

Cultural Perspectives on Student Behaviors: A Study of American and Chinese Students

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Abstract: To explore factors that influence the behavior of Chinese students and strategies for interventions, this paper presents a cross-cultural study on Chinese and American students. It examines the relationships between students' behaviors and the cultural influences; implications for special educators who work with minority students with emotional/behavioral disorders (E/BD) will also be discussed.

Key words: cultural perspectives students behaviors

Comparison of student behavior in Chinese and American cultures is of interest because of similarities as well as differences between them. The two cultures currently are linked by economic and political interests and by immigration from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and many other Chinese communities to the United States. Asian Americans are the fastest growing ethnic group in the America (Sharpe, 1998), and among this group, immigrants from the People's Republic of China are one of the largest subgroups (Chi, 1999). The result is a noticeable change in the makeup of school population throughout the country and an increased need to provide special education services to Chinese American students with special needs.

Despite these connections, the two cultures differ considerably with respect to the sociocultural influences on students' lives. For example, the United States and China differ in their social values, political environments, and economic systems, the degree to which they have experienced industrialization, and now participate in the global economy. These factors are likely to have implications for Chinese American students' emerging values, academic performances, and emotional/behavioral development.

The change of immigration has influenced Chinese American students' sociocultural adjustment and educational performance. In the acculturation process, traditional Chinese teaching comes into conflict with various western ideas such as goals of creativity, autonomy, and critical thinking. These goals and practices, which are so prevalent in the United States today, have influenced Chinese American students' learning experiences. However, there are very few studies on student behavior that are related to the contemporary Chinese culture. The majority of the few studies that exist are based on research in the 1980s and 1970s or even earlier (e.g., Sue, Zane, & Ito, 1979; Chung & Walkey, 1989).

The general perceptions of the Chinese held by the general public are one of the "model minorities." Although we celebrate the high achievement shared by many Chinese students, we cannot overlook the fact that like any other ethnic group, there is also a proportion of intellectual and emotional/behavioral deviances among the Chinese students (Chang, 1995). Undoubtedly, these exceptional children require special assistance, understanding, and empathy to realize their full learning potential (Chang, 1995). However, in light of the

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traditionally low prevalence of Chinese students in special education, many teachers are unprepared to teach these Chinese children with special needs. In some cases, anomalies may have been masked or compounded by misconceptions and misunderstanding.

Some studies have attempted to address the issue of the under-representation of Chinese students in the area of special education (e.g., Cartledge et al., 2002; Chang, 1995). Research indicates that there are a number of school-related variables contributing to the increase in Chinese students who are at risk for the identification of emotional/behavioral disorders (E/BD) or for educational failure. These variables are similar to those that affect students of other culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. For example, teachers' attitudes and reactions to speakers of nonstandard English and the lack of culturally responsive assessment instruments are often cited as reasons for these students' lower academic achievement and referral to special education.

In recognition of the growing number of student behavior problems, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments 1997 requires school-based Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) teams to address the relationship between student behaviors and classroom learning. And the most significant variable related to the achievement of students is the quality of the services provided to students. Therefore, there are many pressing questions related to the behavioral assessment and interventions for Chinese students with E/BD. What are the differences between the Chinese students' misbehaviors and their European American peers? How does the Chinese students' home culture influence their behaviors? What are the factors that contribute to their misconduct in school? How can special educators serve these students with E/BD more effectively? Regrettably, the research literature does not provide a rich background from which one can find guidance for interventions for Chinese students who are currently in E/BD programs. To explore factors that influence the behavior of Chinese students and strategies for interventions, this paper will present a cross-cultural study, which examines the relationships between students' behavior and cultural influences. Implications for special educators who work with minority students with E/BD will also be discussed. In this paper, Chinese refers to those of Chinese heritage and are residing in North America, especially the recently arrived immigrant families from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. To simplify the cross-cultural comparison, the term American(s) is used in its narrow sense, it includes only Caucasian(s).

