

# Who Are We and Who Are They?

## A Comparison of Philosophical Beliefs Between American and Chinese Teacher Education Students



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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this study was to compare and contrast philosophical beliefs commonly shared among American pre-service and in-service teachers and their Chinese counterparts. A total of 100 responses was included in this study. A philosophical inventory with 34 items was used. The causes for the similarities and differences as indicated in the findings were examined. This study pointed out the danger of stereotyping people based on cultural backgrounds. It also encouraged teacher educators to challenge our own habitual view and vision of our practice.*

Numerous studies have been conducted on cultural differences between American and Chinese people (Reagan, 1996; Stevenson and Stigler, 1992; Zhu, 1991). The visible differences, such as food, holidays, costumes, linguistics can be identified rather easily, and many of the variables can be imitated and followed without a deep understanding. With the intensive development of multicultural education, cross-cultural analysis has gone beyond triviality. The invisible factors, such as people's belief systems, cultural and historical principles underlying the visible and invisible factors, deserve thorough exploration. International comparative studies have indicated that Asian students, including Chinese students, have outperformed American students in standardized tests. The stereotypical image of American education and that of the Chinese is progressivist vs. conventional prac-

tice. According to Stevenson and Stigler (1992), the reason behind the discrepancy was due to the conceptions that originated from differing social, cultural and political systems.

The purpose of this study was to compare educational philosophical beliefs between American undergraduate and graduate students in education and their counterparts in China. The research questions in this study are: 1) What are the different perceptions between the two groups? 2) What are the commonly shared beliefs among the two groups of teacher education students? 3) What are the causes for the similarities and differences as indicated by the results? And 4) What are the implications of the findings for our efforts in promoting multicultural understanding and improving our educational practice?

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The most vital agent in improving students' performance is the classroom teachers; they have the most often and direct contacts with students on a daily basis of all professionals. The classroom teachers' philosophy will reflect in their decisions of pedagogy, selection of content, and modeling interactions with students who are different from the mainstream. While classroom teachers are held accountable for their students' learning, each decision a teacher makes in a classroom may produce impact upon the success or failure of his/her students academically, emotionally and culturally. To improve success, knowledge and comprehension of educational philosophies are becoming increasingly important for our teacher education students to justify their practice and evaluate their effectiveness in working with students (Segall & Wilson, 1998). At the same time, as teacher education professionals, our students must acknowledge and understand multiple perspectives of educational philosophies. This could lead to reflective development of their own educational philosophy as well as comprehension of others. Examining philosophical beliefs commonly shared among pre-service and in-service teachers, and identifying the difference(s) would be significant in helping to understand American education and educators as well as their counterparts from another educational system. The current high-stakes testing movement requires educators to be philosophically competent in developing a clear definition of accountability so as to build an accountability system appropriate for improvement and assessment of American students' performance (Littleton, 2000, & Bogotch, 2001).

## DATA SOURCE

A total of 100 participants was included in this study with 50 American and 50 Chinese participants. Among the American participants, 29 were undergraduate students and 21 were graduate students. They took courses with this researcher in an American northwest regional university (EWU), Winter Quarter, 2002. The

50 Chinese participants (35 undergraduates and 15 graduates) attended a four-year provincial university in the northeastern China. The Chinese participants were juniors and seniors in the second semester of the academic year 2001-2002. The undergraduate students of the two universities all had completed their major educational foundations courses, such as educational psychology, foundations of education, and teaching strategies. More than 50% of the American graduate participants were classroom teachers while their Chinese counterparts had little or no teaching experience.

A philosophical inventory adopted from Sadker & Sadker's educational foundations book (1994) was used. The Chinese participants used a Chinese version of the survey translated by this researcher. The 34 items in the instrument included five major schools of educational philosophy: essentialism, perennialism, progressivism, existentialism and behaviorism. The statements covered the areas of purpose of education, curriculum organization, teaching strategies, and perception of essential knowledge and student role. A five-level Likert-scale, with 5 as strongly agree to 1 as strongly disagree, was provided for the participants to associate each statement with his/her beliefs. A T test was used for comparative analysis. The Chi-Square test was used to demonstrate how each differences were distributed. The P value was set up at  $< .03$ .

