CHINESE PUPILS AND THEIR LEARNING PREFERENCES
Derek Woodrow and Sylvia Sham (Yuen Mei)

Abstract

This research project explored the responses of Chinese pupils in Greater Manchester schools to the education that they received in a variety of school settings - Independent, Grant Maintained and Comprehensive. The research was conducted through case studies of five Chinese families, questionnaire responses from 150 Chinese and British-Chinese pupils and 200 British-European pupils and interviews with 65 Chinese and British-Chinese pupils and 35 British-European pupils. A companion enquiry (Verma et al., 1999) provided some additional comparative data from Hong Kong. The overwhelming conclusion from this research is the extent to which British-Chinese pupils remain conditioned by traditional Chinese behavioural rules even though they were largely born and educated in England. The two fundamental rules of ‘respect for superiors’ and ‘loyalty and filial piety’ provide a framework within which they create expectations and attitudes with regard to their education.

The questionnaire enquired into the learning preferences of pupils of Chinese origin, in schools in Greater Manchester, and compared their views with those of European pupils in the same schools. The impact of Chinese beliefs was very evident, with a belief in knowledge and the power of memorising rather than understanding. Significant differences were found for a number of learning preferences, with British Chinese pupils preferring to work alone rather than in groups. They also do not like being asked, or asking, questions and do not value peer discussion. British European pupils prefer problem solving and making up their minds on issues. The distinctive preferences of British-Chinese pupils remain suppressed and covert in the English classrooms due to the controlling influence of the imposing principles to present no overt challenges to authority. The commitment to memorising is also misleading since for British-European students it is associated with surface learning whilst the evidence points to the capacity of the Chinese students to develop deep learning structures by this method- the Chinese Learner Paradox.

Note that we have chosen the term ‘British European’ rather than ‘British White’ in order to emphasise the cultural (rather than racial) derivation of the enquiry. These pupils have origins amongst the long settled groups in the British Isles. The British Chinese pupils were largely from Hong Kong, though a few were from Mainland China and some from Vietnam. It does emphasise the inevitable complications with which such terms should be understood (see Verma et al., 1999, p7).
Introduction

Chan (1997) and Modood et al. (1997) describe the demography of the Chinese in Britain. The 1991 census indicated that there was about 157,000 Chinese living in the U.K., of whom over ten percent live in the North West of England where this study took place. Chan's study indicated that many of the Chinese are in the 20-30 years age group and hence likely to be raising families, the Chinese population will therefore be expected to grow regardless of immigration. The majority of the present Chinese population is employed within the catering trade; estimates vary from 55% to 90%, and although these estimates tend towards the higher figure the outcome for the sample in this research with 93% of the fathers employed in this trade appears particularly high, and may well have a significant bearing on the outcomes. An associated survey (Verma et al., 1999) covering Manchester, London and Liverpool suggested an employment rate of about 70% in the catering trade. This factor provides a very particular environment within which many families operate, involving long anti-social working hours and whole family employment. This may change with the steady growth of a small but significant ‘middle-class’, and later immigration from Hong Kong (in the wake of its integration with Mainland China) and increasingly from Mainland China will have an impact. It is clear that the younger Chinese, who are the focus of this study, have increased social/academic expectations concurrently with family and other economic pressures to remain in the family business.

The research project from which this article is drawn explored the responses of Chinese pupils in Greater Manchester Schools to the education that they received in a variety of school settings - Independent, Grant Maintained and Comprehensive. The research was conducted through case studies of five Chinese families, questionnaire responses from 150 Chinese and British-Chinese pupils and 200 British-European pupils and interviews with 65 Chinese and British-Chinese pupils and 35 British-European pupils (Sham, 1997). The schools that were the main focus of the enquiry included an 11-16 (boys) comprehensive, an 11-16 (girls) comprehensive, two (mixed) 11-16 comprehensives, an 11-16 (mixed) independent school and an 11-18 (boys) grammar school. The Chinese pupils were never greater than 2% of the school population. Some additional questionnaire information was gathered from a Manchester Chinese Education Culture and Community Centre. In each case the questionnaires were conducted by the Chinese researcher, after being introduced to the class by their teacher. The pupils were told that the research was intended to investigate pupils' learning styles and teaching styles. They were told that it was particularly aimed towards understanding of Chinese pupils aged between 13 to 16 years old, and in order to do this we wanted to know what all pupils think about school experiences.