1. Internal and External Challenges of Chinese American Families

Families in the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, which most of the Chinese people immigrated from, currently faces both internal and external challenges due to the increasing influence of western values and change of family structures. These challenges obviously impact families that immigrated to the America in recent years.

First of all, in today's Chinese families and communities, traditional ethics like Confucianism is no longer a dominant ideology as it was in the past. Remarkable changes are emerging in traditional values, lifestyles, and family structure. The beliefs of the Chinese Americans appear to show the influences of both their Chinese heritage and the European American culture in which they reside. While currently there is no data available to indicate that Chinese immigrants are gradually moving away from a traditional orientation due to assimilation, the question remains as to how long and how successfully the Chinese tradition can be transmitted to the later generations of Chinese Americans in today's society.

Secondly, the one child policy in the mainland China has altered family roles and child-rearing practices, raising concerns about the possible harmful effects of too much attention and pampering. When these Chinese

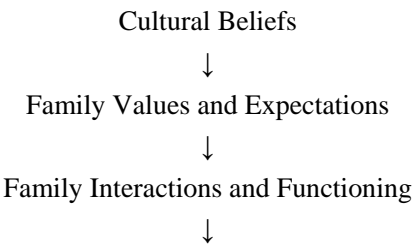
families immigrated to the States, pressure from work and school (many come to the States as professionals or as graduate students) in a new country as well as higher expenses of raising children make it difficult for these parents to have more than one child, even though they now have the freedom to do so. Thus compare to most American families, Chinese families may have fewer children. A study of Chinese families found that children without siblings are more egocentric, less persistent and less cooperative than those with siblings (Jiao, Guiping & Qicheng, 1986). Therefore, the emotional/mental health of the younger generation who has less or no siblings might decrease. The family structure also affects the education of Chinese students in another way. It has strengthened the emphasis upon education and the families’ strong involvement and investment in their children. Thus these students often have much pressure of being successful and do not allow themselves to fail, the pressure is even greater for those who are new comers to America and have culture and language barriers to overcome.

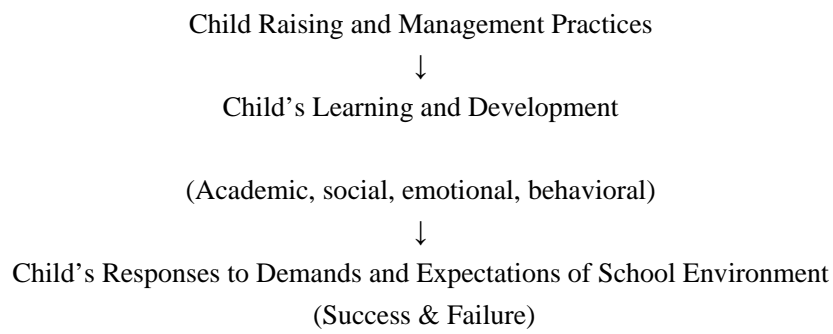
Finally, for students who are from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, their previous educational experience also plays a part in Chinese students’ school life in America. The traditional Chinese educational system is highly selective. Students in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, as early as in elementary school, tend to live under the pressure of keen academic competition primarily because of the high degree of sociocultural value placed on education. Students had to face many academic stressors as a result of pressure of exams, peer competition, copious homework, limited free time and strict school discipline.

In addition, while much of the curriculum content (in mainland China, the curriculum is nationally prescribed) is similar to a typical American program, the teaching and discipline methods are quite different from the “developmentally appropriate” and standard practices advocated in America (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1986). A widely used technique in China is public correction, not just for misbehavior but also for poor performance. Children who are not doing well or have made a mistake are commonly singled out in public (e. g., the teacher may remove a student from a group practicing in a PE class, asking him to sit down and watch the others because he was not doing in the right way). It is believed that such corrections will help the child work harder so as to avoid future mistakes. While in America, positive reinforcement that leads to a higher level of self-esteem and a greater behavioral compliance is considered to be more appropriate and effective. In China, the learning context is often authoritarian with a big class size and large amounts of homework and the classroom is teacher-centered and. Therefore, it should be noted that when these students come to the United States, their different educational experiences make it hard for them to understand the heavy emphasis on independence, self-efficacy, and the notion of equality between the teacher and students.