## FINDINGS

There were no statistically significant differences revealed between the undergraduate and graduate participants, nor between the graduate students of the two countries. Eighteen out of the entire 34 statements showed statistically significant differences, however, when the comparison was conducted between the Americans and their counterpart Chinese participants each as an independent group. The statistical significant differences did not fall into any single school of philosophy. They spread among the five schools of thought. Five out of seven behaviorist statements showed statistical significant differences between the two groups. These differences, how-

**TABLE 1**

Comparison of the responses (EWU: Americans and HU: Chinese)

PHILOSOPHICAL STATEMENTS	Mean		S.D.	p
	EWU	HU		
Curriculum should focus on past great thinkers.	2.4	2.8	0.92	0.03
Students should be permitted to determine curriculum.	2.8	3.8	1.17	0.00
Students ability to think is more vital than social skills or knowledge.	2.8	3.3	1.25	0.02
An effective education is not to meet students immediate needs.	2.6	3.8	1.19	0.00
Students should not be forced to study.	1.9	2.9	1.10	0.00
Programmed learning is an effective method.	2.6	3.2	0.80	0.00
School is to help students understand themselves and find the meaning of existence.	2.8	3.8	1.09	0.00
More emphasis should be on teaching about concerns of minorities & women.	3.1	3.8	0.99	0.00
Rewarding helps with student learning.	2.3	3.2	1.10	0.00
Teachers-guide discovery is a key method.	2.9	3.8	1.04	0.00
Students learn best by engaging in real-world activities, than reading.	4.1	3.6	1.03	0.01
Material is taught effective when broken into small parts.	4.0	2.9	1.04	0.00
Curriculum should be determined by information essential to all students.	3.9	3.4	1.04	0.01
People are shaped more by environment than genetic reason.	3.2	2.7	1.24	0.03
Curriculum should be built around personal experiences and needs.	3.4	2.6	1.05	0.00
Students learn best through reinforcement.	3.7	2.4	1.01	0.00
Effective schools assign homework.	2.4	2.0	0.80	0.03
Teachers should be trusted to decide students acceptable behaviors.	3.3	2.0	1.12	0.00

ever, were not statistical biased towards behaviorism by either group. When the means of seven statements in each school of philosophy were summed, the interesting phenomenon is that both groups obtained the highest total with progressivism (See Table 1). A further speculation of each mean sum, however, indicated that the similar sum comes from a different combination of sub-means.

The perceptions commonly shared among the two groups of participants covered all three aspects of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology and aesthetics. Many shared perceptions identified among the two groups (See Table 2) were demonstrated in the following statements: Academic rigor is an essential component of education. Subject-centered curriculum should focus on basic subjects, such as Three Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic), history and science. Beauty is up to an individual's decision. Each person has free will to develop as he/she sees fit. There is no objective and universal reality. There should be no social promotion. The two groups also scored low on the following statements: School should instill traditional values. The same curriculum should be taught to all students. Effective learning is unstructured and in-

formal. Both groups strongly agreed with the statement: School should promote analytical problem solving ability.

Among the 18 statements that revealed statistically significant differences, the Chinese participants valued several statements higher that represent the perennialist point of view (Curriculum should focus on past great thinkers. Students' ability to think is more vital than social skills or knowledge. Teacher-guided discovery is a key method.) Ironically, the Chinese participants expressed favoritism toward the statement (Students should be permitted to determine their own curriculum.) than their American counterparts. A noteworthy point is that the Chinese respondents valued statistically higher the statement that school must put more emphasis on teaching about the concerns of minorities and women. American participants believed more strongly on the impact of environment upon a person's shaping than genetics.

## DISCUSSION

With differences anticipated, reasons for the differences entail speculation for analysis. Examining the educational goals and purposes in

**TABLE 2**

Similarities and differences between the two groups

<b>Higher means by American Participants (EWU vs HU)*<sup>1</sup></b> Curriculum determined by information essential to all students. (3.9 / 3.4)	<b>Commonalties shared between the two groups (EWU vs HU)*<sup>2</sup></b> Subject-centered curriculum should focus on basic subjects, 3 Rs, history and science. (3.36 / 3.4)	<b>Higher means by Chinese participants (HU vs EWU)*<sup>3</sup></b> Curriculum should focus on past great thinkers. (2.8 / 2.4)
Effective schools assign homework. (2.4 / 2.0)	There should be no social promotion. (3.4 / 3.4)	Students' ability to think is more vital than social skills or knowledge. (3.3 / 2.8)
Students learn best by engaging in real-world activities than reading. (4.1 / 3.6)	Academic rigor is essential in education. (2.9 / 3.0)	An effective education is not to meet students' immediate needs. (3.8 / 2.6)
Curriculum to be built around personal experiences and needs. (3.4 / 2.6)	Schools should instill traditional values. (2.6 / 2.7)	Teacher-guided discovery is a key method. (3.8 / 2.9)
Material is taught effectively when broken into small parts. (3.96 / 2.88)	Students should study the same curriculum. (2.3 / 2.1)	More emphasis should be on teaching about concerns of minorities & women. (3.76 / 3.06)
People are shaped more by environment than genetics. (3.2 / 2.7)	School should propose analytical problem solving ability. (4.7 / 4.2)	Students should be permitted to determine own curriculum. (3.8 / 2.8)
Students learn best through reinforcement (3.7 / 2.4)	Social interaction is needed in curriculum (3.59 / 3.76)	Students should not be forced to study (2.88 / 1.94)
Teachers should be trusted to decide students' acceptable behaviors (3.31 / 2.02)	Students should be active participants in learning. (4.7 / 4.2)	School is to help students understand themselves and find the meaning of existence, (3.78 / 2.84)
	There is no objective and universal reality (3.3 / 3.2)	Programmed learning is an effective method (3.2 / 2.6)
	Effective learning is unstructured and informal (2.48 / 2.4)	Rewarding helps with student learning (3.24 / 2.33)
	Each person has free will to develop. (3.59 / 3.3)	
	Beauty is up to an individuals. (4.01 / 4.2)	
	Frequent testing is the best way to determine learning. (2.5 / 2.8)	