This article describes the questionnaire enquiry in which pupils attitudes to schooling were explored. As a result of their cultural mores British-Chinese children appear to have distinctive forms of learning preferences compared with their British-European counterparts. These distinctive preferences often remain suppressed and covert due to the controlling influence of the imposing principles to present no overt challenges to authority. (Note that the term learning preferences is used here rather than learning styles, so as to distinguish the enquiry from the search for a categorisation in terms of such determinants as, for example, Witkin’s (1967) field (in)dependency,
Cohen’s (1969) analytic/relational styles or Riding’s (e.g. 1991) Wholist-Analytic/Verbal-Imagery axes.)

The Questionnaires

The full questionnaire contained a total of 128 questions, generating data from 350 pupils of which 200 (57%) were British European and 150 (43%) were British Chinese. The 128 questions comprised four identified sections. The first related broadly to ‘biographical’ data and comprised fourteen questions, which described the gender, age, place of birth and the jobs undertaken by both parents of the respondents. Other questions related to schools, evening and weekend activities and finally some questions were asked about parents’ attitudes to school, friends, leisure and their futures.

The second part of the survey questionnaire comprised sixty questions specifically designed for this investigation. The sixty questions, randomly presented, were posed in four different areas of concern: - teaching styles; classroom environment; learning preferences; school subject preferences. All the pupils (both British European and British Chinese) were at the same schools, so where there are differences in descriptions of schooling it is respondents’ perceptions which differs and not their experiences. It was clear, however, that in response to describing their classroom there was almost never any significant difference between the two groups. They appeared to live on the same classrooms; it was their feelings and preferences within those classrooms that were different. The third part of the survey questionnaire was also used as part of a Leverhulme funded project (Verma et al., 1999) looking at the self-image of Chinese adolescents, and was designed to measure pupils’ educational experience in their school. Some questions provide a check with similar questions asked in part two of the enquiry, and this element in the questionnaire was also used in a parallel survey in Hong Kong providing interesting comparative data. The fourth part of the questionnaire was used specifically to investigate differences in learning preferences and used a Learning Process Questionnaire originally designed by Biggs (1987) and used in Hong Kong. The vocabulary and content were exactly as in the original design and again some overlap in questions provided useful confirmation of outcomes. The three sections of the questionnaire relating to schooling have been regrouped to provide a more coherent story of the outcomes

Personal background of the respondents

Gender and age variations. It is interesting to note that two-thirds of the British Chinese were born in Britain, but all spoke Cantonese. The choice of being British or Chinese was self-described. Clearly this question involved a necessary potential of confusion of ethnicity and culture and presented a simple choice. In a parallel investigation it was found that choosing between British, Chinese and British-Chinese created more uncertainty, and further dilemmas occurred when Hong-Kongese was included as an option. It was notable in the interviews that the British European defined their nationality largely in terms of being born in Britain, and were generally accepting that this might lead to encompassing quite a range of culture, language and habit. The British Chinese, on the other hand, commented on colour and language as
the determining factors no doubt reflecting the sense of difference felt by immigrant communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>British</th>
<th>Euro</th>
<th>British</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>50.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>49.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>12.9</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>10.6</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>10.6</td>
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<td>7.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Place of Birth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I  Gender, age and place of birth of the sample

What are your parents' jobs?
A number of early studies (Watson, 1977; Ng, 1968) found that a large percentage of Chinese work in the food trades. These researchers estimated varied between 55% and 90% of the British Chinese workforce is employed in catering. Modood et al. (1997) provides a detailed breakdown of employment of ethnic minorities though, as always, such terms as ‘self-employed’ and ‘managers’ remain unclear. The data gathered from these questionnaires confirm that fathers were take-away owners (50%), chefs (23.3%) restaurant owners (13.3%) and waiters (6.6%) making 93.2% of the total sample working in the food trade. Professional jobs comprised 6.5% and included doctors (1.3%), accountants (1.3%), teachers (0.6%) and computer workers (3.3%). The data from a wider sample in the parallel study (Verma et al., 1999) indicated that over 70% of British Chinese fathers whose jobs were reported were in the catering trade and that about 6% came into the professional category. The case-study data (Sham and Woodrow, 1998) provided some interesting anecdotes to describe why the majority of British Chinese parents are involved in catering businesses. All the British Chinese pupils' fathers were in employment. The British European children's fathers had a much broader spread of jobs (28 mentioned as compared with 8 for British Chinese pupils) with business, shopkeeping and driving being the most common and with 5.1% of fathers unemployed.

