

Comparing teacher dispositions in China and the USA

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ABSTRACT

In studies conducted in the USA, teacher dispositional factors such as enthusiasm, professional esteem and learning motivation often emerge as the most significant variables affecting student learning and achievement from the primary grades through higher education. Do these factors play as significant a role in student learning and achievement in China as they do in the USA? This conceptual paper aims to compare the patterns of teacher dispositions in China with those patterns in the USA. Fourteen experienced teachers and instructors at schools and universities in China and the USA provided oral and written narratives in which they reflected on how teacher attitudes and dispositions affected student learning and achievement.

Keywords: Teacher dispositions, teacher enthusiasm, professional esteem, motivation to learn



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INTRODUCTION

Research on student learning and achievement in the USA suggests that teacher dispositions including enthusiasm, professional esteem and learning motivation are among the most important variables in student learning and achievement across all levels and disciplines (Edmonds, 1979; 1986; Schmitt, 1989). Investigators (e.g. Schleicher, 2006; Takanashi, 2004; Goyette & Xie, 1996) have posited that these variables are significant not only in the USA but also in China where there are prominent differences in culture, society, and educational traditions. This article aims to identify the patterns of similarities and differences in teacher dispositions in schools in the USA and schools in China.

In a comprehensive review and meta-analysis, Bransford, et. al. (2000) concluded that learning involves multiple dimensions and variables including students' or learners' prior knowledge and experience and engagement in the process, as well as teachers' sensitivity to individual learner needs and their ability to guide students through the learning process.

The "effective schools research" identified traits and processes that contributed most to student learning. These characteristics appeared consistently in high-performing schools and were independent of student background. They include the following: (1) an orderly and safe school climate, (2) strong instructional leadership from the principal, (3) high teacher expectations for students to achieve, (4) clear purpose and goal for learning, and (5) regular measures of pupil assessment (Edmonds, 1979; 1986; Schmitt, 1989).

THE TEACHER NARRATIVES

Fourteen experienced teachers and professors in China and the USA participated in a dialogue / conversation about the role of teacher dispositions and attitudes in student learning and achievement. The schools included elementary and secondary schools and universities in the St. Louis, Missouri metropolitan region in the USA and in six cities in China (Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Beijing, Shanghai, Jinan and Qingdao). The selection of teachers and classrooms was opportunistic, and not intended to be representative of teachers and classrooms in China. Table 1 (Appendix) lists the subject, grade level and city for each teacher who contributed narratives. This paper is based on the patterns extracted from the review of these conversations.

The "teacher narratives" were oral or written comments in response to the question, "What teacher characteristics, traits or attitudes account for the greatest learning and achievement among your students?"

Four dimensions of teacher dispositions and how they were expressed in the narratives were indicated in Table 2 (Appendix).

Table 3 (Appendix) summarizes the patterns of teacher dispositions based on the teacher narratives and the classroom observations.

There were examples of passionate and enthusiastic teachers observed at all levels in the USA and China. As well, there were examples of teacher on the other end of the continuum. This variance may be based on factors such as individual personality differences, individual circumstances, and morale factors in the school context.

Teachers in China, especially at high school and college level reported that they enjoy high public esteem, respect and recognition for their professionalism and expertise. Pre-school and primary school teachers in China were less recognized in the past but have been gaining higher esteem as the certification standards have been raised and competition for jobs has been increasing in China (Bishop, 2008). One teacher commented: "The role of a teacher in the

Chinese society is a bit of paradox. They are greatly respected by the society, but extremely pressured by the parents and the schools."

On the other hand teachers in the USA provided varied narratives about the public esteem, social status and recognition they received. The range of comments varied from the sense of being highly regarded, respected and feeling "privileged" to one of low public esteem, low professional stature, and marginalization.

