

THE EMOTIONAL GEOGRAPHIES OF PARENT PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOLING: HEADTEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS IN TAIWAN

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ABSTRACT

Based on Andy Hargreaves' theoretical framework of emotional geographies, this article attempts to analyze headteachers' perceptions of their interactions with parents in Taiwan. By using qualitative interviews with primary headteachers, the research findings show that headteachers' emotional distances from parents were intertwined with parents' sociocultural status, headteachers' moral purposes, headteachers' notions of professionalism, headteachers' political pretense, and the frequency to contact with parents.

KEYWORDS

Emotional geographies, professionalism, emotional masking, headteacher-parent relations

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, the issue of parent participation in education has become a heated agenda. Specifically, schools and families should build strong partnerships for children's education (Sanders & Epstein, 1998). In spite of recent educational reform empowering parents to be active partners with influence over school decision making and participation in school activities and governance (Goldring & Sullivan, 1996), Ogawa (1998) stated, 'The assumption that more parent involvement of all types is always better has gone largely unexamined and unchallenged' (p. 8). Parent empowerment is deemed to introduce uncertainty into teachers' work and to raise questions concerning their control over their professional discretion.

However, there is also a significant body of work on school-family relations that teachers and headteachers still possess 'classical' beliefs of professionalism (Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996; Lasky, 2000). In other words, educational practitioners hold beliefs in 'teacher-as-expert' can create a hierarchy of knowledge, value, and status that affects teachers' willingness to collaborate with parents as equals.

Few empirical studies have paid attention to the investigation of emotional responses to headteacher-parent interactions, particularly when educational policies are emphasized on new standards (e.g. accountability practices) and expectations for schooling. The importance of studying headteacher's emotions in relation to parent participation resides in the aim of educational reform to improve student achievement. For headteachers, they may feel respected when some parents appreciate their leadership for the school and their children; but they may feel frustrated while some bothersome parents yell unreasonable demands.

2. EMOTIONAL GEOGRAPHIES OF PARENT PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOLING

In order to better understand headteachers' culturally embedded and politically contested emotions with regard to parent participation in schooling, the theoretical framework of the article mainly based on Andy Hargreaves' (2001) idea of the emotional geographies of schooling and human interaction. These consist of the spatial and experiential patterns of closeness and distance in human relationships that help create, configure and color the feelings and emotions we experience about ourselves, our world and each other.

This theoretical framework could provide a means of identifying the supports for and threats to the basic emotional bonds and understandings of headteacher-parent relationships that are constructed by the forms of closeness or distance in headteacher-parent interactions. In other words, we can ask what helps to create, configure and color the ‘negative’ emotions from my headteacher informants towards headteacher-parent relations, but also creates and configures ‘positive’ emotions? According to Hargreaves, the five dimensions of emotional geographies of human interactions are not merely physical aspects, but also interconnected with sociocultural, professional, political dimensions and headteachers’ moral purposes.

Firstly, *sociocultural geographies*: Teachers and headteachers often assume that two-parent, middle-class nuclear family structures provide the ‘best’ environments for children’s education. Hargreaves (2001) remarks differences of ethno-culture, gender and class between teachers or headteachers and parents can create sociocultural distance and usually lead them to be treated as stereotypes. Such social stereotypes produce a sense of ‘otherness’ or ‘difference’ (Parr, 2005; Sibley, 1995) which could further distance headteachers themselves from specific ‘other’ parents. In short, sociocultural geographies refer to the closeness or distance between headteachers and parents mainly based on parents’ sociocultural backgrounds.

Secondly, *moral geographies*: Emotions are closely bound up with and triggered by our purposes, say, being a teacher or a headteacher. Positive emotions may occur when teachers and headteachers receive gratitude, appreciation, agreement and support from parents. By contrast, negative emotions may occur when teachers and headteachers feel their purposes as educational practitioners being threatened by parents’ misunderstanding, disagreement or criticism. In short, moral geographies concern the closeness or distance between the headteachers’ moral purposes (for example, their pedagogical and ideological philosophies) and those of parents in relation to children’ education.