The mothers of British Chinese children were predominantly found to be helping father in the take-aways (50%), housewives (34.6%), or linked with the catering trade such as being a waitress (6.6%). The British European children described their mothers' occupation as predominantly housewife (20%), factory worker (10%) dinner lady (7.5%), teacher (6%), cleaner (6%), playgroup worker (6%), shop assistant (5%) and hairdresser (5%) being the most common responses. Like the fathers of the British European children there was a much greater variety of jobs undertaken by British European children's mothers (24) than British Chinese mothers (7).
How much do you join in school activities at lunchtime or after school (e.g. clubs, sport and team activities)?
British European pupil respondents (66%) are more likely than British Chinese pupils (42%) to join in school activities at lunchtime and after school. At lunch times they describe spending time with their Chinese friends in the school rather than joining in activities. They also believe they ought to go home as soon as possible to help their parents in their business or to do homework. The interview data confirmed and re-enforced this tendency to non-participation, as did similar questions asked in another section of the questionnaire: -

I am always active in school activities?
I am not interested in joining in school outings?
Although both groups have mixed responses there was a significant difference between the two groups. The British European pupils claim to be far more involved (60.5%) in school activities than the British Chinese pupils (39.4%). A small group of the British Chinese respondents (28%) expressed no interest in joining school outings but they represented over twice as many compared with the British European respondents (11.5%). Comparisons with the Hong Kong students showed that they had even less inclination (35%) to join in school activities. According to Lee (1985) in many Chinese minds, sports and school outing activities are viewed as frivolous play and a waste of time and energy.

What do you mainly do when you are out with your friends in the evening or at weekends?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>British Euro Pupils</th>
<th>British Chinese Pupils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never go out with friends</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just talk</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>35.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go round the shops</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>53.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pop concert/disco</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>44.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinema</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theatre</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go to town</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>68.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting friend's home and playing games</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>51.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II: What do you do when out with your friends

Each respondent could choose as many after-school responses as were applicable to their own experiences. The percentages therefore represent the proportion of the populations that refer to that activity. British Chinese pupils are five times (16.1%) more likely than their English counterparts (3%) to never go out with friends, and are less likely to go to pop concerts, discos or play sports. There is, however, much in common with the English pupils in that they just talk, go round the shops or go to town, visit their friends' homes. The case studies and interviews suggest that the major preoccupation of the young Chinese is watching Chinese videos and they often talked...
about the weekly visit to Chinatown to collect these. This may indicate a somewhat different meaning to ‘going to town’ for the two groups.

**How often are you told by your parents that play or leisure is a waste of time?**

More than 80.7% of British Chinese pupils are often told by their parents that play and leisure is a waste of time. This is in complete contrast with the British European pupils' parents, where only 8.5% reported the view that play and leisure are a waste of time. These findings relate to, and support, the assumed work ethic within Chinese communities. It is evident too in the high level of working hours of parents and the involvement of children in family work as evidenced in the case studies.

**Who is it most important to please... friends, teachers or parents?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Br.-Euro</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>57.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Br.-Chinese</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>96.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table III : Who is it important to please?

For British Chinese pupils pleasing their parents (96.7%) was unquestionably the most highly significant consideration for them. For both groups, pleasing teachers seems to take a low priority. The dominance of ‘family’ in the lives of the British Chinese comes through in all the data.

**How often do you feel afraid to express your disagreement with your parents?**

As the relationships between parents and children were a significant part of the study, it is significant to note that British Chinese pupils (70%) often fear to express their disagreement with parents. Filial piety and obedience are major goals and guide the socialisation process of children in the traditional Chinese family (Ho 1981). By comparison only 20% of British European pupils are ever afraid to disagree with their parents.

**Pupils Perceptions of Teachers**

Both groups of respondents claimed that their teachers are not strict and allow them to talk in the class. The teachers speak clearly and slowly. Their teachers usually give them opportunities to ask for help and to ask questions and allow them to be fully participative in the class work. They have discussions. The lessons are generally focused and they are made to think and work independently. They are given notes and copy from the blackboard. They are given tests to prepare for examinations and the teachers teach work geared towards passing examinations.

British Chinese pupils’ perception of their teachers is of a far more positive image than that given by their British European counterparts. They describe their teachers as kind, friendly and helpful. They think that their teachers have less control in the classroom than the British European pupils think they do and that they are not strict. They hold the strong belief that the most important part of a teacher's job and their responsibility is to provide them with the knowledge and enough facts to pass examinations.
British European pupils are more likely to believe that if they get poor marks in tests or work it is because they are not good at the subjects, whereas the British Chinese pupils claim that the reason for this is that their teachers have not taught them well enough. British-Europeans believe that the most important part of a teacher's job is helping them to understand the work and make lessons interesting and enjoyable. Their view of their teachers as being moody, easily annoyed and boring, was in sharp contrast to the British Chinese pupils' more positive view. Amongst the more interesting outcomes we would highlight the following responses.

Do you think your teachers are strict?
Do you think your teachers are friendly?

