself. Students are required to extend their knowledge and virtue to others and to the world, and by this extension to help bring about peace and harmony in society (Yao, 2006). A Confucian self-cultivates the self “not only to become fully human, but also to create a harmonious and peaceful society with the Confucian concept of human-relatedness” (Ryu, 2010, p. 19). Therefore, learning starts with transformation within oneself and ends with large scale social change.

An equivalent to Confucius in this regard is John Dewey who shared with Confucius a similar understanding towards the importance of moral education for individual development and the importance of social relations for moral education. Dewey made a strong case for the importance of schooling not only to obtain intellectual knowledge, but also to learn to live a proper social life which is the essence of moral training (Dewey, 1897). In his eyes, the teacher should not simply transfer information and skills to students, but rather engage students in such a way that they realize their full potentials and gain the ability to use those skills for the greater good (Dewey, 1897).

Consistent with the ultimate goal of Confucian education, both Dewey (1916/1966) and Freire (1985, 1998) believed that the ultimate goal of education was to attain a just and democratic society. Education is instrumental and the key to a person’s intellectual development as well as to social progress. Freire believed that human beings are all active participants in society, seeking for transformation to a better life and better social conditions. The role of educators thus is to engage with people in their lived realities and so transforming them. Teachers are “transformative intellectuals” (Giroux, 1985, p. 35), critically analyzing and resisting dominant pedagogies and ideology, constructing and engaging in participatory discussion and collaborative learning with students. Rooted in critical theory which focuses on emancipation, empowerment, and social change, critical pedagogy promotes the view that schools are the ideal sites to promote social change. Instead of being knowledge transmitters, teachers should be education reformers themselves, committed to freedom and democracy and collective political action along with students.

Critical pedagogy acknowledges the same path from self-development to

social change, a ground up rather than a top down approach. Just like Confucius, Dewey too emphasized social relations and held that we are social creatures entwined with in a web of relations with family members, friends, students, and others. Dewey believes that a cultivated self is an expanded self who identifies his own good with the well-being of others, and a cultivated self promotes the good of others (Sim, 2009). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire stated that the starting point for movement (towards individual perfection) is people themselves. It begins with the “human-world relationship” (2000, p. 85) as human beings are relational and part of the world.

A global picture here is that both for critical educators and Confucius, the common goal of education is towards social justice. Critical educators examine the existing dominant discourse and structure; Confucius encouraged his students to go out and serve the government once they had established a good character. All in all, it is to reiterate that school is not simply an ivory tower storing and passing down wisdom from our ancestors, but a democratic public sphere (Giroux, 1985, p. 38) in which teachers and students are political subjects who are committed to freedom and democracy and collective political action. Society would benefit to have such educators as Dewey, Freire, and Confucius, acting both as academics and practitioners to work actively with students by guiding them on how to relate school work with a larger social picture, and take corresponding measures against injustice through reflective and collaborative acts.

Differences

Although Confucius and critical educators share many commonalities, it has to be admitted that there are fundamental sociocultural differences between the educational philosophies of Confucius and critical pedagogy. First and foremost, the understanding and definition of democracy differ due to differences in social context. The idea of social justice and equity in Confucius is grounded on a democracy focusing on individual obligation, whereas critical pedagogy is rooted in the achievement of human rights rather than obligations towards society. Confucius promotes social justice and equity that was modeled on individual morality and virtuous people who could be examples to others and bring good to the world. He looked for a society of harmony and peace with a virtuous leader and self-cultivated people. Critical educators, however, envision democracy as a democratic form of government that allows for great diversity of interests and free interactions among social groups based on equality (Sim, 2009).

Due to distinct understandings of democracy, the approaches to and contents of social transformation as well as the focus of education differ. In a warring period of dangerous chaos, the goal of Confucius was to teach the people of

China how to find the way—the ethical way that could take the country back to the good old days when China was a stable, civil, unified, and virtuous community (Reid, 2000). Education is used as the means to bring about a peaceful and civil world. It is through self-cultivation and internal transformation that external transformation and social harmony are achieved. It starts with the internal transformation of individuals and extends to larger social transformation. This path of character-building and transformation within oneself is an indirect way to achieve social transformation (Shim, 2008). The eventual social change is not merely a gradual transformation of the existing society but a radical one (Tu, 1979), “oriented toward the peaceful but fundamental transformation of this world” (p. 285).

For critical educators, social transformation is to change oppressive social conditions and to create a more egalitarian society. Through critical consciousness and collective reflection/action (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006), Freire encourages people to question their own existence, to feel in control of their own words via critical reflection, and finally to transform the material and social conditions of their existence (p. 122). Through Freire’s observation, he finds that human beings become dehumanized through oppression and unjust treatment. People cannot be fully themselves with restrictions on their freedom. They cannot think, act, or communicate well if their needs and aspirations are restricted due to socioeconomic discrimination and other unequal factors (Shim, 2008). People should liberate themselves from the conditions of oppression in order to become more human. The purpose of education, therefore, is to promote liberation and overthrow oppression, and the first step towards achieving this goal is a critical discovery of the oppressive social conditions (Freire, 1970).