Thirdly, *professional geographies*: Teachers and headteachers often regard themselves as professional people, viewing themselves as experts in teaching and school management. In this respect, the notion of professionalism is defined as a ‘classical’ model based on the traditionally male preserves of being professionals who should avoid emotional entanglements with their clients’ (or parents’) problems and maintain professional distance from them (Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996; Sachs, 1997). On the contrary, the issue of social accountability has an inevitable bearing on the question of professional autonomy (Locke, 2001) which is the central standpoint of ‘classical’ model of professionalism. Much discussion of the new model of professionalism, or so called ‘new professionalism’ coined by David Hargreaves (1994), should be accountable to the wider community (mainly referring to parents) which is derived from the client-focused discourse. In short, professional geographies are concerned with the ideological conflict between competing forms of professionalism (i.e. classical or new model).

Fourthly, *political geographies*: Power relations between headteachers and parents are embedded in hierarchized forms of surveillance is integrated into institutional settings. Particularly, with the increase of ‘parent power’ during the latest decade (Hargreaves, 2000), headteachers feel more pressures from parent demands, and this seems to enlarge political distance between headteachers and parents. In addition, headteachers sometimes want to manage or even mask their emotions while interacting with parents. To paraphrase Hochschild (1983), through emotional masking headteachers present the ‘right’ emotional appearance to parents who can ‘buy’ the hearts of parents (Bryson, 2008, p. 344). Although Goleman (1995) argues that emotional management can be seen as emotional competence or intelligence, Hargreaves (2000) remarks that such emotional masking could enlarge political distance between stakeholders. In short, political geographies concern the stakeholders’ relations in the hierarchical power structures.

Finally, *physical geographies*: The emotional distance may come from infrequent and non-face-to-face communication that can make emotional understanding and good partnerships between headteachers and parents more difficult to establish. Thus, the establishment of emotional bonds with headteachers and parents are based on intensity, frequency and continuity in interaction. Communication between headteachers and parents take place either formal or informal mechanisms. Formal mechanisms include staged meetings (e.g. parents’ days or parents’ nights in United Kingdom) or conferences. Informal ones may take place in strings of infrequent, fragmented, episodic and disconnected interactions. Concretely, we cannot understand people we rarely talk with, nor can we be understood by them in return. In short, physical geographies refer to the physical spaces which can bring and keep people over long periods so that relationships might develop, or which can reduce these relationships due to strings of episodic interactions.

3. THE STUDY

The sample was distributed across three varied schools of different sizes and serving different kinds of communities (i.e. urban, suburban and rural areas). The informants in this article are one female and two male headteacher, whose ages range from 45 to 60 years. All three headteachers, Adam, Ben and Eva (all anonym), in three varied schools were chosen as research participants. Due to their high positions, they have more frequent and significant interactions with parents than teachers. The study, then, focuses on a particular, homogenous, and highly educated group of headteachers. By focusing on this extraordinary sample, we can highlight headteacher-parent relations as perceived by headteachers who both are professional and have some interactions with parents. They all believed that teachers and headteachers are professionals with expert knowledge in children education. Additionally, in spite of empathy towards some minority parents, e.g. aboriginal parents or parents with low-income living, they admitted that they possessed some stereotypes on these minority parents. They regarded some parents as 'normality' while others as 'problematic'.

Interviews may serve as most efficient method of data collection in qualitative social research. Interviews with headteachers were semi-structured and iterative. Interviews with three headteachers were semi-structured and each interview lasted for around 1.5 hours and particularly concentrated on eliciting headteachers' reports of their emotional relationships with parent participation in children learning. All three headteachers were each interviewed three times, approximately over 10 hours. The first interview for three headteachers was undertaken based on Hargreaves' theoretical framework to obtain initial pictures of three headteachers' emotional reflections on headteacher-parent interactions. Then, the summary of the first interview was sent to the headteachers for validation. The second and third interviews took place in the following months when an early version of qualitative accounts was discussed in detail with three headteachers respectively. Specifically, the purpose of the second and the third interviews was to make up some important information which did not emerge at the first interview. Each interview was taped and then transcribed verbatim.