2. The Relationship of Culture and Student Behavior

Children’s development is directly influenced by their cultural backgrounds. Indeed, each society has its own distinct values and norms that impact on the child’s behaviors and development. According to Sugai (1989), the relationship between culture and student behavior can be described in a simple six-component configuration.





Clearly, child development is influenced by the social environments within which they live, culturally regulated customs, family traditions, and religion belief systems. When cultural beliefs are in conflict with the dominant community or school environment, behavioral/emotional development and educational performances are affected. The existence of a disability influences the student's development through the six components (Sugai, 1989). Not only must these students cope with their differences due to their minority status, but they must also face the challenges their disabilities may bring.

2.1 Cultural Belief

Both of the American and Chinese cultures have their own distinctive characteristics. While American culture is centered in the values derived from Judeo-Christian roots, Chinese culture is built upon a value system crystallized mainly in Confucianism. As such, the dominant European American cultural themes of relevance stress individual independence and achievement. Common to many of the discussions of distinctive European American values is the perception that Americans value self-governance and individual autonomy and admire those who achieve by their own efforts (Fliegelman, 1993). American economic and political systems promote individual rewards for individual effort. In contrast, Chinese culture values social deference, group cohesiveness, and endurance.

Studies have reported that youth of Chinese descent in North America tend to have lower rates of delinquency, and some investigators attributed this phenomenon to the restraining effects of Chinese culture. Chang, Morrissey, and Koplewicz (1995) posited that the lower prevalence of aggression among Chinese American children was probably due to the strong intolerance of acting-out behavior in Chinese culture. Krumm (1988) noted different control strategies: Americans and Europeans more often use "primary control", attempting to solve problems by changing their environment, while Chinese apply "secondary control", solving problems through conformity.

Cross-cultural research on adolescent problem behavior suggests that European American children and adolescents are more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors such as physical aggression, defiance, and antisocial acts if compared to their Asian peers (Cartledge et al., 2002). Due to the cultural influence, Chinese students tend to internalize their distress, thus manifesting more anxiety reactions, psychosomatic disorders, and school phobia. Within the Chinese culture, shyness is not regarded as maladaptive. Shy, reticent, and quiet children (especially girls) are described as well behaved and submissive. Students are not supposed to make claims for one's ability, modesty is positively valued and encouraged. Due to the many differences of cultural beliefs, compared to bilingual students with European heritages, Chinese students require a longer period of acculturation in terms of language and culture.

2.2 Family Values and Expectations

It is well accepted that parents' expectations have a powerful effect on children's academic performance. Boocock (1972) holds that children from families which have high expectations for them, and who consequently are likely to

set standards and to make greater demands at an earlier age are more likely to be high achieving. Indeed, there is a strong correlation between expectancy and subsequent academic achievement.

The prevailing social value of scholarly achievement in Chinese families and communities is generally manifested by their high expectation for their children to excel in school. A teacher saw a Chinese student cried when she got the grade report. After a conversation with the student, the teacher found out that the student did not want to go back home because she got three As and two Bs. Instead of praising her for the As, her parents would be very disappointed and ask her why she did not get all As. From the Chinese view, overly generous praising would likely make the child proud and might reduce his or her motivation for further achievements. Compared to their Chinese counterparts, American parents typically don't emphasize educational attainment as much as their Chinese counterparts do, and may not set as high standards for their children. In the case above, they may praise the three A grades and tell their daughter that they are very proud of her.

