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Preservation of Confucian Values in Early Childhood Education: A Study of Experts' and Educators' Views

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Abstract

Confucian values form the core of the Chinese culture, penetrating all levels of social life, and also set the standards for family, community and political behavior. The teaching of values is deemed to be an important aspect of young children's education and usually the responsibility for this is seen to rest with the family. Much interest has been generated recently on the teaching of core values in early childhood curriculum in order to encourage tolerance, acceptance, trust, openness, and honesty in children. Research on Confucianism is popularly conducted in different cultural contexts all over the world. Furthermore research has shown that Confucianism continues to exert a major influence on the everyday lives of Asian communities. Given the interest in Confucian values, this research study was designed to examine the expressed views of three cohorts of professionals in Hong Kong about the preservation of such values and their application to early childhood teaching. This study confirmed the view that there is a need to preserve cultural values to enable the child to be accepted in the society, especially with the value of 'Ren' helping one to learn how to interact with others and with the value of 'Li' further defining the appropriate behaviour in this interaction.

Keywords : early childhood, Chinese, Hong Kong, Confucian value, Confucius

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Introduction

The teaching of values is deemed to be an important aspect of young children's education and usually the responsibility for this is seen to rest with the family (Grusec & Davidov, 2007). However there is also the view that educational settings have an important role to play in teaching values. Jensen and Kiley (2000, p. 237) state that "schools that define core values such as tolerance, acceptance, trust, openness, and honesty as essential to their vision and mission often focus on the development of values and values education as key to their educational purpose". The increase in terrorist activity throughout the world and the difficulty in getting peoples to co-exist in peaceful ways have caused educators, policy makers and families to reassess values teaching (Wong, 2007). As a result of this perceived increasing intolerance, it was deemed important to conduct a research study which might give insights into how children could be encouraged to be more accepting and tolerant. The issue of Confucian valued emerged as a possible research area. It was thought that a study of Confucian values may assist children to understand that values are important and can help children to work and play in a tolerant and accepting way. In this regard they are also seen as important for teaching in early childhood education contexts.

Confucian values were developed by the Chinese philosopher, thinker, and educator Confucius (551-479 B.C.). These values can be regarded as the principles of Confucianism. Confucianism is not a religion; instead it is a set of guidelines for proper behaviour, and an ideology that underlies, pervades, and guides Chinese culture (Hofstede, 1991; Tu, 1998a; Yan & Sorenson, 2006).

The *Analects (Lunyu)* (Ames & Rosemont, 1998), also known as the *Analects of Confucius*, is commonly regarded as the representative work of Confucianism.

The *Analects* is a record of the words and acts of Confucius and his disciples, as well as the discussions and beliefs they held. It was written during the Spring and Autumn Period in the Warring States Period in China (479 B.C. - 221 B.C.). Confucian values are the teaching principles inside the *Analects*.

The Confucian values form the core of the Chinese culture. They penetrate all levels of social life, and also set standards for family, community and political behaviors. Within the present study, Confucianism is defined as a philosophy which is the basic starting point for

every individual to arrive at the state of perfect morality and is a teaching based on a moral code for human relations. Basically, Confucian values are centred on these five virtues:

Ren (Benevolence): a good act expresses and that brings people together

Yi (Righteousness): righteousness, morality, and faithfulness

Li (Courteousness): proper behavior and courtesy

Xiao (Filial piety): one's respect, love and reverence for parents/grandparents/elderly family members

Zhi (Wisdom): one's knowledge and their practical reasoning processes

Global and Local View

Globally speaking, Confucianism has influenced the values and behaviours of over 20% of the world's population (Yan & Sorenson, 2006). Research confirms that Confucianism still exerts significant influence on people's different activities nowadays, including: their social behaviors, attitudes, politics, education and economy (Dirlik, 1995, Dallmayr & Dee, 1993, Scarborough, 1998, pp. 20-21). Many families today want Confucian values to be a part of their child rearing practices and to have these positively influence the social values of their children (e.g., Kim, Park, Kwon, & Koo, 2005). Of relevance also is research by Lee (2008) that has shown a need for Confucian values to be incorporated into the curriculum in early childhood centers in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR).

Confucianism has been investigated in different cultural contexts all over the world, such as those in: the United States, Vietnam, Europe, Singapore, Korea, and Japan. In many Asian countries, Confucianism has also shaped the social interaction of people for more than 2,000 years.