Note: \*1 & \*2: the first number in the parentheses represents mean (out of 5) of EWU students' responses while the second number represents that of HU students.

\*3: the first number in the parentheses represents mean (out of 5) of HU students' responses while the second number represents that of EWU students'.

each country may provide a philosophical underpinning of each system. As the United States is one of few countries with a decentralized educational system, the curriculum standards of Washington State, where the American participants resided, were used to make the compar-

ison with the national standards in China. In the current document of Essential Academic Learning Requirements of the State of Washington (1997), four learning goals are formulated: 1) students will possess the ability to read, write and communicate, 2) students will have knowl-

edge of the core subjects, math, natural science, and social science, 3) students will obtain the ability to think analytically, logically and critically, and 4) work ethics will be fostered.

In the year 2000, the secondary school curriculum guideline designed by the Ministry of Education in China (Wu, 2001) specified the goals of education as follows: 1) to foster the moral value of love for the socialist country, Chinese Communist Party, national pride and appropriate world outlook, 2) to master core subjects and independent thinking skills to become a life long learner, 3) to develop healthy living habits and keep fit, 4) to foster meaningful appreciation of the nature, society, science and arts, and 5) to develop healthy work ethics. After scrutinizing the educational goals formulated in each of the two countries, several of them are very similar. It would seem that perennialist beliefs in education and the belief of the power of education upon the improvement of civilization transcend the geographical as well as social boundaries.

The similarities of the responses to many statements by the two groups also indicate that education and instruction, as an important part of human life, share many common characteristics. The desire for learning, emphasis on basic knowledge and skills, students' participation in learning, free development of a person and beauty judged by individual viewpoint, were approved by the majority of both groups. They all valued down inculcation of traditional values (of course, each group may refer to different things) as purpose of schooling.

The results of this study reinforces to us, that any generalization or categorization of people's perceptions and beliefs among American educators or among Chinese educators should be made with great caution. The same philosophical beliefs can be reflected in different behaviors and practice. Critical examination of "cultural ethnocentrism" (Reagan, 1996) espoused in much of American educational practice would be crucial to the advancement of our current effort in multicultural education.

As Gerald Gutek states, education is "highly contextual" although it is a universal social engagement (1997). The two systems work distinc-

tively to a great extent. To the Chinese, philosophy is an "imported" western term. Instead of the term philosophy, ideological theory has been used to describe each school of thought throughout Chinese educational intellectual history. In addition to the ancient and modern educational ideological theories, the Chinese Communist Party's political agenda, including Marxism, Leninism and Maoism constitute the course content of Chinese educational philosophy. Chinese educators learn about the five schools of philosophy separately as western values. Universities offer courses of educational philosophy by comparing and contrasting eastern and western educational theories.

The most influential educational ideology among Chinese people, including Chinese educators, is Confucianism. This most enduring thought has deeply penetrated in the Chinese culture, even in many Asian countries. A striking difference in Confucianism was his belief about human power instead of the super power of divinity (God), which dominated the western world until the Renaissance. At the same time, Confucius' disciples' strong advocacy for social hierarchy and wide acceptance of this idea throughout the Chinese history have strengthened the culture of respecting, even subordinating to, authority, the elderly and scholars as well as teacher-centered educational practice. Modeled by Confucius' educational practice, learning diligently and retrospective reflection have been cherished and practiced in Chinese education. Confucius highly valued learning the past with a belief that repetitive reviewing could promote a better comprehension of the content or scholarship. Thus, recognition and acceptance of Chinese educational thought may result in the Chinese participants' higher value on emphasizing learning from the past thinkers, and development of thinking ability as primary goal of education.

