

Chapter 10

Developing Effective Teacher–Student Relationships in International Schools in China

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ABSTRACT

Establishing and maintaining productive and supportive relationships between teachers and students is critical in all educational environments. However, this can be particularly challenging in the international school setting where Western teachers frequently facilitate learning for culturally and ethnically non-Western students. This chapter describes a qualitative case study that identified strategies, understandings, and perceptions that effective Western teachers employed to develop effective relationships and facilitate high levels of learning with Chinese and other Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) middle level students. Analysis of interview and observational data from an international school in mainland China revealed six positive relationship-oriented themes integrated into teachers' instructional practices. This study highlights the importance of cultural understanding and the need for teachers to recognize and adapt to changing international school demographics and to prioritize the cultural, social, and emotional needs of their diverse students.

INTRODUCTION

The demand for an international education for children in China is increasing rapidly (Gaskell, 2019). While historically, international schools were designed to serve a primarily expatriate population, increasing numbers of middle-class Chinese families now have access to and are choosing an international, English-medium education for their children (Gaskell, 2019). Many Chinese parents seek a Western educational approach as an alternative to the rigid structure of the national curriculum or because they plan to send their children abroad to attend a foreign university after graduation. They hope that educat-

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ing their children in English language, Western-oriented schools will result in scores on language and other standardized exams sufficient to achieve admission to competitive top-ranked Western universities.

International schools that offer a foreign, Western oriented curricular program typically employ teachers from Western, primarily English-speaking countries such as the U.S., Canada, U.K., and Australia to provide core academic instruction to students (Gaskell, 2019). Because of the typically disparate backgrounds between teachers and host country students, the ethnic and cultural differences between international teachers and local students create the potential for a cultural disconnect that can interfere with and negatively impact the quality of student learning (Bailey, 2015). To mitigate this potential conflict, international schoolteachers need cultural understanding, sensitivity, and a specialized skillset to meet the needs of students learning from a foreign instructional model culture while living and interacting under the daily influence of their home culture (den Brok et al., 2010). Effective teachers in the international setting have the knowledge and skills necessary to bridge this cultural gap and facilitate learning while ensuring that students are challenged and their culture and heritage are preserved and embraced (Ladson-Billings, 1995b).

In addition to the demands of adapting to a cultural setting that differs from that at home, middle level students in particular experience a significant developmental transition during their early adolescence as they experience rapid physical, intellectual, and social-emotional changes (Caskey & Anfara, 2014). In the West, this period is marked commonly by a greater focus on peers and reduced reliance on parents, increasing the significance of their relationships with their teachers (Allen et al., 2013; Engels et al., 2016; Hamre et al., 2013; Setoh et al., 2015). While a cultural emphasis on filial devotion may downplay the magnitude of peer engagement in Chinese students, the cognitive growth and other biological changes that occur at this age still influence their ability to focus and learn in the classroom setting (Setoh et al., 2015). Because of this developmental shift, supportive, age-appropriate student-teacher relationships are critical for success in school (Allen et al., 2013; Eisenbach & Greathouse, 2020).

This chapter identifies and discusses many of the ways that effective Western teachers support the learning and engagement of their Chinese and Confusion Heritage Culture (CHC) students. Using a qualitative, case study design, the researcher collected and analyzed data from foreign teachers in an international school in mainland China and identified several of the culturally and developmentally sensitive perceptions, understandings, and instructional strategies employed by those teachers with their Chinese and CHC students. This chapter discusses those qualities and characteristics and their impact on pedagogical practice in the international school setting.

BACKGROUND

Cultural Differences and Conflict

There are several types of English-medium international schools throughout mainland China, but most provide or incorporate aspects of Western curriculum and pedagogy, usually originating from the U.S., U.K., or Europe (Mast, 2016), and most employ Western, typically white, Anglo-Saxon (Poole, 2020), native English-speaking teachers to provide at least part of the instructional program (Gaskell, 2019). The differences between traditional Chinese Confucian values and beliefs about education and the associated highly competitive, exam-oriented school environment and the approaches to students and learning that characterize Western education have the potential to create a conflict for Chinese students as they navigate

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