Please write down five words which describe your teacher?
The majority of the British Chinese pupil respondents think their teachers are not strict (88%) and whilst a majority of British European pupils (59.5%) agree quite a number (40.5%) thinks they are strict. This might be thought to be a comparison with Hong Kong teaching, which appears to be stricter, but it should be remembered that two-thirds of the British Chinese were born in Britain. The commitment to respect for elders would lead to adults using a stricter code, and also tends to embody different expectations about individual children's rights. Prioritising social responsibility over individual rights can often be seen as a major cultural difference between Asian and Western attitudes and is part of the ever present assumptions in the Chinese families we studied. We also asked the respondents whether they think their teachers are friendly. The majority of the respondents from both groups indicated that most of the teachers are friendly and clearly friendliness and strictness are not necessarily in conflict.

The pupils were given the freedom to choose any five words to describe their teacher. The British Chinese made six predominant choices of descriptive words representing approximately 30% of all words chosen: kind (6.3%), friendly (6%), not strict (6%), helpful (5.8%), caring (3.3%) and sensitive (3%). The British European pupils selected eight predominant choices of descriptive words representing over 30% of the words chosen: moody and having mood swings (11.4%), easily annoyed (4.5%), boring (4.5%), intelligent (3.6%), kind (3%) and noisy (3%). It seems that the British Chinese pupils' perception of their teachers is a far more positive image than the British European respondents. Indeed, the British Chinese illustrate their belief in respect for their elders in that they tend to avoid being critical by describing the possible lack of control and classroom arrangement and organisation as being not strict (6%). How else could they be sensitively critical?

We also asked the respondents to name two teachers who teach them well. The results demonstrated that the British Chinese respondents favour the teachers who prepare notes for them (90%). Conversely only a few (10%) of the British European respondents chose teachers who prepare notes for them. They (80%) chose two teachers who encourage them to have discussions in the class.

In your school now, what do you think is the most important part of a teacher's job?
Table IV: What is the most important part of the teacher’s job?

Regarding the perception of the most important part of the teacher's job, the responses from the British European pupils and British Chinese pupils are very different. According to Biggs & Watkins (1993, p.219), Chinese students traditionally hold teachers in high regard and respect; teachers are the source of wisdom. The students expect the teacher to provide information and knowledge, not to run group sessions and throw the students back onto their own learning responsibility. Not surprisingly the results show that British Chinese pupil respondents express a strong belief that the most important part of a teacher's job is providing them with enough facts to pass the examination. They are nearly four times (63.3%) more likely to hold this view than the British European pupil respondents (18.6%). Interestingly very few of British Chinese pupil respondents (0.7%) believe that a teacher's job entails making lessons interesting and enjoyable.

Classroom Environment

There were, of course, few disagreements on factual matters but where pupils perceptions of the situation were important then there were some interesting differences – remembering that the classroom described by the two groups were the same classrooms. A large majority of the British Chinese (78%) claim to raise their hands to gain the teacher's attention or permission to leave their desk or to ask a question compared with the British European pupils (only 14.5%). A greater proportion of British Chinese (32%) claim that their classmates often fight with each other in the class compared to British European respondents (14%) of whom 25% claim that fighting never happens. It may well be that the term 'fight' has a different meaning to the two groups of respondents (see for example Johnson, 1997, for culturally different classroom interpretations). The British Chinese pupils experience pupils talking most of the time, indeed 90% of them claim that their classmates do not listen to a lesson without talking to each other compared to only 40% of the British European respondents. They also more often perceive their classmates racing to finish their work (42.7%) than their British European counterparts (24.5%). British European respondents (80%) claim their teachers decide where everybody sits at the beginning of the year, whereas only 27.3% of the British Chinese respondents say so.

From the Chinese researcher's own experience and from the interviews and case studies, British Chinese children who had attended a Hong Kong school find it very confusing and chaotic when they first start in a British school. Lessons are held in different classrooms, pupils are streamed or set in different groupings so the pupils are not in consistent groups and there are no set places to sit. There is seemingly little order and structure. It is altogether very confusing and disorientating for newly arrived
Hong Kong pupils. Classes are larger (30-40) in Hong Kong, but the pupils feel the unstructured environment in British schools is more disconcerting and unsettling despite the smaller British secondary school classes (18-21).

Over three-quarters of the British Chinese respondents have been told by their teachers that their class work is good. They feel scared and do not enjoy being asked questions by their teacher. They are afraid to ask questions of teachers when they do not understand. They are not interested in school outings and do not join in school activities. Just under half of them were always happy when at school. The great majority do not think that teachers were always telling them off, and nearly half of them believe that their teachers like them. They believe that it is important to respect teachers. A minority of British Chinese prefer to work on their own ideas compared with their British European counterparts. Three times as many of them express the view that they like to be told what to do by teachers. They prefer examinations and tests rather than doing projects.

