Teaching Wisdom in *The Sound of Music* in the Perspective of Positive Psychology

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Abstract. *The Sound of Music* is one of the most well-known musical films in the world and Maria is the heroine. In the film, Maria becomes a governess of the seven children of Captain Georg von Trapp after leaving the Austrian convent. With her teaching wisdom, she wins the children’s trust, respect and love. This paper analyzes the teaching wisdom reflected in this film in the perspective of positive psychology, such as how to develop students’ positive emotion and potentials, how to encourage their positive traits to meet with new challenges, how to resist frustration, how to build a harmonious relationship with students to construct a positive institution, and how to teach students more effectively, etc., teachers can benefit a lot from this film.

Introduction

*The Sound of Music* is one of the favorite musical movies, directed and produced by Robert Wise in 1965, derived from the Broadway musical play with the same name. Based on the book titled *The Story of the Trapp Family Singers* published in 1945, the film is about a young woman named Maria, who leaves an Austrian convent and becomes a favorite governess of the seven children of Captain Georg von Trapp, a naval officer widower. At last, Maria and the captain fall in love with each other and get married. The film won five Academy Awards including “Best Picture” and “Best Director”, displacing the popular film *Gone with the Wind* as the top-grossing one of all-time.

*The Sound of Music* deeply impresses and moves audiences from the entire world with its humane characters, patriotism, melodic and tuneful music as well as its stunningly beautiful scenery, which is regarded as a delight in aural and visual events. Maria, whose teaching wisdom as a successful governess, inspires many educators. In a teacher development program in China, it is reported, *The Sound of Music* was adopted as one of the training contents in teachers’ ethic devotion. In 2001, the United States Library of Congress selected the film for preservation in the National Film Registry as it was deemed “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant”. There is no doubt that *the Sound of Music* is a film that exerts such a profound influence on people in different countries at different times.

Positive Psychology is the scientific study of human flourishing, and an applied approach to optimal functioning. It has also been defined as the study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals, communities and organizations to thrive. Martin Seligman is regarded as the leading pioneer in this area. Positive psychology is well reflected in *the Sound of Music*. This paper focuses on the teaching wisdom in the perspective of positive psychology (especially concerned with three issues: positive emotions, positive individual traits, and positive institutions), which can be applied in practical teaching as references.

Positive Emotions, which is concerned with being content with one’s past, being happy in the present and having hope for the future. In the film, Maria became an orphan when she was only two years old. Yet, she did not wallow in self-pity. Instead, Maria is optimistic with a bright and cheerful personality, showing great passion to nature and music. Life is a river, full of ups and downs, twists and turns are inevitable parts of it. Positive emotions are important in one’s growth and development, and people should always have hope for the future.
How to Develop Positive Emotions to Confront with New Challenges

At the very beginning, Maria does not know what her future will be like when she is assigned to be the governess of the Captain’s seven children. On the way, she also feels upset, having a haze of fear, nervousness, and confusion. Can she be accepted by the seven children? “Why am I so scared?” She tries to maintain her optimism, “I must stop these doubts all these worries. I’m seeking the courage I lack, the courage to serve them with reliance.” She encourages herself to “face my mistakes without defiance, show them I’m worthy”. In fact, she does psyche herself up to meet the challenge to be a qualified governess: “I have confidence they’ll put me to the test. I will impress them I will be firm but kind.”

Rakesh K. Mittal (2005) once said, with a positive mindset every problem is a new challenge and an opportunity. “stop the doubts...show them I’m worthy..., I have confidence..., I will be firm but kind...”, Maria uses such positive words to enhance her self-confidence when confronting with new challenges. The power of positive words will help people to attain courage and happiness as it is full of practical wisdom drawn from ordinary daily episodes, inspiring us to develop a positive outlook and action towards life and society, bringing us some unexpected benefits.

Positive Individual Traits, focusing on one’s strengths and virtues. Maria is optimistic with a great interest in music, nature, and life. She cannot help dancing and singing in the fields, “For thousand years, the hills fill my heart. With the sound of music, my heart wants to sing every song it hears.” In her eyes, happiness is everywhere. She finds the most comfortable shelter for her soul in music and the beauty of the wild nature, often losing herself there.

How to Develop Individual’s Positive Traits and Potentials

Maria likes singing in the garden without permission. As a nun in an abbey, she is not accepted by other sisters. They do not think her an asset to the abbey.

