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# **The Implementation of Contemplative Education in the Assessment and Evaluation of Young Children Course**

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## The Implementation of Contemplative Education in the Assessment and Evaluation of Young Children Course

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### Abstract

The purposes of this action research were to study the process of implementing contemplative education in the Assessment and Evaluation of Young Children course and to investigate students' learning experiences in the awareness of self, others, and the profession. The research sample was 32 graduate students with a study duration of 16 weeks. Data was collected by using participatory observation, students' journal writing and final examination, as well as focus group interviews. Data was verified throughout the study by means of peer review with co-lecturer and triangulation in multiple data collection and then analyzed using content analysis. The research findings revealed that there were three main steps in implementing contemplative education as follows: 1) Planning: Course curriculum was designed based on contemplative education which comprised of four main components, namely (1) the course concepts focusing on three aspects of knowledge, (2) the course structure focusing on three contemplative education practices, (3) the course contents composed of early childhood assessment integrated with contemplative education, and (4) learning activities emphasizing three modes of learning. 2) Action: Lesson plans were designed. Then six steps of instruction were carried out, namely (1) setting the stage of serenity for learning readiness, (2) practicing the creation process through artistic work, (3) practicing contemplative observation, (4) learning the concepts of assessment, (5) sharing space through dialogue, and (6) self-reflection through journal writing. Finally, lesson plans were reviewed and adjusted. 3) Evaluation: Students' knowledge and competency in applying concepts of assessment and contemplative education were gathered and evaluated. After implementation, students reflected on their learning experiences as follows: (1) Awareness of self: Students' reflection showed evidence of clearer self-understanding, open-mindedness, self-appreciation, self-improvement, careful observation, optimism and happiness, being non-judgmental and effectively learning. (2) Awareness of others: Students' reflection showed evidence of understanding and acceptance of others, viewing things as they were, having sympathy for others, and valuing others. (3) Awareness of the profession: Students' reflection showed evidence of understanding children as they were, teaching in accordance with the nature of children, being aware of oneself, self-improving, caring for children, and valuing the teaching profession.

**Keywords:** contemplative education, early childhood, graduate students, learning experiences.

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## Introduction

Effective assessment equips the teacher in identifying the status and progress of children's development and learning, leading to appropriate decision making and planning of appropriate lessons to suit individual differences. Authentic assessment is the most appropriate appraisal for early childhood teachers, therefore, objective observation skills are necessary for them to learn and practice.

Duberley (2007) mentioned that early childhood teachers need to be conscious throughout the day working with young children. The most important quality is to have an openness towards what each child is expressing, to learn to observe objectively, and then to be open to let go of what might have been prepared if the behaviors of the children indicate a mismatch. Early childhood teachers are to act as a facilitator of the child's learning, not to teach by words, but to observe, look, and listen openly to each child. They not only need to know about child development and learning, but also need to develop their ability to observe contemplatively and to be open consciously to the children in order to respond according to their needs.

Baum and King (2006) pointed out that decision-making is key in becoming a teacher who is responsive to the needs of young children and who is able to make choices that are consistent with best practices. The foundation of good decision-making lies in helping early childhood teachers to develop a sense of self-awareness.

Taking this point into consideration, assessing young children's development and learning must be done without prejudice. Judgment based on incorrect information influenced by the subjectivity or bias of unconscious teachers results in mismatched responses to the actual needs of the children. Early childhood teachers should regularly practice the ability of noticing criticisms and judgments, being mindful, and letting go of automatic reactivity.

However, in the Thai context, many early childhood teachers spend more time developing lesson plans rather than assessing. They generally spend the last week of the semester assessing the whole class of 20-30 children without any systematic observation process.

Consequently, to avoid this problem and to enhance the assessment knowledge and competency of student teachers, teacher training institutes must play a vital role in developing alternative instructions to develop student teachers' characteristics to become gentle, sensitive, caring, and highly responsive teachers. To be able to do so, student teachers need to have awareness based on understanding of oneself, of others and of one's profession.

One interesting educational approach that concerns developing this awareness is contemplative education, the term introduced by Trungpa, the Tibetan Buddhist founder of Naropa University. This approach believes that knowledge can be constructed when learners embrace their inner mind and self awareness as a basis for learning. According to this approach, truth, goodness, and beauty cannot be conceived separately. The main purpose of this approach is to cultivate transformative learning, first from an individual then expand to the organization, and world-wide.