British European pupils are less likely to be happy in school than their Chinese counterparts, although they claim to be far more involved in school activities and interested in going on school outings than the British Chinese. Over two thirds of them indicate that their teachers have told them that their class work is good. They are not scared to ask questions of teachers when they do not understand and do not feel scared when their teachers ask them questions about their work. Half of them prefer to work on their own ideas. Over two thirds seem to prefer doing projects than examinations and tests. Over a third of them dislike being told what to do by teachers. One fifth of them do not accept the view that respect for teachers is important. A significant number of the British Chinese respondents (11.3%) strongly agree that they always feel happy when they are at school compared with the British European respondents (1.5%). Overwhelmingly, both groups of respondents disagree that going to school is a waste of time. Overall, approximately half (54%) from both groups of respondents consider their lessons in school are interesting. In the parallel study it appeared that the Hong Kong pupils were even happier (64%).

**Praise and Criticism.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Uncertain %</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers say my class work is</td>
<td>GBChinese</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>363</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers tell me I am doing</td>
<td>GBChinese</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>well at school</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>360</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have been told my class work</td>
<td>GBChinese</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poor</td>
<td>377</td>
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<td>361</td>
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<td>31</td>
<td>44</td>
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Table V: Teachers have praised/criticised me.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GB Chinese</th>
<th>GB Euro</th>
<th>HK</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>359</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>362</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The questionnaire was also used in Hong Kong, which showed that being praised might be part of British school/child culture but not in Hong Kong. In the previous question asking about being happy at school the Hong Kong students were more positive than either of the British groups, so lack of praise seems not to have put them off liking school. Although Hong Kong children/pupils are not often praised it does not seem as important for their self-image as it would be in the Britain, where pupils observe praise in action and are conditioned to expect it.

When you get a poor mark in a test do you usually think this is because:
(a) you are not good at that subject?
(b) you have not worked hard enough?
(c) the teacher has not taught you well enough?

We asked this question in order to explore the often quoted data of Stevenson and Stigler (1992) who found that pupils in Taiwan blamed failure on their teachers compared with American pupils who blamed themselves. We asked respondents to choose one alternative. The results show that both groups of respondents gave the greatest percentage to not having worked hard enough (65% for British European and 52% for British Chinese). A similar result was found from both groups in that poor marks result from the pupils not being good at the subject (25%). The greatest difference occurred between the two groups in relation to the belief that teachers not teaching well enough might be a contributory factor to the achievement of marks. More British Chinese pupil respondents attribute a causal relationship to their teacher, believing that the teacher has not taught them well enough (22.7%) than do the British European pupil respondents (10.5%). This fits with our findings on the British Chinese pupils' view of the responsibility and authority of the teacher.

Motivation/Competition were tested through a number of questions such as:
I try to obtain high marks in all my subjects because I like to beat the other kids?
I like the results of tests to be put up in class so that the others can see how much I beat them by?
I would rather do well in school than be popular with my classmates?

Half of the British Chinese respondents (50%) were more inclined to try to obtain high marks in all their subjects because they like to be more successful than the other kids, whereas the British European respondents recorded 34.5% for the same question, a significant difference. This suggests that the British Chinese pupils tend to view study as a competition more than the British European respondents do. Over half of the British European pupils (59%) did not like the results of tests to be put up in class so that the others can see by how much they have been beaten. The British Chinese pupils (40.7%) seem to be less inclined to dislike their test results being displayed: indeed 37.3% positively want their results displayed compared with 17% of British European pupils. Over three quarters of the British Chinese (78%) see doing well in school as a competition and are determined to win compared with (31.5%) of their British European counterparts who hold this view. In our survey we asked the
respondents whether they would rather do well in school than be popular with their classmates. Significantly more British Chinese respondents (55.4%) seem to think that they would rather do well in school than be popular with their school friends compared with their British European counterparts (37.5%). The British Chinese respondents overwhelmingly (73.3%) express the view that they will work for top marks, whether or not they like the subject, compared with their British European counterparts (48%). Again this difference is significant. The overall evidence in this section supports the assertion that British Chinese pupils are more motivated by a competitive attitude than their British European peers.

Further aspects of motivation derived from a set of questions related to intrinsic/extrinsic dimensions:

I become interested in many school subjects when I work at the.
One day I might be able to change things in the world that I think are wrong. I believe that school should help me to form my own ideas.