It is a fact that individuals differ in the strength of intelligence. In 1993, Gardner developed the theory of multiple intelligences in *Multiple Intelligences*, which has emerged from cognitive research. In the widely spread book, Gardner (1993) made the following categories, such as linguistic intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, body kinesthetic, spatial intelligence, musical intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, and naturalist intelligence. Gardner believes that every person has a relatively independent intelligence of the eight kinds, but each has its own unique understanding of intellectual development process and system of signs.

Based on the above theory, Maria has some of the most significant characters to be a good teacher, such as linguistic intelligence, body kinesthetic, musical intelligence, interpersonal intelligence. She is active and energetic, not suitable for strict disciplines in the abbey. The reverend mother in the abbey understands Maria very well, describing her personality with some metaphors, “how do you catch a cloud and pin it down? How do you keep a wave upon the sand? How do you hold a moonbeam in your hand?”

Maria is articulate with a variety of interests. In the mother’s eyes, she is an ideal candidate to be a governess instead of a nun in an abbey. The mother is wise enough in recognizing Maria’s potentials and assigns her to a new position. It is Maria’s power of character and her positive attitude to life that contributes to her new career. Maria becomes a successful teacher—a governess of the seven children, not beyond the reverend mother’s expectation and trust. A teacher should be aware of the fact that every student is unique with their own potentials, trying to understand their respective strengths and weaknesses. In this way, a teacher can develop students’ positive traits as well as cognitive ability with suitable methods. What’s more, the teacher can give students appropriate advice in future career planning.

Positive Institutions are based on strengths to better a community of people. Just as *Multiple Intelligences* reveals above, students are quite different individuals. How to construct positive institutions? Maria also set a good model for educators in building a harmonious relationship with students, respecting students and teaching effectively.
How to Build a Harmonious Relationship with Students

Before Maria comes to Captain Georg von Trapp’s home, the children had twelve governesses. They came and left, no one stayed there long because the children are pretty naughty. Maria also psyches herself up for the children’s naughty behavior:

“Let them bring on all their problems, I’ll do better than my best. Everything will turn out fine, I have confidence the world will all be mine, they’ll have to agree I have confidence in me, I have confidence the world can all be mine.”

The seven children of Captain Georg von Trapp are defensive to Maria when she comes to their home as a new governess. Just read their dialogues when they first meet each other:

Liesl: “I’m Liesl. I’m 16 years old, and I don’t need a governess.”
Maria: “I’m glad you told me, Liesl. We’ll just be good friends.”
Maria: “Really? Who told you that, Friedrich?”
Friedrich: “Fraulein Josephine. Four governesses ago.”
Brigitta: “I’m Brigitta. And I think your dress is the ugliest one I ever saw.”
Kurt: “I’m Kurt. I’m 11. I’m incorrigible.”
Maria: “Congratulations!”
Kurt: “What’s incorrigible?”
Maria: “I think it means you want to be treated like a boy…”

The children’s innocence and naughtiness as well as Maria’s wisdom in education can be reflected obviously in their dialogues. Facing Lisa and Gita’s direct provocation, she is not embarrassed or irritated, just saying “I’m glad you told me, we can be friends”. Kurt’s “incorrigible” is also kindly interpreted as “you want to be treated like a boy”, a very positive signification with a teacher’s kind intention. These words have positive implications and expectation in children’s growth and development, which also contribute to a good student-teacher relationship.

The seven children use various tricks to make fun with Maria when they meet each other, putting a toad in her pocket secretly when she goes upstairs, making her so scared; they secretly put a pine cone in her chair before dinner, she cannot help giving a painful scream when she sits down. Such things make her so embarrassed in front of all the family members including the captain.

Maria knows it is the nature of children to be fond of playing tricks to get people’s attention. She also knows the feelings of them: they lost their mother when they were young, their father is so strict with them that they lack chances to express their inner feelings. The former governesses were often biting, ignoring their feelings. Facing with the children’s practical jokes, Maria shows her understanding and great patience. She tells nothing to their father, the captain. At the dinner table, she just says humorously, “I’d like to thank you all for the precious gift you left in my pocket today.” When the captain asks what gift it is, she just says, “It’s a secret between the children and me.”