In the Thai context, Wasi (2003), a well-known and prominent philosopher, has introduced and promoted this idea to Thai educators for about the last ten years. He suggested that, "education should help students to understand themselves and uplift their spirits". Subsequently, this idea has been applied in many fields of education in Thailand.

In the field of early childhood education, contemplative education has been applied by Brown (1999) to educate undergraduates who called it "contemplative observation". This method synchronizes the observer with the learning environment; awakens and clarifies the sense perceptions, thoughts, and emotions; and develops knowledge and compassion. Contemplative observation is one method to open teachers to the sacredness of ordinary teaching and learning.

In addition, contemplative education has been implemented to train Thai educational administrators through the Contemplative Education Research and Development Center in the Faculty of Education, Chulalongkorn University. The project was titled "The Urgency of Ethics in the Higher Education System Project" run by the Office of the Education Council during April to September, 2008. The main purpose of this project was to make a paradigm of higher education shifting from the mainstream that focuses on professional knowledge, skills and attributes to focus on like self-consciousness, learning skills and values.



This training inspired the author, as a novice university lecturer, to make some changes to course designs. Consequently, action research was set to implement contemplative education in the course “Assessment and Evaluation of Young Children” to cultivate the non-judgmental assessment ability of early childhood student teachers, which then leads to self-consciousness, learning skills and values of teaching. Therefore, when they become teachers, they will be able to develop an optimum learning relationship with children and nurture young children according to their own needs.

To implement this idea, the meaning of contemplative education was taken to employ Panich (2007), a well known Thai contemplation practitioner and trainer, has described this term as the way of learning by heart with contemplation for cultivating self awareness. It involved three aspects of knowledge, namely academic, profession, and spiritual knowledge. To practice this contemplative education, there is the need to create a comfortable learning environment, provoke learners’ inner-self value and concern towards learners’ feelings. The three main learning processes of this practice are deep listening, contemplation, and meditation.

1) Deep listening is the process of listening by heart from a deep, receptive, and caring place in oneself, for deeper and often subtler levels of meaning and intention towards others. It also includes other perceptions such as reading, seeing, touching, etc.

2) Contemplation is the process continuing on from deep listening. It requires an individual’s space and time to contemplate what has been perceived.

3) Meditation is the process of observing the nature of the mind. Cultivating the wisdom of seeing the connection between oneself and the outer world.

## Methodology

The purposes of this action research are to study the process of implementing contemplative education in the Assessment and Evaluation of Young Children course for graduate students and to investigate students’ learning experiences in the awareness of self, of others, and of the profession.

The research questions are:

- (1) How was the contemplative education implemented in the Assessment and Evaluation of Young Children course?
- (2) What were the students' learning experiences in the awareness of self, of others, and of the profession?

The sample comprised 32 early childhood graduate students who registered for the Assessment and Evaluation of Young Children course. This course was a two-credit early childhood mandatory course in an early childhood program for graduate students. Class duration was 16 weeks, 2 hours per week.

Triangulation in multiple data collection was used to verify the validity of the data gained from focus group interviews with semi-structured questions, notes taken from classroom dialogue observations, and student's journal writing and final examination. Peer review was done regularly throughout the 16 weeks of implementation with a senior co-lecturer. The course curriculum and lesson plan for 16 weeks was designed by the researcher and a co-senior lecturer. Then lesson plans were reviewed and adjusted weekly to suit the learning nature of the students. Also, dialogues and journal writing were used for students to reflect on their learning experiences during the course.

After 16 weeks of implementation, the data on the students' learning experiences were collected again by means of semi-structured questions focused on the students' feelings towards learning atmosphere, learning obstacles, their preference activities or practices, their experiences gained from the lessons, and main concepts or key messages gained from the lecturers.

## Research findings

The research findings were reported in two parts according to each research question.

### Research question 1:

The process of implementing contemplative education consisted of three steps: planning, action, and evaluation.



1) Planning: The course curriculum was designed based on contemplative education which comprised of four main components, namely (1) the course concepts focusing on three aspects of knowledge, (2) the course structure focusing on three contemplative education practices, (3) the course contents composed of early childhood assessment integrated with contemplative education, and (4) learning activities emphasizing three modes of learning.

The course conceptual framework was developed based on contemplative education, the holistic development approach, and the concept of the assessment and evaluation of young children's development (see Figure 1).

