

Now the Doors Are Open: Cross-Cultural Issues in Chinese Constructivist Education

Interviewer: What values do you want your child to have?

Interviewee: I certainly hope he grows up to have a good character. Of course, I want him to have some international values, not entirely Chinese ones. Now, China is gradually coming in line with international standards. We are in the integration. I certainly hope he can stand on his own, complete his own goals. I hope he can be free, as well as physically and mentally healthy. I just want him to be happy.



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FINDINGS

- Teachers need more accredited Montessori training programs.
- Schools need more qualified teachers.
- Families need more support from quality bilingual schools.

BACKGROUND/LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the implementation of the “open door policy” in the late 1970’s, China has reformed its educational policy and rapidly expanded private schools, called “minban” education (Chan and Wang, 2009). This included a theoretical shift in the Chinese philosophy of early education, specifically from a Soviet model to a constructivist one (Yeh, et al., 2004). Constructivism is a theory of human learning that states that humans build their own knowledge by coming up with theories and testing them through interacting with the world. This project is an exploration of the ways that **three Montessori and International Baccalaureate (IB) “minban” or private startup chain schools** are negotiating the changing Chinese education market and integrating Chinese culture and language in their Western, constructivist educational models.

Existing literature about perceptions in Montessori and IB programs reveal that culture clash is a consistent issue when Western education models are used with children from collective cultures, as both these models have a significant focus on the Western values of independence and learner empowerment. A majority of the Montessori studies are master’s theses, and many of the IB studies were conducted on behalf of the IB Organization. There are a few exceptions to this.

OBJECTIVES

To determine the perceptions of parents, teachers and administrators about what, if any, challenges and adaptations occur when implementing AMS Montessori, AMI Montessori, and IB styles of constructivist education in China was the goal. Data analysis has only been completed for the AMS Montessori program and that is what is presented in this document.

RESEARCH METHODS/VALIDITY CONCERNS

This study looked at two campuses of an American Montessori Society member school startup chain in a large city in northern China. The chain has a total of three schools. A toddler and a 3-6 year old classroom were observed on each campus, for a total of four classroom observations. One school was open for two school years and the other for four months. Observation protocols assessed the quality of program implementation, as well as the quality of teacher student interactions for teaching long-term life skills and for teaching higher order thinking skills (Alford, 2013; Dweck, 2006; Lillard, 2012; and O’Donnell, 2008). There were six teacher, five parent, and four administrator interviews using the responsive interviewing technique (Rubin, J. & Rubin, I., 2005). Themes were determined using the techniques of grounded theory (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), along with a Critical Race Theory lens (Parker & Lynn, 2009; Dovidio, et al., 2002).

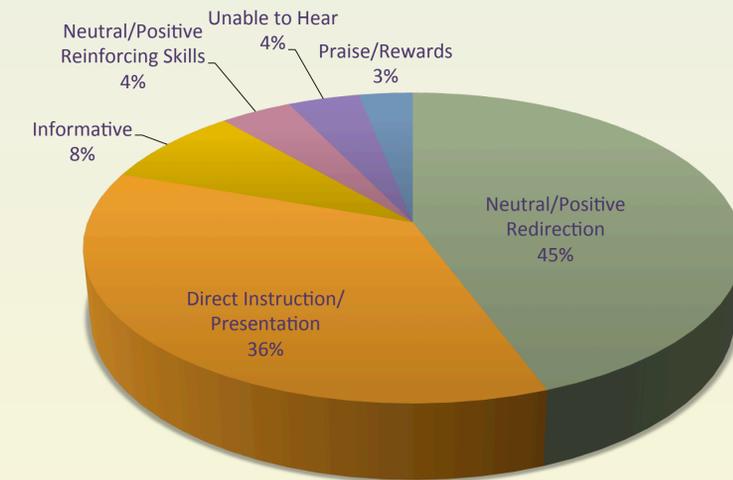
Parent and teacher participants were recruited by school administrators. This may have resulted in a skew toward interviewees that had high program satisfaction and observations in classrooms that had more program fidelity than others.

Challenges	Adaptations	Bilingualism
Generation Gap There is a generation and education gap between parents and extended family members raising children that can cause conflict at home and at school.	Primary School Preparation 5 year olds spend the their afternoons studying Chinese characters and Montessori math in response to parent concerns about acceptance into highly competitive selective bilingual primary schools.	Focus on English Language Learning Although it occurs in a fully bilingual environment, additional language learning is valued more than Mandarin instruction by some families.
Shift Away from Adult Centered Learning and Basic Needs Focus More of the younger, college-educated generation of parents value long-term learning, independence, character development, and English learning than do their parents.	Teaching Families about Student Centered Learning and Social and Emotional Skills Weekly Lectures, monthly subject area interactive events where parents act as students, and Adlerian social and emotional training for parents and students	Mandarin Montessori Curriculum Selected The school system has selected a Montessori style Mandarin curriculum and is piloting its use.
Interactions between Teachers and Students Teacher interactions with students provide specific feedback about organizing their work but little feedback about other academic or social skills that create a “growth mindset” (Dweck, 2006).	Building Teacher Capacity Adlerian behavior management training, monthly teacher observations, feedback about classroom practices, professional development by peers and educational experts, and oversight by a chain-wide Academic Leader	English Teachers Have Limited Early Childhood Training English teachers were Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) certified (but not Montessori trained) and received 8 hours of site based Montessori training.

IMPLICATIONS

School Level	National and International Level
Providing Teacher Development about “Growth Mindset” Work with teachers to practice giving specific, behavior-based reinforcement about life-long learning habits and skill development	Opportunities for Teacher Training Programs Meet the demand for training programs to meet the growing need for Montessori certified teachers in China, as well as providing TEFL training with an early childhood and constructivist focus
Giving Language Access to All Employees Provide mono-lingual employees at bilingual schools access to professional development, meetings, and organizational processes in their native language	Teaching Mandarin Language Curriculum Training International accrediting bodies for teacher training programs could increase the cultural responsiveness of Montessori implementation in China by requiring training programs in China to provide Mandarin language albums to future teachers

AVERAGE PERCENTAGE OF TYPES OF TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTIONS



The classroom observations showed that, on average, teachers in this program spent three quarters of the morning work cycle giving lessons and redirecting children’s behavior, largely around executive function tasks like how to organize their work. Only four percent of their time was spent giving encouraging feedback to reinforce other long-term learning habits and skills, such as perseverance, learning from mistakes, etc.

LIMITATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

- Even when fully completed, this study will be very small. Its purpose was to gather some initial data on perceptions about cultural issues in Chinese constructivist education programs. Further research in this area will need to be done to determine if these trends are generalizable.
- Finalize the data analysis of the International Baccalaureate and Association Montessori Internationale programs.

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