Many Chinese parents believe that it is problematic for a student to perform below ability level. These findings are consistent with literature which indicates that Chinese parents tend to expect their children to study hard, cooperate with the teacher, and follow rules to better themselves. With regard to socialization values, traditionally, Chinese parents have been more concerned with children's submissiveness and obedience to parents than their western counterparts, but more tolerance of children's independence has been observed in young and better educated parents (Bond, 1991). In contrast, the majority of parents in today's American society are known to value their children's social competence and place less priority on compliance, politeness, and respects as their Chinese counterparts do.

2.3 Family Interactions and Function

Family interaction and functioning can have a direct and an indirect impact on children's psychological well-being and problem behavior. It is believed that good parental influences and parent-child relationships tend to reduce delinquent behavior and increase pro-social behavior. In 1974, Wilson compared family functioning in Hong Kong, Taiwan, New York City's Chinatown, and Caucasian parents in a New Jersey community. All three Chinese groups demonstrated greater emphasis on family interactions than the U.S. sample, even though the Chinese American children generally resembled the U.S. sample more than the Chinese groups. More revealing findings have been obtained in several more recent studies. Level of acculturation was studied by Lin & Fu (1990), who compared Chinese, immigrant Chinese, and Caucasian-American parents on their family interactions. In Lin and Fu's study, both Chinese samples were significantly higher on control and achievement, confirming traditional cultural practices. Surprisingly, no significant differences were found between samples on the variable of affection, as affection is generally not openly displayed in traditional Chinese families. It is speculated that this finding demonstrates that Chinese parents are gradually moving away from a traditional child-rearing orientation (Lin & Fu, 1990).

2.4 Children' Raising and Management Practices

Baumrind (1991) suggested that three major types of parenting styles exist: authoritarian (demanding and unresponsive), authoritative (demanding and responsive), and permissive (non-demanding and responsive). Authoritarian parents attempt to control their children with absolute standards, and expect obedience, respect, and preservation of order from children. In contrast, authoritative parents set clear standards, enforce rules and standards firmly, encourage independence, individuality, and open communication (Baumrind, 1991).

In a survey of 7,836 adolescents in the San Francisco Bay area, Dornbusch, Ritter, Liderman, Roberts, and Fraleigh (1987) found that Asian American parents were more authoritarian than European American parents, and

that for both European and Asian Americans, the authoritarian parenting style was associated with lower academic grades. Chao and Sue (1996) argued that the current conceptualization of parental authoritarianism ignores the purpose of parental control and fails to capture the essence of the authoritarian behaviors of Asian parents. Chao (1994) also found that Chinese mothers from Taiwan emphasized the “training” of their children more than European American mothers did. Chinese parents’ strict discipline actually pushes their children toward educational success. These Chinese mothers believed that children should be trained intensively so that they may behave well and obtain good school results, and that mothers should try their best to train their children. This finding is consistent with the Chinese tradition of attributing a child’s misbehavior or lack of abilities to his or her poor family education. That is, when a child misbehaves, it is the parents to blame rather than the teacher.

American children are raised in less restrictive home environments than their Chinese counterparts are. In an analysis of child-rearing practices over two thousand years, Bossard (1954) reported that it is not until the 20th century, and almost exclusively in America, have children been assigned status in any manner equal to that enjoyed by adult members of the family. Goldscheider & Goldscheider (1989) also noted: “When we compare family life in America and Germany, we are struck by the greater freedom for self-expression and self-assertion enjoyed by the American child” (p.88).

2.5 Children’ Learning and Development

Today’s Chinese children may not know much of the four thousand years of Chinese civilization that their grandparents have been proud of, however, the acquisition of Chinese characters is often conveyed to them early and surely because many parents believe that the improvement of reading and writing skill in the early age is a key focus for prevention of school failure. Many Chinese children begin to learn Chinese characters and arithmetic at the age of four. In contrast, American children are probably free from formal family education, and they may learn more through playing and exploring their environments.