2) Action: Lesson plans were designed. Then six steps of instruction were carried out, namely (1) setting the stage of serenity for learning readiness, (2) practicing the creation process through artistic work, (3) practicing contemplative observation, (4) learning the concepts of assessment, (5) sharing space through dialogue, and (6) self-reflection through journal writing. Finally, lesson plans were reviewed and adjusted.

When implementing the developed lesson plans in the classroom, a warm contemplative atmosphere needs to be created to make students feel comfortable to share without being judged. Three ways of learning including: doing, feeling, and thinking were included. Lesson plan review was done weekly.

The instruction of the Assessment and Evaluation of Young Children Course implementing contemplative education consists of various learning experiences which enhance learners' contemplation of their experiences.

The three modes of learning, doing–feeling–thinking, helped learners to apply the three kinds of knowledge learned in class to their daily lives. The main contemplative practice was contemplation. This is because it not only provokes learners to reflect upon their experiences through dialogue and journal writing, but it also brings about the “transcendence” of learning to students.

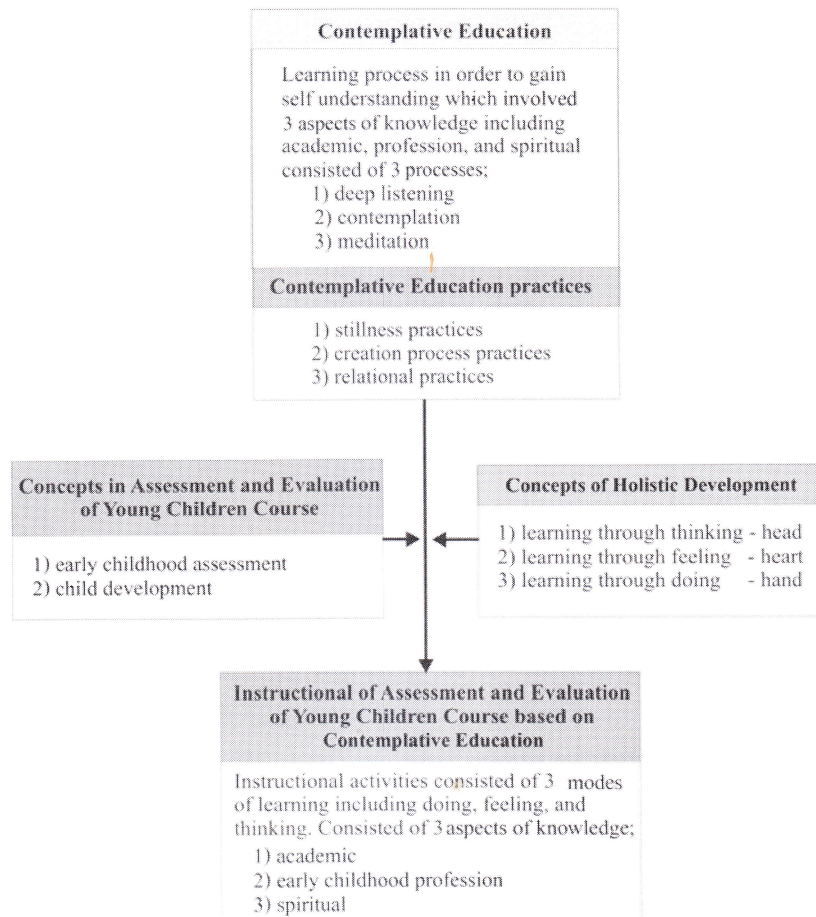


Figure 1. Course Conceptual Framework of the Assessment and Evaluation of Young Children Course

Messages of wisdom without rational thinking or “intuition” were intentionally sent to students in order to help them learn more about their self-awareness. Students learned with peaceful minds and acquired the relaxed, unexpected state of being. Intuition helped students to be able to understand the linkage between course contents and their application, then they could transfer their knowledge to their lives. When the more students could understand themselves, the better they could understand others. Consequently, they would value their profession more, and would try their best to develop themselves. Also they would view themselves and the world differently.



The rhythm of the session started with a spiritual part, an early childhood professional part, an academic part, and ended with a spiritual part. The period of each session was flexible according to the circumstances.

3) Evaluation: The students' knowledge and competency in applying the concepts of assessment and contemplative education were evaluated.

The students' knowledge and competency in applying the concept of assessment was evaluated by means of final examination, which consisted of two papers. Part one was a two-hour essay exam and part two was a take home exam. Students' journal writing was used to gather together the students' learning experiences to answer research question 2.