The public esteem of teachers was associated with availability of professional development opportunities. Teachers in the USA were vocal about the lack of professional development opportunities, especially in educational technology. This observation mirrors an OTA report on teachers and technology (OTA, 1995). This report concluded that teachers have limited professional development opportunity especially in using newer technology to improve teaching. Teachers in the USA were concerned about the imbalance between contact hours of direct teaching and time for preparation and professional development.

Teachers in both countries were highly interested in gaining new knowledge and competence in technology. They value having significant time and priority given to advance their knowledge and pedagogy. They believe professional development should be continuous throughout one's career and sustained rather than isolated workshops or conferences. Thirty percent of the teachers expressed their interest in pursuing advanced degrees, such as master's, specialist or doctoral degrees.

Teachers reported that their own level of enthusiasm was affected by their students' attitudes and motivation to learn. Table 4 (Appendix) summarizes the patterns of student motivation in China and the USA from the observations and teacher narratives.

Compared to teachers in the USA, the teachers in China reported that their elementary and secondary school students showed more self-discipline and consistent interest and motivation to learn. Several Chinese teachers noted that parents and the Chinese culture itself placed high expectations for children to be interested and motivated to learn. They noted that:

"Practice and hard work are valued and recognized in the Chinese family and schools."

"Struggle is a positive part of learning process to Chinese educators."

"Students are expected and encouraged to make every effort in all school activities."

"Parents and schools value academic performance more than other progress at school."

They consistently praise and reward students for academic achievement."

The teachers in China acknowledged that the high and consistent levels of self-discipline and learning motivation among their students inspired them, contributed to their professional gratification and their motivation to excel. As well, some teachers in the US, especially in elementary and secondary schools, were discouraged and even demoralized by the lower and less consistent levels of self-discipline and motivation among their students.

At the college and university level in both China and the USA, there were examples of both highly motivated students as well as students with low motivation. University professors in China described a marked decrease in student motivation during the college years as compared to the secondary school years. Several Chinese professors consistently reported poor student attendance in university classes as well as low motivation to learn. These observations are consistent with studies that show strong support from parents at elementary and secondary levels in China (Martin, 2007; Pryor, 1995; Yeung, 2009).

Likewise, the lack of involvement of American parents in their children's education has been cited as a serious problem (Chira, 1993; Pryor, 1995). While Asian children are pushed by

parents toward academic achievement, American parents tend to value “play” and the preservation of “childhood” for their children (Stevenson & Stigler, 1994).

The instructors speculated that the learning climate changes when Chinese students enter the university. Moving away from families reduces contact with parents."

"There is a lack of faculty support at the college level because the faculty priority is conducting research and pursuing grants."

“My students often say they worked so hard to get into college. They feel burned out with studies and need a break.”

In contrast, American professors perceived that U.S. college students were more academically focused when entering their college years than their Chinese counterparts or when compared to the high school years. College professors speculated that greater independence for U.S. students may inspire a sense of personal responsibility, which their Chinese counterparts were not ready to assume given prior family and cultural pressures.

DISCUSSION

The high public esteem for Chinese teachers at all levels has historical origins: Confucius viewed schooling as a “Ke Ju” system that leads to an official and glorious ladder to reach to the top of society (Phillipson & MacCann, 2007). Today, education continues to be regarded as important and an effective means to raise one’s social and economic status. Success in education becomes “a distinctive line which decides whether a person wears straw sandals or leather shoes in their future lives” (Cui, 2009).

Following Confucian philosophy teachers in China are expected to be role models, setting examples in conduct and morality (Shao & Tamashiro, 2009). This social ethics still serves as a prevailing guideline for teaching profession as also reported by the teachers in this study.

The US also has historical roots in valuing education and the work of teachers as critical to preserving democracy and keeping the nation economically and politically competitive. But this high regard for education and teachers have eroded with the increasing demands for teacher accountability, threats of litigation, and more school-context problems (bullying, violence, discipline problems, school budget problems) (Manski, 1993).