The interview protocol was designed to understand how headteacher perceived parent participation in education. This study borrowed Hochschild's (1983) methodological procedures whereby headteachers were asked to reflect on critical incidents regarding headteacher-parent interactions. Questions asked included: (a) Tell us a bit about what kinds of parent backgrounds in your school? How do you perceive parent backgrounds in relation to parent participation in schooling? (b) What is your primary responsibility as a headteacher? Does recent educational reform regarding parent participation in education affect your purpose as a headteacher? (c) What do you think of the word, professionalism, and what comes to your mind particularly related to parent participation? (d) How often do you contact with parents? Do you meet some parents on Parents' Day or during the meeting of Parents' Association? Whether are all parents willing to communicate with you? And why do some parents participate in headteacher-parent meetings? (e) In what circumstances do you hear parent criticism or obtain parent recognition in your headship?

4. EMOTIONAL GEOGRAPHIES OF PARENT PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOLING

4.1 Sociocultural Geographies and Parent Participation

Headteacher informants in the article often had assumptions about parent backgrounds that are socioculturally biased, delivering their comments on pupils' family backgrounds which had a significant impact on children's performances. As Headteacher Ben exclaimed:

At the community some parents are classified as 'the working class'. This rural community does not provide many job opportunities so they look for jobs away from this rural area to the city. Owing to living in the poor environment, parents unable to provide the better environment for their children. Usually, their children's academic performance is not good enough. Even worse, some children from the working class can not catch up with those who from the middle class since their parents do not support their children in schooling. (Headteacher Ben).

Headteacher Adam delivered similar comments on her experiences about parent participation in schooling which represented traditional norms of 'disadvantaged' families failing to support their children's education.

On Parents' Day, I was looking forward to all parents from this community who could visit the school exchange some experiences in children's education. It was a little pity that some parents, especially from low-income families, were unable to visit the school and have a chance to discuss with their children's learning and performance (Headteacher Adam).

Headteacher informants' responses of parent participation in schooling seemed to be consistent with the ways parent backgrounds have taken for granted that parents with middle to high socio-economic positions are primarily active participation in formal and informal activities in schools (Driessen, Smit, & Slegers, 2005). From Headteacher Adam's judgment, parents' failure to attend meetings or officially organized events was regarded as failure to support their children's. There was a sense of 'otherness' towards those parents from the working class or low-income households which was seen to enlarge sociocultural distance between headteachers and parents.

Furthermore, the literature indicates a tendency to judge and to classify parents according to a range of normality, including parents' ethnic or racial status which is likely to be labeled as 'good' or 'bad' related to home-school interactions. For example, some studies have reported 'black' parents having unrealistic expectations of their children or not interested in their children's education (Charles, Roscigno & Torres, 2007; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). In this study, Eva delivered her opinions about some aboriginal parents whose attitudes towards their children's education. As she indicates:

Some parents are aborigines in our community whose seem not to take children's education seriously. One teacher told me that one of his pupils was absent for several days... Later I phoned his aboriginal mother but she did not say anything... I tried to urge she should bring her child to school according to the law, but she failed to do so. I really felt disappointed (Headteacher Eva).

Another aspect of parent backgrounds is concerned with parent marital status. The research findings are consistent with related literatures which present that single-parent families can be problematic in children's education (Lasky, 2000). Adam's statement illustrated that the single-parent family is usually failure to build up a warm and supportive family environment for children's education. For example,

I have a boy called Willy, who lives with his father only. Several years ago his mother died in a traffic accident. His father is unemployed and beats Willy quite often. ... Later the social worker helped Willy away from his father bully. I am empathy with Willy's situation. (Headteacher Adam)

Headteachers' responses to teacher-parent relations illustrate their social distance from parents or social closeness to parents particularly in terms of parents' sociocultural status. Headteachers seem to be inevitable to see some parents as 'the others' by the presence of definite stereotypes. Under these circumstances, the gap of their emotional understanding between headteachers and 'other' parents may be formed, and the emotional closeness between the two parties could be difficult to achieve.