Such a fundamental distinction results in thoughtful reflection on ethics for individuals in the Confucian World and critical consciousness of rights and social status in that of critical theory. With respect to reflection, critical educators echo Confucius on the purpose of reflection as a way to learn and eventually to take action. Reflection on oneself and one’s practices is to understand one’s knowledge, capabilities, biases, and limitations. One learns through self-reflection and thus takes proper actions accordingly. Both critical educators and Confucius agree that self-reflection fosters positive attitudes such as love, open-mindedness, and humility, which are also required in reflection. Critical pedagogy also resonates with Confucius in the belief that reflection is a skill and scientific method for learning that goes on without end. The only difference lies in the lack of emphasis on ethical practice in critical pedagogy. Instead, it is more about critical consciousness and self-interrogation of hidden prejudices, narrow interests, and people’s own individual and group privileges rather than a moral examination towards virtues and adoption of an ethical life style.

The differences between Confucius and critical pedagogy in the understandings

of social justice and transformation and the act of reflection, to some extent, reflect the larger social environments of his age. On the one hand, his philosophy and principles are embedded within that particular social and cultural context. On the other hand, the larger social and cultural contexts is reflected in the concepts of critical theorists towards social transformation, justice and reflection which further influences how they perceive education or directly affects their educational thought. Therefore, although the purpose of this paper is to understand and interpret the educational thought of Confucius using critical pedagogy represented by Freire and drawing upon from Dewey, it is impossible to analyze and study these concepts without a consideration of the social and historical contexts in which they lived. This paper has positioned each of the figures within their sociocultural environment; however, it was not possible to provide a very detailed account of the historical contexts wherein Confucius, Dewey, and Freire developed their thought given the limitation on length.

Conclusion

This theoretical paper embodies a cross-cultural dialogue on global understanding in education by revisiting and comparing some classics. Despite the differences between Confucius and critical educators, due to vastly different social contexts, there exists a strong resemblance between the two in terms of integration of theory and practice, reflective teaching and learning, teachers as learners (mutual learning) and social transformation. By visiting Confucian quotes from the *Analects of Confucius* and engaging them with Dewey's and Freire's educational concepts, this paper presents an authentic image of Confucius as an educator. Following the arguments in the paper, for example, one can find that Confucius did not stand for memorization of textual information and rote learning. This association with Confucian learning, is actually a distortion of his thought (Hall & Ames, 1987). More importantly, this paper illustrates the common ground in educational philosophy shared by educators both in the East and the West, which implies the potential for cross-cultural dialogue. To summarize the main themes pinpointed in this paper, a diagram has been created (see Fig. 1).

Teachers as Learners (mutual learning): between teachers and students, there should be a collaborative partnership. Teaching and learning are a mutual process in which teachers sometimes can become engaged as learners and learners can be teachers. Reflection: This is as a skill required in teaching practice, requiring teachers to examine their knowledge, beliefs, experiences, and biases in teaching subject matters to students. Though not represented in the figure, reflective teaching and learning processes are needed by both teachers and students in order to expand their knowledge of subjects and understanding of the world. This

Fig. 1 I, thou, and it Triangle

Note. Adapted from “I, thou, and it,” by D. Hawkins, 2002. In D. Hawkins *The informed vision* (pp. 51–64). New York, NY: Algora Publishing.

reflective teaching and learning is a constant process without end. As the teaching/learning practice carries on, so does the reflection. Integration of theory and practice: Teachers are supposed to train and provide students with opportunities to link theory with practice through conversations and examples.

Students, on the other hand should be active and motivated learners who are eager to learn and associate textual learning with the world. In this situational learning which involves connecting individual experiences with larger social reality, the recognition of the connection is not enough for learning. Both Confucius and critical educators think it is equally important for students to translate their experiences into concrete actions. Cooperative inquiry, reflective teaching and learning, and linkage between theory and practice are deeply interrelated with each other.

Reflection is one of the key steps in integrating theory with practice. Linking theory and practice is best accomplished with collaborative efforts between teachers and students. Cooperative inquiry requires reflection from both teachers and students so that they are able to subject their knowledge and experiences to scrutiny of one another and thus foster their willingness to learn from each other. In this intertwined process there is a fixed first step and some procedures can happen simultaneously (2000). All in all, the ultimate goal of these steps in learning carries the mission of changing the world toward equity and justice. Though for Confucius, it starts with self-cultivation and character building, the soul of social transformation begins with internal transformation.

Through elaborating the common thought shared by Confucius and critical educators, the author hopes educators may find an engagement with the Confucius concepts and its implications for education and research fruitful. Just as Confucius reformed education of his time by insisting on “a creative return to

the classics” (Grange, 2004, p. 111), so does our response towards current educational reforms and policies nowadays may benefit from Confucian ideas. More importantly, educators from East and West should try to understand and learn from each other. Responding to Wang’s (2007) call for global understanding and exchange, we should all endeavor to create a genuine global community that is emotionally and intellectually sustainable, truly of one world. The paper concludes with a quotation from the *Analects of Confucius*, an ethical standard shared by all, “Zigong asked: Is there a single word that can guide a person’s conduct throughout life? Confucius said: What you do not want others to do to you, do not do to others” 己所不欲，勿施于人。(*Analects of Confucius*, 2007, 15.23).

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