More British European pupils (32%) indicate that they become interested in many school subjects when they work at them compared with the British Chinese respondents (12%). There is a significant difference between the British Chinese and British European pupils in that British European pupils are far more inclined to be interested in their school subjects than the British Chinese respondents. This suggests that intrinsic motivation is much stronger in British European pupils and that British Chinese are much more motivated by extrinsic factors such as adult roles and careers. This is confirmed by their comparative views of personal control and importance. The British European pupils (48.5%) tend to be more confident in believing that they are able to change things in the world that they believe to be wrong, compared with the British Chinese pupils (24%). There is a significant difference between the British Chinese and British European pupils in relation to their belief concerning the purpose of schooling in that the majority of the British European respondents (60%) believe that school should help them to form their own ideas, compared with about one third of the British Chinese respondents (34%).

Learning Preferences

British Chinese pupils (85%) admit that they worry about being told off by their teachers if they do not follow their instruction, this is a much higher proportion than their British European peers for whom only 20% worry about being told off. They prefer to work on their own and to work in a quiet classroom compared with their British European counterparts. They are nervous and embarrassed when discussing things in a group.

In relation to school subjects, two thirds of the British Chinese want to study subjects related to future jobs. They see the purpose of learning is to pass tests and they worry about tests and examinations. They believe that success in school will result in obtaining a good job. They are quiet in the classroom. They claim they do not enjoy, feel good about, become interested in, or are excited by, the process of learning. At a simplistic level, school is for the acquisition of knowledge, to pass tests and examinations and thus to obtain a good job. They try hard in school; they are competitive and want to be successful. They work hard even if they do not like the subjects.
They learn best by memorising. They prefer to learn facts in order to understand what they learn in a way that appears different from their British European peers. They try to do well but prefer not to learn what will not be tested. They appear to be relentless rote learners, though that is to misunderstand their learning style, though they are passive and syllabus dependent. They prefer subjects where they have to memorise facts, with solving problems as their second priority and regard choosing to make up their own mind as highly unpopular. They find making up their own mind is the most difficult learning strategy if they are to do well in the subjects. They also find it difficult to ask questions and favour the teachers who prepare notes for them. They seem to lack initiative and adopt a narrow learning approach and do not consider how useful the subjects might be. Finally the British Chinese are well organised and systematic in their work. They follow up their work and review it immediately they have been taught it. They are personally conscientious, correcting errors that they have made. They take learning seriously.

By contrast the British European pupils tend to choose subjects because they are interested in the topic. They tend not to worry as much about examinations. They do not believe that working hard will result in a good job. They prefer to understand the subjects they learn and are content just to reach a pass standard. They have a broader based learning approach and relate new work to other work they have previously done. They think about the usefulness of subjects. They say they are badly organised, they take time to complete their work and rarely review it. British European pupils prefer to work in a group. They prefer subjects where they have to solve problems and make up their own minds. Memorising was the least favoured and they also find memorising facts hardest to do. They favour the teachers who encourage them to have discussions in the class and they are relaxed about asking and being asked questions. They see the classroom less as a competitive arena and believe that being good at a subject means they understand it.

Do you prefer to work on your own in the class or with a group in the class?
Do you prefer to work in a quiet classroom or one where people are talking?

The great majority of the British Chinese pupil respondents (84%) express a preference to work on their own. Conversely, 77% of the British European pupil respondents would prefer to work within a group, a remarkable difference. According to Dunn et al. (1990), pupils learn best in a variety of different sociological patterns, which includes working alone or with two friends or in a small group. She found significant differences between different ethnic groups of American pupils. (Notably out of 21 learning preferences the American Chinese and the American Africans were significantly different on 15 aspects.) There is overwhelming evidence that the British Chinese pupil respondents exhibit greater preference (88%) to work in a quiet classroom than the British European pupil respondents who are only marginally more in favour (54.5%) of working in a quiet classroom than one where there is classroom talk (45.5%).

Do you prefer subjects where you have to memorise facts or subjects where you have to solve problems or make up your own mind?
Which do you find the hardest to do in class if your teacher asks you to:
a) memorise?
b) solve problems?
c) make up own mind?
Overwhelmingly, 71.8% of the British Chinese pupil respondents prefer subjects where they have to memorise facts than where they have to solve problems, which is a distant second priority. Choosing to make up their own mind was highly unpopular (6%). The British European pupils, on the other hand, seem to select ‘solving problems’ and ‘making up their own mind’ in fairly equal numbers, whereas memorising was the least favoured. This was re-enforced by asking the converse question about perceived difficulty. In terms of a learning strategy, memorising facts seems to be the hardest for the British European respondents (64%), whereas the British Chinese respondents (9.3%) find this task relatively easy. British Chinese respondents find making up their own mind the most difficult learning strategy.