4.2 Moral Geographies and Parent Participation

Moral issues are concerned with value judgment and beliefs. People may achieve the moral agreement and support when their value judgment or beliefs are similar. This will bring about the emotional closeness among people involved. Three headteacher participants in this study indicated that the paramount purpose of teaching is the motto, 'no child left behind'. These headteachers expressed the importance of caring, with which they also emphasized that parents should be concerned.

Some parents recognize that I have a significant influence in leadership to encourage teachers who should spend time on children's behaviour in discipline... I feel that I obtain parents' support in leadership. Most teachers also convey their positive comments on my leadership and example in children's discipline. (Headteacher Ben)

Indeed, caring for children was one of moral purposes for headteachers. When headteachers' moral purposes are achieved, happiness, gratification, self-fulfillment, and other positive emotions are the consequence (Oatley & Jenkins, 1996). On the contrary, headteachers' negative emotions can occur when they feel their moral purposes in children's learning are being ignored.

Another moral purpose of being a headteacher is concerned with the caring purpose of schooling. Yet, when headteachers' purposes are at odds with those around them, particularly for parents, frustration, helplessness, anger, and even disgust may occur. Such negative emotions can be affect headteachers' moral

purposes, leading them to reduce their efforts and enthusiasm for their work (Hargreaves, 2001). Headteachers in this study reported feeling helpless and powerless when parents did not value the significance of caring and support in children's education:

Some parents, as far as I know, seem to assume that children's education is not their responsibilities. They often expressed that they were not good at children learning. But I do believe if parents spend more time on caring for their children, children may try to improve their learning performance for their parents in turn. (Headteacher Ben)

Adam and Ben expressed similar comments on parents' indifferent attitudes towards children's learning:

Some pupils are chronically late in learning or they have some behavior problems and for me, this is not a really big problem. The real problem is when I phone pupils' home and I can tell by the uncaring responses from their parents, indicating that parents are disinterested in all efforts to find solutions for their children's learning. They have already given up their children. I cannot figure out why these parents do not care about their children (Headteacher Adam)

Caring is one of the most important elements in children's education. But I find that some parents in this community have already given up their children. I cannot understand why these parents do not care about their children... I feel very frustrated (Headteacher Ben).

Educators frequently identify that inconsistency in parents' and headteachers' moral purposes provokes negative emotions. Teachers feel responsible for children, and as Nias (1999) remarks, teachers feel that their moral 'answerability' to pupils puts on them an obligation to 'care' for them. She and her colleagues also comments that teachers may lose their sense of moral purpose and become 'demoralized' (Nias, Southworth, & Yeomans, 1989), particularly when their efforts to work with children were impeded due to lack of support from parents.

4.3 Professional Geographies and Parent Participation

Headteachers in this study perceived positive emotions when parents conveyed their respect and agreement with headteachers' professional judgment, regarding headteachers and teachers as experts on pupils' learning and curriculum planning. When headteachers received parents' positive acknowledgement related to their headship, they reinforced their authority and power over parents due to their professional status.

As a head, I need to focus on children's learning and behaviour.... I explained how to enhance children's academic performance ... and parents were impressed by my efforts of doing this. I am so glad that parents recognized what I had done for those children.... Some parents really appreciated my professional performance in helping students. (Headteacher Adam)

Eva delivered her opinion about how parents express their gratitude to teachers' help for children's learning.

As far as I know, most parents do appreciate teachers' professional performance in helping their children. Particularly in Chinese societies, there is an old saying, 'Even if someone is your teacher for only one day, you should regard him as your father for the rest of your life.' In other words, teachers are still regarded as respected people nowadays, even though teachers face more and more pressures from the general public. (Headteacher Eva)

However, headteachers and teachers may suffer professional vulnerability due to parents' disagreement with their professional judgment. Sometimes, parents demand 'unreasonable' questions or 'demanding' requirements. The following is an example, describing Adam who acknowledged that he felt defensive when the parent commented on his headship.

