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Comparing Caring — East and West

Early Childhood Care and Education in China

by Sally Cartwright

For five weeks in 1988, I visited kindergartens in and near Beijing quite as I chose and with my own interpreter. Hoping to see what the Chinese considered their finest early childhood education, I concentrated mainly on two "excellent" schools: Wei Xiu Kindergarten — under the auspices of Peking University, with an enrollment of over 500 children — and June First Kindergarten — a boarding preschool for 400 children from leading Beijing families. I returned to China in 1995 with a follow-up visit to Municipal No. 2 Kindergarten for 800 children in Kunming. Whether in Beijing or Kunming, the so-called "best" urban kindergartens in this authoritarian society are very much the same.

On a typical visit, my interpreter and I entered the classroom with a nod to the teacher and students, who responded with friendly smiles. Forty-six four year olds sat at wooden tables in orderly rows. With magic markers, the children were copying a wall picture of an elaborate dragon and phoenix. They seemed relaxed. They worked seriously, steadily, with warm intent.

Although skillfully done, the colorful drawings were nearly identical. Afterward, I was given one of the drawings (see page 25). When I later showed it to a Chinese professor of history, she explained every detail of the drawing in terms of its classical significance. She took me to Beijing's Forbidden City and showed me 600 year old sculptures in wood and bronze with the same details as those drawn by the children.

One by one, the children finished their pictures and brought them to the teacher's desk. Before going out to recess, they waited on a long bench at the side of the room. Far from resenting the delay by those still at work, the fast students were poised in tender support of the slow ones. I felt strangely privileged to witness this silent, collective spirit of encouragement!

Outdoors, I watched a group singing game of some 34 children led by a teacher. She initiated every verse and movement. No child came forward to lead any part of the game. I also watched the children when they weren't led by adults. They stood around and took desultory turns at a slide and climbing gym. I saw no self-initiated dramatic play.

What a puzzle! Forty-sixty children sat still as mice. They performed in almost identical ways as directed by their teacher. Yet they listened attentively and did their tasks with care, involvement, and inordinate skill.

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No fidgets, no whispers, no touching each other. Nor did they "let loose" on the playground. How could this be? Why weren't the children either listless, surly, pugnacious, or fretful, as they might well be in our Western schools? I saw neither restlessness nor aggression. The children were alert without tension, friendly, uncomplaining, quick with spontaneous humor and compassion, and generally delightful. Moreover, my observations agree with those of other Western professionals (Kesson, 1975).

There were also what many of us would consider major deficits: individual child initiative seemed almost nonexistent. Nor could I discern originality or imagination in the children's play and work. Problem solving and invention were indeed rare. Children seemed to have little opportunity for choice, decision, or leadership.

China has no alphabet as we do. To functionally read Chinese, one must commit to memory some 3,000 characters, while a semblance of scholarship requires rote knowledge of more than 5,000 of these strangely abbreviated, disconnected, and bewildering pictographs. Learning to read and write in China requires years of diligent practice. If China is to help her 200 million four and five year olds effectively approach this quelling memory task, perhaps conformity and rote practice in classrooms of 40 odd children are not unreasonable.

Authority in China, past and present, is widely respected. In spite of revolutionary changes since 1949, China's age old authoritarian concepts of family, school, society, and government are embedded in the daily life of her people. Most Chinese seem to accept obedience and conformity; it is a way of life they know. (See the discussion of authoritarianism in China and her schools by Howard Gardner, 1989.) Many Chinese feel that to encourage independent thought in a country of over one billion persons might invite chaos or repressive measures such as the appalling Tiananmen Square Massacre of June 1989.

Both teachers and children approach learning with reverence and gratitude. Lin Jing Hua, director of June First Kindergarten, saw the teachers on her staff as symbols of ancient and beneficent authority. They were to inspire the children with traditional stories, songs, and pictures of honesty, loyalty, steadiness, moderation, patience, love, unity, humor, and warm satisfaction in helping each other. Chinese respect for authority seems ingrained. East/West Comparisons 1, 2, and 4 (see box on page 24) help explain this prevalent quality. No wonder Chinese classrooms seem repressive! But, paradoxically to us, teacher controls are gentle and supportive.

Community is a powerful, living concept in China. More than five times our US population is packed together in China, and the people share the oldest continuing culture on earth. It is not surprising that one's success depends on group success. One's self-esteem depends on being part of the group and on one's contribution to the group. Devotion and service to family and community are paramount.