I learn best when I memorise things by heart?
I prefer learning facts and details about things to trying to understand them?
Overwhelmingly, more than three-quarters of British Chinese respondents (82.6%) indicate that they learn best when they memorise things by heart compared with the British European pupils (26.5%). It is clear that cultural background plays a significant role in determining respondents' attitude towards their approach to study. Culturally, this may be explained in terms of an extension or transfer of the Confucian ethic of filial piety and behavioural rules, which value knowledge above creativity, and assumes learning is achieved through repeated practice. (This is in part also a consequence of the early learning of Chinese script, which relies strongly on memorised learning and repetition.) Again overwhelming, three times as many British Chinese respondents (83.3%) strongly express the view, that they prefer learning facts and details about things rather than trying to understand them, compared with their British European counterparts (30.5%). Again 42.5% of the British European pupils never or rarely believe it true of them that they learn facts and details rather than understanding these facts and details compared with only 5.3% of the British Chinese pupils who expressed that view.

I prefer to work on my own ideas.
I like to be told what to do by the teacher.
I prefer examinations and tests to doing projects.
We have already seen that it is in learning preferences such as this that the two groups differ consistently. Three times as many of the British Chinese respondents (86%) like to be told what to do by their teacher compared with the British European respondents (28.5%). Overwhelmingly (94%) the British Chinese pupil respondents agree that they prefer examinations and tests rather than doing projects, compared with only 19% of the British European respondents. British European pupils (69%) seem to prefer doing projects rather than examinations and tests. This is another of the significant statistical differences between British European and British Chinese in relation to their preferred learning preference.

I enjoy being asked questions/I feel scared when asked questions by my teacher.
I'm scared to ask questions of the teachers when I don't understand.
Classroom observation suggests that British European pupils seemed to enjoy being asked questions by their teacher in class, much more than the British Chinese. This is confirmed by the results from this data which indicated that over twice as many of the British European pupils (32.5%) agree that they enjoy being asked questions by their
teacher more than do the British Chinese pupils (12%). This could be a self-image situation in not wishing to be picked out or may relate to different expectations of the value and method of schooling. The latter would fit the hypothesis about adults owning knowledge but in all likelihood it is probably a combination of these factors. Over three times as many British Chinese (38%) as British European respondents (11.5%) admit that they are scared to ask questions of teachers when they don’t understand. Over three times as many of the British Chinese respondents (58%) admit that they feel scared when their teacher asks them questions compared with British European respondents (15.5%).

**How do you feel when the teacher asks you to discuss any subject in a group?**
The pupils were asked to choose their own words to describe how they feel when asked to discuss any subject in a group. Their chosen words showed that over 76% of the British Chinese pupil respondents used the words embarrassed, nervous (33%) or feeling ill (8.7%) when a teacher asks them to discuss any subject in a group. The British European pupil respondents are far more inclined to feel quite relaxed about such group discussion work with nearly all the pupils using words like alright, fine, happy, don’t mind.
In your school now, do the teachers discuss the following subjects in your lesson (and how do you feel when the teacher discusses) marriage, divorce, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy?

Both groups report that divorce and drug abuse are the most common of these subjects discussed in class. We followed up this question to ask the respondents how they felt when the teachers discussed marriage, divorce, drug abuse and teenage pregnancy. The British Chinese pupil respondents expressed feeling highly embarrassed (80.7%) but only 3.5% of the British European pupil respondents felt so. Conversely, 93.4% of the British European pupil respondents found it interesting when their teachers discussed those subject areas. Not so the British Chinese. In Chinese culture and family life, these topics are very personal and private matters which are not discussed, especially matters referring to sex. The nature of education as gaining knowledge rather than forming opinions clearly affects attitudes to some topics.

Conclusions

Significant differences have emerged between the British European and British Chinese pupils in their attitudes towards their learning. In a number of areas there are clearly differences within the groups themselves. In some contexts, particularly that of Learning Preferences, the scale of homogeneity is surprising, with often more than 80% of the British Chinese respondents expressing the same viewpoint. Some caution is needed in that the population surveyed here is the Greater Manchester Chinese community, and the very large proportion of the sample working in the catering trade may be unusually high compared to other regions. This trade involves parents working unsocial hours and the family working together as unit in the evening. This may well lead to even greater family cohesion and conformity. In more professional and ‘middle-class’ households it is likely that the parents by virtue of their jobs will have increased social interactions with the general population and perhaps greater expectations of social mobility by their children. Never-the-less cultural dominances of the kind found in this study are likely to persist.