My school is located in the centre of the city. Some parents are doctors, university professors or working as managers, and sometimes they complained about how I paid little attention to their children's learning.... Actually these parents want 'more extra curricular activities' arranged for their kids but I need to take care of the whole school children's needs. It is difficult to satisfy these parents' expectations. (Headteacher Adam)

Respondents accounts indicated that their notion of headteacher professionalism was significantly influenced by parents' needs or viewpoints to define or redefine her professional identity. Headteacher interviewees seemed to possess the 'classical professionalism', revealing that they are experts in education, enjoying parents' gratitude and support for their profession and leadership (Lasky, 2000). However, 'flexible' professionalism possessed by parents ask headteachers to arrange some curriculum and activities for their children, which may challenge headteachers' profession and leadership. Headteachers' sense of emotional closeness or distance that headteachers perceptions of their relationships with parents is affected by their definition or redefinition of professionalism.

4.4 Political Geographies and Parent Participation

In Taiwan, the act, Education Basic Law, has empowered parents the rights to participate in schooling and to choose what sort of school or educational system would be appropriate for their children's learning. Lasky (2005) argues that with the emergence of parent power in education, headteachers and teachers face more requirements and pressures from parents.

One day a student's parent walked into my office, complaining about his son bullied by other pupils. Most important, he accused of the teacher lacking of care about his son's situation. ... after that I asked the teacher. She told me that she had dealt with his son's situation.... Lastly, I found this student lied to his father owing to his absence of attendance. (Headteacher Ben)

When educational practitioners interact with parents, they normally 'pretend' their authentic emotions (often referring to negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, helplessness) to avoid possible conflict with parents, particularly while facing parents' criticism (Hargreaves, 2001). Such an emotional response for educational practitioners can be in line with what Goleman (1995) coins the term, emotional masking. The following is an example when Headteacher Adam once encountered a parent angrily accusing of his child's teacher 'bad' instruction:

One day there was a parent angrily running into my office, accusing his child's homeroom teacher who used inappropriate teaching methods to his child. I tried to appease his emotions and patiently listened to his complaints.... Finally, he realized what he heard was not true. But you know, at that time I needed to 'manage' my emotions, patiently communicating with this parent (Headteacher Adam)

Emotional management above used by Adam could be a useful way to minimize possibly anxious, uneasy or even conflicting interactions. In spite of the use of emotional management avoiding conflicting interactions with each another, educational practitioners often manage their authentic emotions especially when they face parents' criticism. Although Goleman (1998) argues that the importance of managing one's emotions has been most widely highlighted in organizational operation, Boler (1999) criticize Goleman's view of emotional management, arguing that it involves 'selling out' the emotional self to the purposes and profits of the organization, for instance, a smile for a sale, or to the 'nice' relations with the clients (or parents in the study). Eva said that being an educational practitioner is laborious work and needs to be aware of the importance of 'professional image'. For example:

In oriental countries educational practitioners are regarded as intellectuals who are knowledgeable and have higher social status in the society. Whether being a headteacher or a teacher, we are expected not to fight with parents even though they lose their temper, accusing of something against you.... Over time we are getting used to pretend our real feelings, i.e. making our authentic emotions to ease up parents' anger or resentment. In doing so we could be viewed as 'qualified' educational practitioners. (Headteacher Eva)

As far as the pretence of emotions is concerned, headteachers or teachers usually adopt the strategy of emotional masking to encounter parents' criticism or unreasonable requirements. Ashforth & Humphrey (1993) argue that masking emotions can identify with the expectations of the role. Emotional masking and management can reduce the tensions between educational practitioners (including headteachers and teachers) and parents; however, it is used to protect educational practitioners themselves against parents' criticism and hostility (Hargreaves, 2000). In the long term, educational practitioners gradually keep political distance from parents owing to 'hiding' authentic emotions which may impede the authentic relations.