Due to global migration and historical evolutions, Confucianism has spread its roots deeply in many Oriental countries, such as: Japan, Korea, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam and Malaysia (Figure 1), which continues to exert a major influence on the everyday lives of many Asian communities. This again includes the child rearing influences and views of parents when they seek to enrol their children in early childhood centres. Many parents want Chinese values upheld in the form of Confucianism (e.g. Goh, 2006).

Research on Confucianism is popularly conducted in different cultural contexts all over the world, such as those in:

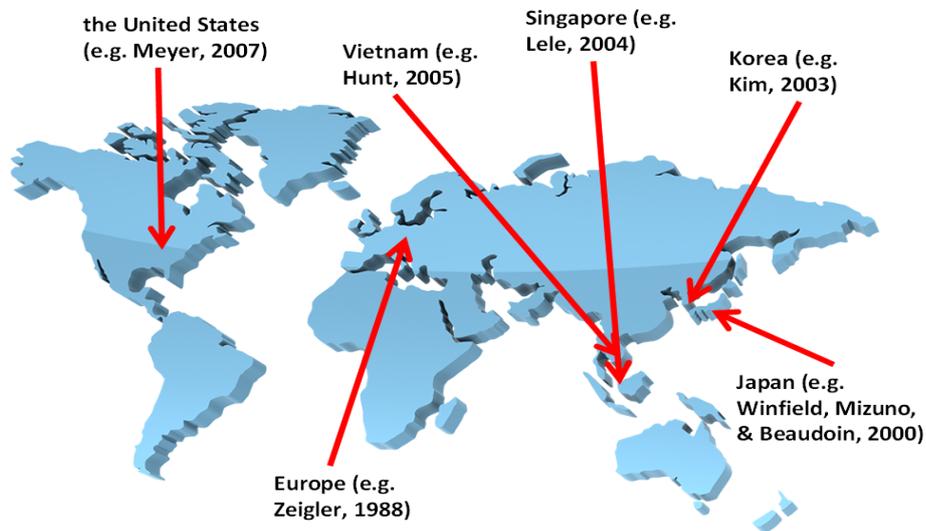


Figure 1. *Countries Conducting Research on Confucianism*

Locally speaking, as researchers in the Chinese context, we agree with Rarick's comment that "Confucianism remained a dominant social force in Chinese society for two thousand years". Even though the imperial system of governance no longer exists in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Confucian teaching was once eliminated, the ideals espoused by Confucius never left the Chinese people.

Confucius and Confucianism are undoubtedly highly significant historical figures and philosophies respectively. The 2,550th birthday of Confucius was celebrated in his hometown in September 1999, and for the first time in 50 years the government of PRC officially organized the celebration. Such events demonstrate the continuing vitality of the Confucian ideology. Research also confirmed that Confucianism has been reintroduced into the Chinese educational system, so that a number of Confucian Institutes have been established (Dallmayr & Dee, 1993, Burdette, 1942).

How does an understanding of Confucian values relate to early childhood education? In answering this question it is useful to note that education systems have been challenged to review values as part of the curriculum in both the East (e.g. Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum, Hong Kong) and the West (e.g. the South Australian Curriculum, Standards and

Accountability Framework). Specifically in Hong Kong, such a review of values as part of the curriculum was emphasized after 1 July 1997, when this Eastern region changed from a Western oriented one to one that is more akin to the traditional societies and cultures found in present day PRC.

The first Chief Executive of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (Tung, 1997) encouraged local people to learn and practice Chinese traditions as one of the lifelong values. The current pre-primary curriculum guidelines also encourage children to “develop national identity through an understanding of the Chinese culture” (Education and Manpower Bureau HKSAR, 2006, p. 34). Such a political change and curriculum reformation have caused educators and families to rethink the teaching of Confucian values developed by the Chinese philosopher, thinker, and educator Confucius (551-479 B.C.). The core and relevance of this policy noted above to early childhood is the teaching of values. The teaching of values is not limited to Hong Kong. In Singapore, for example, the Kindergarten Curriculum Guide (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 83) states that as one of the guiding principles to their aim in education is that “*Values should guide and provide purpose for one’s behaviours. Values are at the core because they provide the bearing for action, Enactment of actions without grounding in values would lead to inconsistency in purposes and actions*”. Given the interest in Confucian values and the importance more generally of values in relation to early childhood curriculum it was decided to devise a research study in early childhood education which focused specifically on identifying Confucian values (Lee, 2000).