As early as 2,500 years ago, Confucius started to address the relationship between human beings and the environment in the process of human development although he didn't use the same terms. He stated that there were internal and external variables that affected a person's development. Between the two variables, the

more determinant is the internal one, a person's diligence and willingness to grow. This point of view was recurrent in Maoism. Thus, in the Chinese culture, a person's individual internalized desire to learn has been perceived as vital in his development. One's effort is attributed to his/her achievements. This may explain the reason why the Chinese participants didn't put more weight than their American counterparts on the impact of environment upon a person's development. An eclectic perception that has been in the Chinese educational philosophy course is that a triplet of one's efforts, inherent intelligence and environment contributes to a person's success (Wu, 1992). This belief may distinguish the Chinese educational policies and practice from those of the United States. The Chinese central government has never financed the students in the poverty-stricken areas as much as the US government has to deal with the equity issues. Students in those areas have to depend on their own persistence and tolerance of hardship more than those in the other parts of the country to make their college dream true.

The inquiry from Steven and Stigler's studies (1992) for American students' lower performance in math and science interpreted that Americans' belief of individual efforts had been destructed by some people's biased view that "not all children are capable of mastering the elementary school curriculum because of differences in innate ability" (p. 222). The culture of overemphasis upon innate ability deprives many American youngsters of self-esteem and diligence. This contrast with the Chinese triplet reflects as a different ideology with which each society addresses the issue within its own context.

Although differences have been reported to a great extent between American and Chinese participants, the results of the six statements under progressivist school of thought indicated otherwise. The mean sum of the statements in this school are similar with the two groups (EWU:26.63, HU:26). In addition, the mean of each group was the highest of all the five schools of philosophy, demonstrating the appealing power of progressivism either rhetorically or practically. The "logical" assumption has been

that American education has been more progressive than the Chinese with more student-oriented instruction, more hands-on activities, and emphasis on problem solving. But why did their Chinese counterparts share the similar degree of favoritism toward this philosophical belief? Is it due to the ideal perception of education depicted in progressivism or the results of instructional practice adopting progressivist approaches in American schools that made the participants of both groups generate such responses? Do a majority of American educators really approve, embrace and implement the philosophy in their profession?

Two years ago, a group of 11 Chinese educators came to observe schools in the area where the American participants resided. The Chinese visitors observed four to five classrooms separately in one middle school and one high school. By the end of the day, they commented that there was no great difference between American instructional practice and that of China except that the class size was much smaller in America. A one-day observation of two schools could be rather limiting and conclusion could be incomprehensive, though.

It is ironic to see the merging of the two conflicting thoughts of the American participants. While marking significantly higher than their Chinese counterparts on some statements of experience-based education, they scored higher on some behaviorism-based ones. If progressivist learning is advocated, students should have a high engagement in learning. Then the learning should be more student-oriented than teacher/adult-oriented, upon which the behavioral point of view is based. The American participants expect to be more of an authority figure in the classroom, issuing reinforcement and making decisions on students' behaviors. This result entails our teacher educators' efforts to facilitate our students' authentic and overall comprehension of progressive education instead of approving the philosophy only rhetorically. As a progressivist educator, frequent use of a behavioral modification approach would not be helpful in encouraging students' self-exploration and identification of values and truth. The danger in identifying one's philosophical beliefs in

an eclectic way, which always happens in this researcher's teacher education classes, could be a superficial mixture of some elements of each school of thought to meet one's individual convenience and purposes. Going beyond "comfort zone" of one's habitual thinking pattern is what we should challenge our teacher education students to pursue.

The findings of this study do not confirm some of the previous generalization of the differences between American and Chinese education. This study, however, pointed out the danger of stereotyping people based on cultural backgrounds. We, the people, are multicultural in spite of where we are. We share many similar perceptions and also have differences. If the differences are envisioned as learning opportunities, our educational practice could be more diversified and meet the needs of more students.

An interesting finding of this study is that the Chinese participants perceived the need of teaching about the concerns of minorities and women more strongly than their American counterparts (EWU:3.06, HU: 3.76). Multicultural education in America is facing a new challenge with the current high-stakes testing movement. Many standardized testing results have reflected issues of reliability and cultural bias. Teaching to the test is practiced in some schools at the expense of neglecting students at risk. The need to teach about the concerns of minorities and women in the United States should have a high mean instead of mediocre one so as to ensure that no child is left behind.

Identifying one's own educational philosophy could be used to facilitate a productive dialogue among educators regarding best practice, and help with a clear definition and a better understanding of the current accountability movement. Understanding of ourselves and others could challenge our habitual view and vision of our practice and promote an exploration of the accountability system according to our own sociocultural context.

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