The group as a whole gives caring support to the individual. In China, the work unit and government often make important decisions regarding where one lives, one's education, military training, employment, sometimes even marriage. At first glance, we would find this intolerable, but an outstanding quality of Chinese authority, unlike fascism, is its significant emotional nourishment to each individual in the group. In kindergarten, this collective concern seems fostered by a lack of competition, a pervasive conformity, and especially by the teachers, who — with no threat of punishment! — model consistent, affectionate help to the children.

Competition among Chinese kindergarten children seemed nonexistent. This may partially account for their interpersonal caring. In the West, with our competitive individualism, we lack the strong bond of unity mentioned above. Some of our teachers and parents work hard for a sense of security, belonging, and well-being in each child, often with doubtful results. This may be in part because we believe self-esteem derives largely from individual progress. We try to build a child's positive sense of self by encouraging individual achievement; in China, personal prominence is often frowned upon. Much of our culture admires a competitive attitude; in China, one is seldom out to beat the next guy. The feeling is, rather, "Whatever for? How self-defeating!" Again the unspoken bond between persons, between all living and inanimate things, is deeply rooted in centuries of tradition. Competing with another person is like the right hand competing with the left. For many Chinese, it makes no sense.

Uncritical affection for children flourished. In most Chinese families, children seem warmly, joyously accepted. This begins at birth with traditional mother-infant bonding, and, in general, family members stay together, grandparents live in, and small children bask in loving affection.

In all the time I spent in preschool Chinese classrooms, I saw no angry criticism, no punishment, no threat of penalty. Rather, I saw teachers giving affectionate support to the children, with gentle humor, patience, and trust. In spite of rigid conformity, the children, to my

astonishment, were not put down, not demoralized, not shamed. Although teachers had high expectations for child conformity and skill, they did not require submission. (Repressive authority, as we know it, usually requires submission. See Bettelheim, 1960, and Adorno, 1950.)

I would like to end with some hunches. When we link democracy and freedom to competition and the profit motive, when we match individualism to our outworn survival-of-the-fittest rationale, we tend to diminish our feelings for cooperation and mutual reward. Why are so many of China's kindergarten children attentive, eager, skillful, and joyous compared to our youngsters? I suspect that much in our competitive industrial society opposes the basic unity of mankind. In contrast, China's history, culture, and education contribute to the deep sense of unity frequently felt by her people.

Generally speaking, in China, with the exception of vociferous dissidents who are considered outsiders, the group cares for the worth of each member as an integral part of itself. We need to recognize the nourishment, the enduring self-esteem which Chinese society gives to most of its members. If we could bring this kind of nourishment to our schools, perhaps more of our children would build deep, positive feelings about themselves. They would develop personal self-esteem uncompromised by the selfishness of individual, competitive achievement.

Parents, professional caregivers, and teachers can devise environments with and for children which encourage group learning and put us in touch with the sustaining *unity in diversity* which is basic to democratic community. Thus, we need not accept conformity. Instead, we can enhance self-initiative, invention, and originality within a cooperative group process of learning that affirms each child in the group.

References

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East/West Comparisons

That Affect the Care and Education of Young Children

1. The Chinese have had a relatively unified, stable civilization in one place for 5,000 years. We in the West are a mix of people from many countries with increasingly rapid social and technological change.

2. Chinese tend to see history, tradition, and sage counsel from the past as valuable guides to the present, while Westerners more often depend on empirical research and pragmatic truths.

3. Chinese see change largely in terms of cycles. Westerners are often fiercely goal-directed and think in terms of linear progress.

4. Family, school, village, province, and state have been authoritarian for millennia in China, while most Westerners have tried to practice democracy.

5. In China, part of the very definition of the group (family, school, work unit, etc.) has been its innate, caring support of each person within it. In the West, with few exceptions, group support of its individuals must often be consciously articulated in the form of social agencies and psychological professions, often with disputed success.

6. Where Chinese tend to seek harmony, Westerners often compete with each other.

7. A Chinese more often feels good about himself as a valued, integral part of the group, while a Westerner, although he shouldn't boast, more often feels good when he himself is outstanding.

8. Unlike ourselves, China's people share the undertow of pain. Their lives have been marked by devastating war, flood, and famine. On a visit to China, Will Rogers concluded that, "Chinese are the luckiest people on earth, for they know that nothing, absolutely nothing, can happen to them that is worse than what's already happened."