Research question 2:

Students reflected upon the learning atmosphere as a whole, describing it as relaxed, warm, open, pleasant, happy, challenging, even though it was rather stressful when they learned the concepts of assessment.

Regarding the many various activities in one session, the students reported that some lessons were rather rushed to clarify some concepts within the limitation of time. Contemplative education practices and activities were rather hard to follow and students were not familiar to them; consequently, some of them felt uncomfortable, skeptical, and doubted as they learned at the beginning. However, at the end of the term, all doubts and uncomfortable feelings disappeared while understanding and knowledge emerged unforced.

First, I felt like I was being forced to learn. After a few weeks, I felt like I was a sponge absorbing things. I gradually understood...this was an experience to talk with my friends about how good this course was as well as the dark side, how boring it was...

Student 29-Interview

First, I didn't understand and didn't see the connection between practices and the course content, but at the end of term, I just understood everything.

Student 4-Interview

Table 1. *Rhythm of the Session*

Area of learning	Step of instruction	Type of activities	Details of activities
Spiritual part (hand and heart)	<u>Step 1</u> Relaxing / creating serenity	stillness practice	Listening to music with guided meditation focusing on senses perception. Other mindful techniques were used such as pendulum, guessing game.
	<u>Step 2</u> Learning by creating art	creation process practice (artistic work)	Creating various artistic works such as form drawing, wet on wet painting, modeling.
Early childhood teacher professional part (head and heart)	<u>Step 3</u> Practicing contemplative observation	relational practice (observation practice)	Listening to contemplative observation concept and practicing contemplative observation of stones, rice, thumbs, and kindergarteners etc.
		creation process practice (storytelling)	Listening to stories, verse, and case studies.
Academic part (head)	<u>Step 4</u> Learning concepts of assessment	lecture	Listening to assessment concepts.
		lesson review	Reviewing the course's main concept.
Spiritual part (head)	<u>Step 5</u> Sharing space through dialogue	relational practice (dialogue)	Making dialogues on their selected issues and the end of each dialogue session in serenity.
		<u>Step 6</u> Self-reflection through journal writing	relational practice (Journal writing)



Students reflected that a peaceful mind could result in their tacit knowledge. It could be said that they could construct knowledge from the inside; however, the lecturer would be of no use if they couldn't make the linkage between their tacit knowledge and new knowledge. It was an understanding without apparent effort gained from doing various activities in the course. In the state of a peaceful mind or a tranquil, still state of mind, active learning arose. Insight and awareness were gained by acknowledgment and observation without judgment. When students were calm and mindful, their minds could truly sense their power of thought, without bias or falsification. These senses came to their mind automatically and unforced. The following are some examples of the students' reflections.

When my mind was peaceful, calm, and relaxed, I could perceive emotions, needs, including thoughts, by using the mind as a means to communicate.

Student 14-Journal

...being with myself and in a state of emptiness, my mind was astonishingly calm.

Student 11-Journal

"It was not an obvious way of teaching, gradually knowing by myself"

Student 31-Interview

"The lecturer didn't have to explain the concepts, the activities led us to reflect upon ourselves...the teacher's emotions also affect the child. It could be clearly seen what the children feel when facing the teacher's fury. I could understand this situation, this cause and effect from the activities was not from the teacher's talk."

Student 15-Interview

Gradually, students accumulated their experiences from the course's activities such as listening to storytelling or case study or practicing contemplative observation. The observations started with still objects such as stones to observe an unchanging object. Then they moved on to observe live objects such as rice-plants, thumbs, and young children. These activities helped the students to make linkages between their experiences and their deep understanding in assessing young children's development. They reflected that in the state of relaxation without pressure or force, answers to questions just came into their

minds spontaneously. These phenomenon didn't happen in classrooms but everywhere when they were relaxed and peaceful, for example, getting off a boat, washing their hair, observing a young child riding a bike, or gathering information for assignments. This "knowing" emerged at the end of the semester. What they knew was linked to what they learned in the classroom. Most of them had a new paradigm of seeing children. They did not perceive all children the same way as before but they saw children differently as individuals.

Students' learning experiences in the awareness of self, others, and profession can be summed up as follows:

1) Awareness of Self Course activities encouraged students to observe, review, reflect, explore, and assess themselves unintentionally. Students' reflection showed that their awareness of self brought about clearer self-understanding, non-judgmental attitudes, open-mindedness, self-appreciation, self-improvement, considerate observation, optimism and happiness, and effective learning.