Compare to their American peers, many Chinese American students have one more academic goal—maintain the Chinese culture and language. Therefore, in addition to regular schooling, many Chinese students go to weekend Chinese community schools. Though it is important for these students to maintain their cultural heritage, going to school on weekends inevitably increase the students’ academic load and it may become another stressor that contributes to behavioral/emotional problems.

Chinese parents may rarely be able to identify behavioral and emotional problems, largely because of their general lack of awareness of mental health problems. It is also possible that Chinese children do actually have lower symptom scores as implied by Hsu (1985), whose study of Chinese children revealed some temperamental differences compared with U.S. children. However, more research is needed to explore this finding, which stresses the importance of the investigation of cultural differences in children’s behavioral problems and the role parental attitude plays in these differences.

2.6 Children’s Responses to Demands and Expectations of School Environment

In their study of educational and achievement aspirations of New Zealand Chinese and European secondary school students, Chung and Walkey (1989) maintained that Chinese students attribute higher academic expectations and stronger achievement orientation to their parents’ response to failure and a greater sense of obligation to their parents than was found among the students from western cultures.

Research on functional behavioral assessment (FBA) indicates that the desire for attention is a very common reason given for student misbehavior (Gable, Quinn, Rutherford, Howell, Hoffman, 2000). In deed, any American teachers can attest to the fact that too often students use inappropriate or problem behavior to get the attention of

their teacher and/or peers, especially when they are expected to perform tasks that are too difficult for them. In light of the cultural influence, Chinese students are less likely to seek attention from teachers and peers, especially negative attention. However, it should be noted that Chinese students who are used to success in school in China may also exhibit disruptive behaviors when they are requested to perform tasks that are above their levels, especially if their English proficiency is limited.

3. Implications for Special Education

The challenge of educating a diverse population of students with disabilities can be best met by preparing school personnel to become culturally and communicatively competent. Unfortunately, few teachers are aware of the “deep”, non-superficial cultural characteristics (e.g., values, cognitive functioning, and behavioral norms) of different ethnic groups. Many American teachers still have the image of Chinese culture that dates back to the colonial period, and when people talk about Chinese cultures, they are likely to think of rice and chopsticks only. As teachers of minority students, they should not only know a few facts of a culture or stereotypes about its people, a wider view of the contemporary society is critical.

Some teachers reported that with all the demands they have in the curriculum, they don’t have time to address multicultural education for the very few minority students in their classroom (Day-Hairston, 2002). However, helping students to be successful in today’s “global village” necessitates that teachers develop a strong sense of multiculturalism. This involves developing (a) a sensitivity to their own cultures and values; and (b) a responsiveness to students’ needs with regards to curricula, pedagogy, and communication. For instance, in line with the Chinese value systems, verbal positive reinforcements Chinese students expect from the teacher include “hard-working”, “humble”, “polite”, “honest”, and “obedient”. An understanding of family’s socioeconomic, linguistic, and religion background is essential to encourage parental involvement. Teachers should bear in mind that it is harmful to see the students all the same just because they are of the same ethnicity. For example, Chinese Americans differ from each other in aspects of home languages/dialects, social economic status, and they may immigrate from different places such as Malaysia, mainland China, and Singapore.

Immigrating to another country means loosening the emotional attachments to old friends and giving up security of a familiar way of life. In the acculturation process, therefore, teachers of newly-immigrated students play an important role in helping them develop a positive cross-cultural identity. Strategies such as home visit can help teachers note cultural signs and see the true meaning of student behaviors. In addition, cultural characteristics valued in one society may not be valued in another. Teachers should accept that fact rather than try to “Americanize” the students, even though learning American culture is also important.

In developing skills in teaching minority students with E/BD, there are few if any cookbook approaches that can serve all of the teachers’ needs. As Chinn (1979) puts it so well, “Enlightenment in cultural diversity and a careful study of the idiosyncrasies of each ethnic group, coupled with sound special education techniques, will provide a basic foundation for meeting the needs of these children” (p.536).

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