Research Study

A need for the study was clearly demonstrated in that relatively few studies have been conducted on Confucian values in relation to early childhood. The outcomes of the study were expected to yield data on the teaching implications and identify the Confucian values that should be taught to young children.

The design of the research study was primarily a mixed methods design to gather data which examined the expressed views of three cohorts of professionals (see Figure 2) in Hong Kong on the preservation of Confucian values. The researchers decided that such a design yield rich and relevant source of data to answer the research questions (Torrance, 2010).

Individual interviews, focus group and questionnaire were used due to the accessibility of participants. Three major questions were investigated:

1. What Confucian values should be preserved or developed in young children in Hong Kong?
2. In what ways are Confucian values important to young children?
3. What Confucian values are usually seen practiced by children in kindergartens in Hong Kong?

Specifically the three cohorts were:

- five local experts on early childhood education and/or Confucianism – two were experts on Confucianism; three were experts on both early childhood education and Confucianism. All of them were interviewed individually.
- six early childhood teacher educators were invited to express their views in a focus group interview.
- 57 pre-service and in-service student-teacher participants whose data was collected in two ways. Firstly, all student-teachers were invited to fill in the pre-test questionnaire. Secondly, out of those 57 students, 14 of them (seven pre-service students and seven in-service students) volunteered to participate in one of the two pre-test focus groups (one for the pre-service cohort and one for the in-service cohort).

Table 1. *Sources of Data*

No	Cohort	Number of participants	Source of Data
1	Local experts on early childhood education and/or Confucianism	5	Individual interview
2	Teacher educators	6	Focus Group
3	Pre-service	7	Focus Group
		28	Questionnaire
	In-service	7	Focus Group
		29	Questionnaire

Results

Local Experts

Among the five local experts, a total of ten responses gained at individual interviews were recorded. The responses dealt with the Confucian values that are expected to be preserved or developed in local kindergartens in HKSAR. After coding, four categories of Confucian values emerged:

- 1) Ren
- 2) Li
- 3) Filial
- 4) Yi

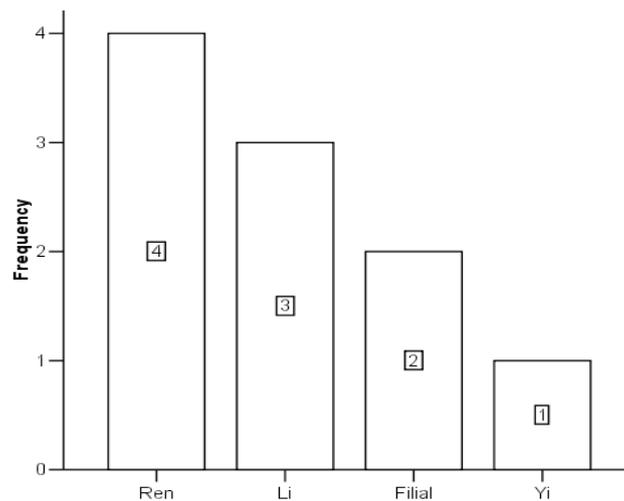


Figure3. *Frequency of Experts' Views on Confucian Values which Were Expected to be Presented in Local Kindergartens in Hong Kong*

The figures show that experts on both early childhood and Confucianism had a wider response to the variety of values expected for local young children than those experts on Confucianism only.

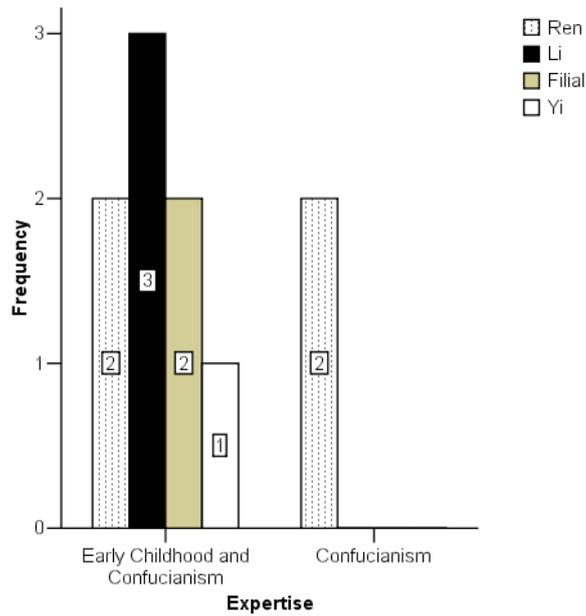


Figure 4. Experts' Expertise and the Frequency of their Views on Confucian Values which were Expected to be Presented in Local Kindergartens in Hong Kong

Ren

Confucianism experts tended to focus predominantly on the values of 'Ren'.