4.5 Physical Geographies and Parent Participation

Physical geographies are one aspect of emotional geographies which focuses upon physical phenomena. We may feel distance from people who are right next to us whereas we feel very close to ones who live miles away. In this respect, emotions have imaginary geographies (Shields, 1991). Headteachers-parents interactions can be involved by face-to-face, by meetings, by telephones, by notes, by e-mails and so forth. One of affecting the quality of Headteachers-parents relationships is frequency. For example:

Some parents are working as volunteers in my school. Some of them tell stories in the morning when homeroom teachers attend the staff meeting. Some work as lollipop men who temporarily stop the flow of traffic so children can cross an intersection. Some do other things, such as working as clerks in the school library, or working as cleaners who help first/second graders to clean their classrooms. (Headteacher Eva)

Headteacher Eva continued to express her positive emotions because of parents as volunteers for school children education:

I find that most parents working as volunteers in my school are housekeepers. They have lots of free time so that they come to the school as volunteers. ...At the end of the year I usually give a letter to these volunteering parents, delivering my gratitude to them. (Headteacher Eva)

Parents' willingness and abilities to participate in and around the school can draw up physical closeness with headteachers. Working as voluntary parents would be a good example of building up physical closeness between headteachers and parents. Headteachers and parents meet each another frequently, positive emotions reported by headteachers occurred.

By contrast, related literatures reveal that communications between educational practitioners and parents in secondary schools are overwhelmingly episodic and infrequent (e.g. Lasky, 2000). Compared with the difficulties of physical closeness for secondary headteachers and teachers to develop better relationships with parents (Walker, 1998), primary school headteachers and teachers and parents engage more frequent interactions which seems to be positive influence on the quality of teacher-parent interactions. Similarly, Hargreaves (2001) found that half of the teachers selected reported positive emotions with parents involved informal discussions.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The primary purpose of this article has been to explore how headteachers' emotions can be influenced by their interactions with parents based on Hargreaves' five dimensions of emotional geographies. To achieve this goal, emotional geographies of headteacher-parent relations were analyzed by parents' sociocultural backgrounds, inseparable from headteachers' sense of moral purposes and professionalism, related to headteachers' emotional masking, and headteachers' physical connection with parents.

There are five dimensions of emotional geographies in relation to headteacher-parent interactions, and the research findings revealed headteacher-parent relationships were interconnected with conceptions of culture, status and power. First, research data illustrate that the emotions headteachers experienced in their interactions with parents were largely affected by parents' socioeconomic status, ethnic identity, or marital status. The respondent headteachers in this study seemed to be inescapable to regard some parents as 'the others' by the presence of definite stereotypes. Second, consistency in parents' and headteachers' moral purposes provokes positive emotions and vice versa. Headteachers' sense of emotional closeness could be achieved when headteachers and parents recognized each other particularly in educational beliefs. Third, a sense of 'classical professionalism' was still implanted in headteachers' minds, and this is difficult to see parents as partners in children's education. Fourth, emotional masking or management was usually used for headteachers to soften possibly conflicting situations between headteachers and parents. Finally, physical distance or closeness depended upon the frequency of headteacher-parent interactions, and parents' willingness to be volunteers in and around the school.

To sum up, this article tries to figure out their similarities and differences between the headteachers related to their perceptions of each aspect of the emotional geographies. The headteacher respondents regarded some parents as 'normality' while others as 'problematic'. The research findings, perhaps, merely from headteachers' accounts of headteacher-parent relations, reveal their similarities rather than differences. Why did the headteachers' in this research have similar viewpoints of five aspects of emotional geographies? The article agrees with Lasky's viewpoints (2000) that the headteachers delivered their personal and cultural beliefs in their interactions with parents, largely shaped by the professional norm-based discourses and values they possessed within the culture of schooling.

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