In China, elementary and secondary school teachers’ salaries and promotion are linked to the performance of their students on examinations compared to other students across the grade level, the school, the district, or the nation. The admitting rate to the “key” high schools is significant for junior high / middle school teachers’ promotion. High school teachers are recognized and rewarded according to the number of their students who are accepted by the “key” universities. Chinese teachers are expected to be “personally accountable for their students’ overall development as human beings” (Wenzhong & Grove, 1991). Professional development for teachers is a high priority in China’s elementary and secondary schools. The typical student-contact time for teachers is 3-4 hours per day, with the rest of day devoted to professional development, curriculum development, lesson preparation, and faculty meetings (Paine & Fang, 2006).

While some teacher fatigue and burnout were observed in both Chinese and U.S. schools, the vitality, energy and enthusiasm in the overall school climate seemed to depend on the relative youthfulness of the school faculty and the leadership tone set by the principal or headmaster. In

China, the priority on professional development for teachers at all levels and a less demanding teaching load may explain the more consistent positive morale across the schools.

CONCLUSION

Individually, teachers in both China and the USA possessed a wide range of enthusiasm and motivation. However teachers in China reported a higher degree of professional esteem than teachers in the USA. The broader patterns of differences in teacher dispositions between teachers in China and the USA may be associated with differences in traditional and emerging cultural values and attitudes about education and learning. This analysis informs educators in China and the USA how numerous systemic factors including cultural values, parenting styles, teacher attitudes, and student peer competition contribute to students' academic success or failure. As much as it is admitted by both American and Chinese educators that changing culture is difficult. The question raised by both sides was: "Is it possible to change views of learning and adopt the strategies if another culture produces better learning outcomes?"

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APPENDIX

Table 1
Classroom Sources for Teacher Narratives and Classroom Observations

Subject	Grade	Country	City; School type
Mathematics	4	China	Hong Kong SAR, PRC. Urban semi-private (government subsidized) school
		USA	St. Louis, Missouri: suburban public school
	5	China	Shenzhen, Guangdong, PRC: urban public school
	8	USA	St. Louis, Missouri: suburban public school
Science	4	USA	St. Louis, Missouri: suburban public school
	8	USA	St. Louis, Missouri: suburban public school
English	8	China	[Shenzhen, Guangdong, PRC: urban public school
	10		Hong Kong SAR, PRC: urban, semi-private (government subsidized) school
Computer Science	11	USA	St. Louis, Missouri: suburban private school
	Undergraduate (College)	China	Fudan University; Shanghai, China
		China	Jiao Tong University (laboratory section), Shanghai, China
		China	Shandong University (laboratory class), Jinan, China
		China	Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, China
		USA	St. Louis, Missouri: suburban private university

Table 2
Teacher Dispositions in Narratives

Dimensions of teacher dispositions	How dispositions are expressed in the narratives
1. Enthusiasm, passion about the subject matter, self, or student(s)	Describes or identifies enthusiasm / morale
2. Self-esteem and self-confidence (personal or professional)	Describes sources of self-esteem or self-confidence, including public esteem and social status.
3. Interest, curiosity, motivation in research questions, professional development, or learning	Describes one's interest, curiosity and motivation or fatigue and burnout in pursuing new learning.

Table 3
Dispositions Described by Teachers in China and USA

Characteristics	China	USA
Teacher Morale and enthusiasm (general)	Varies by individual	Varies by individual
Fatigue or burnout	Common	Common

Table 4
Student Motivation Reported in Teacher Narratives

Characteristics	China	USA
Self-discipline, learning motivation in elementary and secondary schools	Consistently high	Varied by individuals and by classrooms
Self-discipline, learning motivation in colleges and universities	Varies by individual student; but perceived as lower than in USA	Varies by individual student; but perceived as higher than in China.
Societal and parental expectations for students to be motivated to learn	Common and consistent	Varied by individuals