Maria also opens her heart, telling the children how she wants to be accepted here. She says frankly, “Knowing how nervous I must have been, a stranger in a new household… Knowing how important it was for me to feel accepted. It was so kind and thoughtful of you to make my first moments here so warm and happy and pleasant…”

Here Maria shows great wisdom when dealing with children. With her kindness and wisdom, she manages in resolving the children’s prank and her embarrassing situation. The children perceive Maria’s sincerity and consideration, they are touched and moved. Maria’s positive individual traits help her win the trust, respect, and love of the children. Soon they construct a harmonious teacher-student relationship, which is constructive in effective teaching. There is a saying, “pupils don’t learn anything from people they don’t like.” Both teachers and students can benefit a lot from a harmonious relationship between them.
**How to Respect Students’ Affection**

In the film, Liesl, the eldest daughter (16 years old), fell in love with the young postman named Rolfe. One day, they open their hearts and speak lovers’ prattle until midnight regardless of the heavy rain. Liesl does not notice it is late to go home. As a result, she cannot get into the house because the door is locked. Fearing that her father will punish her, she just slips in through the window. Maria does not blame her. Instead, she invites her to her room to have a talk and gives her comfortable clothes to change her wet clothes, so that she will not be noticed by others. Liesl is so moved that she changes her attitude to Maria, “I ever told you I didn’t need a governess, but, maybe, I do.”

Maria is accepted by Liesl and become friends with her and they get along well with each other. She provides immediate support and comfort when Liesl and her boyfriend are separated. Under the influence of Maria, Liesl becomes a little assistant, sharing her secrets and confusion with Maria. The other children are not lonely any longer; they also like to share their feelings with Maria without any restraints. Their love to Maria and their family is increasing; laughter and music reappear in this family.

Many students in China have experienced puppy love, which may interfere with their learning because some of them cannot balance their love and learning. Teachers should respect and understand their affection, for it is inevitable to have such feelings to the opposite sex at their age. Some famous people’s biographies can be recommended to students to help them balance their affection and learning. Teachers’ understanding and solicitude is helpful to establish a good relationship with students. More willingly they are to open their inner world and communicate with teachers. In this way, teachers can provide students immediate help once there are any problems. Consequently, students can benefit a lot from teachers’ guidance and advice to treat puppy love more wisely.

**How to Teach Students Effectively**

At the very beginning of the film, when the audiences follow Maria to Captain Georg von Trapp’s home, what they find is a family with strict discipline. Children are summoned by different whistles instead of their names. The captain also issues orders to his children and dresses them in sailor-suit uniforms as he did to his soldiers. Under the rigid rules, the nature of the children is confined. They have no music or no laughter in the family. What they are interested is playing tricks on people. Maria openly expresses her disapproval to the Captain, telling him it is contrary to the nature of children.

Maria respects children’s interests and hobbies. Although initially hostile toward her, the children become friendly to her. Gradually, she wins the trust and respect of the children. She effectively teaches the children in accordance with their nature and different personality.

The first lesson is carried out in the beautiful grassland, Maria teaches them through various activities. Education cannot thrive without enjoyment. Maria teaches the children the knowledge of music, playing the guitar, “When you read, you begin with A-B-C; when you sing, you begin with Do-Re-Me.” Do-Re-Me are the basic musical notes one must learn to sing songs. In order to help them to understand and memorize the notes, she compares the abstract musical notes and the familiar lovely things with the method of harmonic tone:

“Doe (do) a deer, a female deer,
Ray (re) a drop of golden sun,
Me (mi) a name I call myself…”

Maria combines education with pleasure with the heuristic education, arousing the children’s curiosity and interests, changing the abstract to the concrete. Gradually the children have the same infectious enthusiasm to join the song. They are learning and singing happily, spreading the happiness and singing in the field, in the valley. Music draws the relationship between Maria and the students near, the children become increasingly cute and sensible, and their hostility to Maria disappears completely.
Patriotism is also one important theme in the film. The captain is ordered to accept a commission in the German navy, but he opposes the Nazis regardless of the great pressure. He and Maria decide to flee from Austria with the children. After performing the national song Edelweiss, they manage to flee from Austria with their children.

**Conclusion**

With her kindness, patience and wisdom, Maria teaches the children effectively, resolving their pranks and solving the embarrassment humorously, which reflects her ethic devotion, professional qualities and personal styles. As a result, she wins the children’s trust, respect and love. In the perspective of positive psychology, teachers can obtain lots of inspiration from the film, such as how to develop students’ positive emotion and potentials, how to encourage their positive traits to meet with new challenges, how to improve their ability to resist frustration, how to build a harmonious relationship with students, how to respect students to construct a positive institution to arouse their curiosity and interest to knowledge and how to improve their competences based on their respective intelligence. In a word, positive psychology embedded in the film is beneficial for teachers in the cultivation of positive emotions, positive individual traits and positive institutions, which can encourage individuals to strive to do their best.

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