'Ren' was one of the most popular values mentioned by both cohorts of experts. They generally defined this value as love, care and/or positive relationship (or network) with people or objects. 'Ren' is expected to bring altruistic love. Also, experts generally agreed that this value is important for young children as it could be the seed for their future kindness. Therefore this value is expected to be carefully nurtured to maturity.

Here are three examples of experts' views on 'Ren'.

"...the nucleus of Confucian values is Ren. Ren is about love and the attitudes and manners in human relationships."

"...Adults should teach children to love and care for one another, an altruistic love."

“...Ren is the most important concept in Confucianism, and should be introduced first to young children. The word Ren means “good will” and the Chinese character of Ren (仁) means the relationship of two persons...Ren is life bearing. It is a seed that enables life to grow. With good will, a positive relationship will develop, and this will bring more kindness, love, experience and knowledge.”

Li

The value of ‘Li’ was the most popular value among experts, both early childhood and Confucianism. All of them consistently used the word ‘respect’ to define this value. They generally believed that ‘Li’ was expressed first through the attitude and manner of respect, courtesy and politeness. Also, they mentioned four basic traits of ‘Li’: 1) that which should come through appreciation and love; 2) it is about obedience to advice given by authority (in the case of children, this would be parents, teachers or family elders); 3) it is one’s responsibility to complete tasks initiated by them; and 4) it is one’s self restraint.

Here are examples of experts’ views on ‘Li’:

“...We should start by teaching Li, explaining to children why we should respect others, and then we could continue to teach love and filial together.”

“...The outward expression of Li is courtesy, politeness. These are all acts of Li...The root of filial is respect, and this comes from Li. This respect is the least one can do in filial, and is also the easiest to do, so Li always goes with filial.”

“...We encourage children to be responsible and to complete their task or whatever they have started to do.”

Teacher Educators

As noted earlier 6 teacher educators participated in the data collection process, and a total of 17 responses were recorded regarding this research question.

After coding, two major Confucian values were seen as important by them. They were: 1) Li and Ren. This finding is similar to the local experts’ views discussed.

Li

Among teacher educator participants, the value of 'Li' was the most popular value which was expected to be preserved or developed in local kindergartens in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). They defined this value as mannerism including behaviour such as respect, courtesy and responsibility.

Young children are expected to develop orderly behaviour at home, in the early childhood centres, and in the society. Orderly behaviour may include greeting others, tidying up and following instructions.

Here are two examples of teacher educators' views on 'Li'

"...Li is most often taught and is the most important value in kindergartens – children have to learn the daily routines, how to take care of themselves, greet teachers in the morning, farewell to parents and teachers, greet teachers and children before meals, thank the helpers and cooks in preparing their food."

"...Children have to learn how to behave at home, to love and respect their parents and their elders."

Ren

The value of 'Ren' was the second most popular value which was expected to be preserved or developed in local kindergartens in HKSAR.

The majority of responses emphasised the importance of young children's development of social relationships, such as making friends, sharing and caring.

Here are examples of teacher educators' views on 'Ren':

"...children have to be taught how to treat one another, how to be friends, how to be sympathetic to those who are not happy, how to share their toys with other children, how to show their love for others and animals."

"...They [children] have to learn how to make friends and this is very important for them in kindergartens and is useful for their social development and for their future relationship in the society...They should learn how to care for others and to be friends. This is important for their social

development.”