The outcomes of this study, however, are generally very clear and show that there are quite distinctive preferences in learning strategies between the British European and the British Chinese pupils. It should be noted that very many of the British Chinese pupils were born in Britain and these differences relate to a subgroup of British society and not recent immigrants. The corroborative evidence from case-studies of Chinese families (Sham and Woodrow, 1998) and from the interview data (Sham, 1997) indicates that the dominance of the Chinese culture in terms of ‘filial piety’ and ‘respect for elders’ is very pervasive, a well known phenomena of Chinese culture but which might well have been thought to be diluted by assimilation and an English education. These characteristics are clearly re-enforced by the culture of learning the Chinese language, and the persistent fostering of this through the generations of immigrants is a particular feature of many Chinese homes in the study. Indeed the number of parents established in the U.K. for very many (often 30 or more years) with poor English language skills was also notable. The Chinese language depends greatly in its written form on the memorising, repetition and constant improvement of particular ideograms, and it is probable this that leads the pupils at a very early age to see memorising as a dominant form of learning. Studies in Australia have explored the paradox of the use
by Chinese students of memorising as a learning technique and their academic success which is usually associated with deep learning structures (Marton et al., 1993; Tang and Williams, 2000). This work would suggest that these students develop specific structuring techniques within the memorising actions by which each memorisation enriches their internal conceptual models in a way not usually developed in Western students. Clearly this casts doubt on the efficacy of importing different teaching styles in the search to match Asian success in international comparisons of achievement in mathematics and science unless new learning skills are also promoted.

The case studies described by Sham and Woodrow (1998) indicated an extremely strong and enclosed family life, in which the two central ‘virtues’ of Chinese Society – ‘respect for elders and superiors’ and ‘loyalty and filial piety’ dominated. The impact of the home language and the long unsocial hours worked by the families ensured a remarkably strong imprinting of these attitudes providing a framework within which they create expectations and attitudes with regard to their education. The extent and depth of that enculturation was surprising with little movement towards assimilation and adaptation into British-European culture even in second and third generation immigrants. These British-Chinese children appear live in a cocoon within British society under distinctive socialisation practices in terms of language and heritage, cultural values and a set of behaviour rules from their family. The strength of this particular finding is undoubtedly related to the social structure of those employed in the catering trade, where family co-operative working is prioritised. The results of the interviews (not reported here) indicate that surprisingly these many contradictions do not engender conflict in British-Chinese pupils who accept the separation of distinctive elements in their lives. Because the cultural impositions are so strong they do not have room for much questioning and this breeds comforting satisfaction of a kind often found in strong religious faiths which leads to little impetus for growth and change.

The reverence for facts, coupled with reverence for the teacher as an authority provides a strong view of what learning and education really mean in the Chinese culture. This contrasts strongly with the concentration on the individual and the nurturing of personal learning which dominate much of secondary education in Britain. The closeness of the working family on the Chinese community strongly re-enforces their traditional views. Despite, or because of, the relative smallness of the ex-patriot families the family dominates as the social environment. There is not the strong religious community found in other immigrant groups, and which serves to help mediate those groups into the British culture. By virtue of their trade as restauranteurs and caterers the Chinese tend to be a widespread community and hence develop as a self-sufficient family unit. The Chinese families, by virtue of their unsocial work patterns and the strength of their language dependence, remain isolated social entities. As with many immigrant groups the maintenance of language skills is a seen as a critical necessity by the adults of the community. The case studies and the interviews confirm the clear strength of the cultural confirmation found in these questionnaires.

One would expect Chinese pupils from a different milieu than ‘take-ways’ and restaurants to have a greater opportunity for social exchange and freedoms. The Confucian ethics would undoubtedly remain as an influence, however, and some of the
concerns of the pupils in this study will persist. Indeed similar concerns have been found in Australia in supporting students in higher education from other Asian countries, and a number of African students find the lack of respect and concern for factual knowledge and structured instruction in English education to be different from their learning assumptions. A Hungarian colleague commented that in England “Not to hurt the ‘self image’ of the children is more important than to force them to achieve better results, there is more emphasis on creativity than knowledge” (Hatch, 1993, page 30). The extent to which these attitudes are embedded in British education is difficult to appreciate by those immersed in the system. That the Chinese pupils generally do well is a tribute to their hard work and commitment, and their unquestioning acceptance of adult authority hides the extent to which they are uncomfortable or not well served by the methods we adopt. The evidence from these pupils is that they are good at supporting each other in school and that they relate to other Chinese pupils rather than to British European pupils.

As indicated in the introduction the case studies and interviews indicate that many Chinese pupils are well adjusted to living ‘between two cultures’. The angst, which we might be tempted to ascribe to their position, is only occasionally evident. It is important, however, that they are supported in their schooling. School networks need to help them to respond to the way in which the school operates, and above all the induction of parents into the demands and assumptions of British schools needs to be addressed so that they too can appreciate their children’s schooling. The widespread nature of the Chinese community leads to a paucity of accumulated experience by individual teachers and other support staff, who meet the Chinese in small numbers and occasionally, rather than in larger groups whose very presence must be recognised. But their needs are clear and should be addressed.

References


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