"...I know that I always judge people and everything..."

I found that I am good at writing rather than speaking. I know myself, that I am an introvert, more observant and not a big mouth, but once I speak I truly mean it. I'm also a bit arrogant. This course taught me a lot about knowing myself"

Student 12-Interview

More aware of my emotions, I feel so lucky that I had the chance to study this course to help prevent my bad attitudes. Even though, I still get angry, sad, or think in a negative way, I understand the nature of the situation more.

Student 12-Journal

"(I should) be conscious of myself without any expectations. Also I should go with the flow and not pressure myself too much."

Student 20-Interview

This type of learning process encouraged me to observe myself more and try to figure out who I am through course activities. I discovered my weak points that needed to be improved.

Student 2-Journal



2) Awareness of Others Course activities guided students to learn more about themselves and encouraged them to understand themselves, which led to the awareness of others through understanding and accepting others, viewing things as they are, having sympathy for others, and valuing others.

"I learned to understand the way other persons are, and not judge others. I understand that each type of person is not the same, so that I have to learn to observe myself and others, and understand the differences.

Student 28-Interview

The non-judgmental mind leads to clearer thought; to see the truth of things.

Student 29-Journal

The consequences from this learning process were the understanding, empathy, and awareness of other people's lives. I understand the consequences from the actions and am being a more optimistic person.

Student 14-Journal

3) Awareness of the Profession Course activities that guided students to interconnect their learning experiences with their awareness of the early childhood profession were understanding children as they were, teaching in accordance with the nature of children, being aware of oneself, improving themselves, caring for children, and valuing the teaching profession.

Each activity aimed to help us practice being in the now, living with the truth...Regarding early childhood teachers, we have to see the child the way he is without using our own prejudice...we have to know and be aware of our thoughts and to practice how to see the child as he is without prejudice.

Student 29-Journal

...as an early childhood teacher, it is so wrong to think that every child is developing or learning the same way or equally. The teacher has to understand what the child needs as an individual.

Student 19-Journal

“Early childhood teacher is such an important person ... The teacher plays an important role in assessing young children. If he doesn't have self observation skills, the evaluation might not show the truth...The content in the textbook is not as important as self awareness. If we added some thoughts but not the facts of that thing, it's frightening”

Student 15-Interview

Before the teacher teaches, he should teach and know himself first. Self understanding, mindfulness, and wisdom bring the ability of understanding others and teaching without prejudice or bias.

Student 14-Journal

## Discussion

1. The outcomes of learning based on contemplative education generated unceasing knowledge and comprehension within the students, i.e. self-awareness, understanding of others, and principles of assessing young children.

The key to assessing a young child's development and learning is the ability to view and understand the true nature of children individually. In addition, the students' reflection showed that they had achieved the learning outcomes of contemplative practices, namely stress-lessening, calmness, self-understanding, understanding of others, and self-appreciation and valuing of others.

2. The learning outcomes of contemplative practices were productive for those in the early childhood teacher profession. This was because the course activities refined the students' characteristics to become mindful, conscious and considerate. Also, students had gotten the chance and space for contemplation or reflection upon their experiences in dealing with young children as teachers. They were encouraged to think about the early childhood teacher profession while doing course activities. Their reflections also revealed that they learned and constructed their knowledge and understanding from course activities, and not from the teacher's lectures.

3. One key component of contemplative education instruction is skillful lecturers or facilitators who understand this approach well. This is because this kind of instruction needs a mastery of contemplative education, a person who can master inner practices with a

good understanding of life, including a clear vision of instructional goals.

4. Not only students, but also the researcher, as a learner was transformed through these instructional processes. Short meditation at the very beginning of each session led to a neutral state of emotion and thought. Learners' minds were easily moved to a state of serenity without any effort, then they achieved the state of relaxation, enlightenment, serenity, and consciousness.

Realizing and being aware of all the sensory information perceived and conceived consciously helped me, as a researcher, to hold back the reactions towards these stimuli. Also, there was no emotional drive in these reactions. In addition, I could perceive my expectations, prejudices, and negative thoughts clearer. These perceptions inspired me to improve myself to become more compassionate.

Finally, I have found that the contemplative education challenged me, as a human being who is still struggling with passion, ignorance, and negative thought, to be compassionate, sympathetic, and empathetic towards everything.

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