Student Teachers –Questionnaires

All 57 student teachers were able to name at least one Confucian values they expected to be preserved or developed in local kindergartens via questionnaire, resulting in a total of 137 responses. After coding, 4 categories of values emerged:

- 1) Li
- 2) Ren
- 3) Filial
- 4) Yi

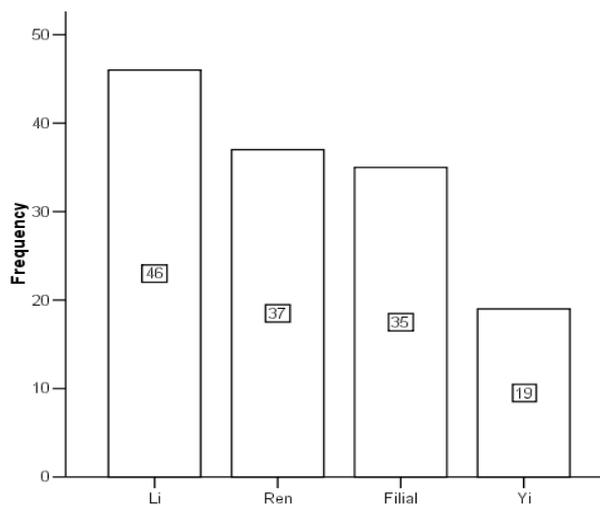


Figure 5. *Confucian Values Expected to be Presented in Kindergartens Expressed by Student-Teacher Participants*

This finding is consistent with the teacher educators' views and is similar to the experts' views which were presented earlier.

These figures further shows that different patterns of responses occurred between cohorts.

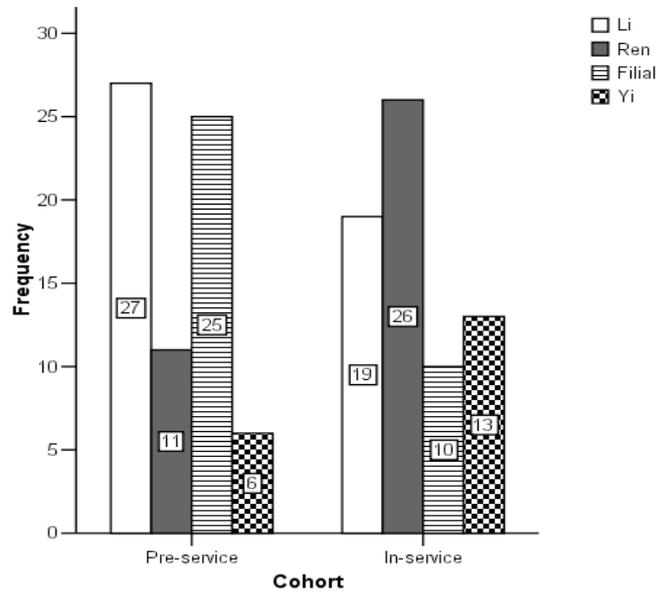


Figure 6. *Confucian Values Expected to be Preserved in Kindergartens Expressed by Pre-service and In-service Student-teacher Participants.*

Pre-service student-teacher participants stated that ‘Li’ would be the most important value to be preserved; while in-service student-teachers opted for ‘Ren’

Student Teachers – Focus Group

All 14 student-teacher participant was able to name at least one value which was expected to be preserved. Therefore, a total of 98 responses were recorded. After coding, four categories of Confucian values emerged:

- 1) Ren
- 2) Li
- 3) Filial
- 4) Yi

‘Ren’ was the most popular value expected to be preserved in the local kindergartens by

both cohorts. This finding is consistent with the experts' views, and is similar to the teacher educators' views and student-teachers' pre-test questionnaire responses presented earlier (Table 2).

Table 2. *Confucian Value Expected to be Preserved in the Local Kindergartens by Both Cohorts*

Student-teacher Cohort	Samples of responses of 'Ren'
Pre-service	<i>"... love myself and love others as oneself, to cherish and treasure what you have, to be generous, accepting and forgiving"</i>
	<i>"...Children should learn to be thankful, appreciative, and they will grow up to be happy people"</i>
	<i>"...these are basic principles that guide one's behaviour, and we hope that children's growth will be healthy and complete and this will be a good foundation"</i>
In-service	<i>"...This will make the society more harmonious and will have lesser conflicts. Children will know how to live together, and accept the same social norms and standards so that they will become socially acceptable persons"</i>
	<i>"...Children should learn the appropriate behaviour for treating others, and do loving, merciful and good deeds"</i>
	<i>"... if every child has love and compassion, feels for and understands others, many problems may be solved"</i>

Table 3. *The First and the Second Most important Confucian Values that Were Mentioned by Each Participant Cohort and Their Relevant Sources of Data.*

Cohort	Source of data	1 st most important value	2 nd most important value
Experts	Individual interview	Ren	Li
Teacher educators	Focus group	Li	Ren
Student-teachers	Questionnaire	Li	Ren
	Focus group	Ren	Li

Table 3 summarizes the first and the second most important values that were mentioned by each cohort and their relevant sources of data. Results show the consistency and similarity found between all three cohorts of professionals.

‘Ren’ and ‘Li’ indicated by all professionals to be the two Confucian values that are expected to be preserved or developed in kindergartens in HKSAR.

The views of the experts and the pre-test focus groups agreed, with ‘Ren’ being the first most important value and followed by ‘Li’. The views of the teacher educators’ focus group and the pre-test questionnaires of the students were similar, with their choice of ‘Li’ being first and followed by ‘Ren’.

Discussion of the Results

The study confirmed the view that there is a need to preserve cultural values to enable the child to be accepted in the society, especially with the value of ‘Ren’ helping one to learn how to interact with others and with the value of ‘Li’ further defining the appropriate behaviour in this interaction. This is in keeping with the Confucian philosophy and as shown in the study results, still highly relevant today.

As discussed earlier, one of the popular views of the student-teachers was that Confucian values and customs, being positive and reflecting good moral values, would possibly bring forth harmony in society. This echoed explanations by modern Confucian scholars that “harmonious human relations” is one of the chief characteristics of the Confucian society (Dirlik, 1995, p. 246). Dirlik also emphasized “the collectivity against selfish desire”, and a “priority given to the group over individual interest, beginning with the family and extending to social life in general”.

Harmony is highly valued in both China (PRC) and in HKSAR. The premier of PRC, Wen Jiabao in his report to the National People’s Congress (2005), stated that the country has to “actively develop our society and foster social harmony” (Ho & Chan, 2007, p. 2), and this message was further reiterated by the Vice President (PRC) Zeng Qinghong to HKSAR that “harmony should be the basis of stability and prosperity” (Ho & Chan, 2007, p. 2). Subsequently, the Chief Executive of HKSAR, Donald Tsang laid out fostering social harmony as one of the three major objectives in his policy address in 2005 (Ho & Chan, 2007).

However, people in HKSAR, living in a prosperous cosmopolitan city, tend to put personal gains as a priority, ignoring the importance of mutual aid and trust, preventing the successful establishment of love and social harmony (Ho & Chan, 2007, p. 18). This calls for a need to

develop in young children this altruistic love as represented by the Confucian value of 'Ren'.

The student-teachers expressed the need for children to know their roots and be grateful for what they had. Gratefulness and appreciation calls for respect for the family and forefathers, and thus the emphasis on the value of 'Li' and 'Filial'. The source of oneself is the parents and grandparents, which is the genealogy of the family. The value of 'Li' further defines the manner of interacting within the relationships among our family members. Another meaning of roots described by student-teachers was the 'source of water', that is, the source which brings forth the Chinese culture, showing a recognition for history and ancient philosophies, and of how life and meaning evolved.

Conclusion

It is believed that the findings of this study are unique and highly relevant to the education sectors particularly for those countries where Confucianism remains a dominant philosophy. There are many issues which will arise as families strive to uphold Confucian values in modern day society.

The main characteristics of the modern age interpretation of Confucian values, according to Kahn and Bergy, (cited by Dirlik, 1995, p. 246) are the high evaluation of education, the priority of group over individual intentions and an emphasis on harmonious human relations. These characteristics bring forth a need for teachers to help young children learn and adapt the ancient values to the modern age, with an emphasis on 'Ren', 'Li' and 'Filial' values, starting from family and extending to others in the community.

In a world increasingly beset by violence as mentioned in the introduction to this paper the application of Confucian values is a welcome call back to the five virtues:

- 1) *Ren (Benevolence);*
- 2) *Yi (Righteousness);*
- 3) *Li (Courteousness);*
- 4) *Xiao (Filial piety); and*
- 5) *Zhi (Wisdom).*

It is proposed that an understanding of the values inherent in any culture is important for teachers of young children and many countries have Chinese children either as residents or immigrants therefore, understanding and accepting how their values may influence behaviour is important (Yim, Lee, Ebbeck, 2009). A relook at what Confucian values embody is indeed relevant today.

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