

Discipline and Self-discipline: A Personal Cross-Cultural Perspective

Over the years, many students from China have enrolled at UCLA. Some have worked at our Center as part of their university experience. They have shared varying views about their pre-university experiences in China. The following is a brief overview of what Quan Zhou (Emmy) shared. She spent six years in a Chinese public school and then came to the U.S.A. for high school and then university.

Emmy, as she chose to be called in the U.S., recognized that Chinese education has been criticized for “killing students' creativity and interest.” While she agreed that that happens for some students, she also felt that the strict discipline in her school helped establish good study habits at early age. Specifically, she stated that “the homework assigned to students and the classroom management in Chinese elementary school helps students to become more self-disciplined.”

Her Personal Experience

“The essence of Chinese education places the emphasis on discipline and self-discipline. Teachers take the responsibility to teach both curricular knowledge and self-discipline.

Students of the same grade are assigned to different classes. Each class has a director teacher who is in charge of the classroom management and discipline. Students are required to behave orderly in class and show respect to teachers. I remembered I was asked to sit properly in my desk during class and was not allowed to talk unless I raised my hand. According to my director teacher, such requirement was to help students put their attention to the teachers rather than other irrelevant things. Moreover, my director teacher selected a student as a discipline officer to overlook other students' behaviors while she was absent. The discipline officer would behave as a model for all other students and take points off if any students disobeyed the class discipline. As for homework, generally, I had homework for Literature, Mathematics and English every weekdays and every weekend. All students in the same classroom had the same homework.

Teachers asked students to treat the classroom as a serious learning place ... they do not want to spend much time managing classroom order. At the same time, teachers expect students to know the idea that success is the result of effort because Chinese education emphasizes the importance of effort rather than innate intelligence. ... I learned to obey classroom order and assume responsibility for my academic success from the first day of elementary school ... to obey discipline and finish homework on time. Finishing homework and behaving properly and respectfully have been one of my habits since elementary school.

When I went to a high school in United States, I found that Chinese students, generally, were more hard-working and self-disciplined than American students. Although the teacher did not set up an explicit rule for the class, Chinese students always submitted the homework in time and they were less frequently to check their cell phones and eat during class. I remembered in a 50 minutes class, an American student went to the back of the classroom to sharpen her pencil three times, went to the restroom once, and went to her locker twice. Two American students even sat on the ground and ate goldfish crackers. Such behaviors seldom happened among Chinese students because they knew that these are not expected in class and restricted their behaviors.”

Emmy recognized that not all students cope well with the classroom practices she described. Of particular concern were students with disabilities. She remembered there was a boy with poliomyelitis in her class. This student sometimes unintentionally disobeyed class rules because he could not help making some noises and had trouble finishing his homework on time. As a result, he was frequently disciplined. She recalled that the strict discipline not only wasn't helpful, it probably exacerbated his problems.



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What She Focused on in the Literature

To support her experiences, Emmy cited the following from the literature:

(1) With respect to *self-discipline*, reports indicate that Chinese students outperformed students from all other countries in International Academic tests (Bidwell, 2013). Why? Maslen (2008) reported that Chinese students work harder and spend more time on homework. Chinese classroom practices emphasize standards-based direct instruction, acquisition of foundational curricular knowledge and skills, and hard work through strong discipline and self-discipline (Ma, 2014; Zhang, & Padilla, 2014).

Duckworth and Seligman (2005) found self-disciplined students had better academic performance (e.g., GPA, standardized tests scores, competitive high school acceptance) than their non-disciplined peers. Self-discipline had a bigger effect on students' final GPA than IQ, and it is two times stronger than IQ in predicting the variance in students' final grade. One explanation is that self-disciplined students do well in planning and managing their time. They also are more likely to spend more time and effort studying and practicing because they know they are responsible for their success.

Tangney, Baumeister, and Boone (2004) report similar correlations between self-control and academic performance. The average grade of people reporting higher self-control was found to be higher than that of people with self-reported lower self-control. Furthermore, self-esteem and its stability were positively correlated with self-control. ... They conclude that self-disciplined people do better in delaying gratification, inhibiting their impulse, focusing on their tasks, and managing their time.

(2) With respect to *discipline* and classroom management, research indicates that "high achieving schools are more disciplined and orderly than low-achieving schools" (Peng, 1993). Bear (1998) points out that one fundamental responsibility of school is to teach students self-discipline. Bear and Manning (2014) stress that a comprehensive approach to classroom management is needed to develop self-discipline. Key to this is an "authoritative style of discipline." Such style has two features: high demandingness and high responsiveness. High demandingness calls for high expectations for students' behavior, close guidance and monitoring, and fair, consistent, and rational application of discipline. High responsiveness calls for being responsive to each student's social, cognitive, physical, and emotional needs (e.g., being caring, warm, and accepting; using persuasion rather than authority to correct behavior).

Using an authoritative style of discipline, schools attempt to develop student self-discipline, focusing on five areas: self-awareness, responsible decision making, social awareness, relationship skills, and self-management. These competencies are developed through "sequenced, active, focused, and explicit" lessons and application. Examples of application opportunities include class meetings, peer mediation, cooperative learning activities, student government positions, etc. Through these opportunities, students are able to regulate their emotions, make responsible decisions, develop self-awareness and social awareness, and establish a positive student-student relationship. Staff modeling of "emotional intelligence" (e.g., being fair and caring) also is seen as important in developing student self-awareness and emotional regulation.

Chinese teachers require attention from every student, closely monitor students' behaviors, and have few discipline problems (Zhang & Padilla, 2014). However, Chinese teachers ask students to be docile and quiet, which deviates from Bear's suggestions for proactive classroom management.

In exploring factors contributing to the learning gap between Chinese and American students, Peng (1993) found that Chinese (and Japanese) teachers set a strict class routine and spend more time correcting students' behavior and guiding them to work properly. Highly disciplined students were assigned as class president and discipline officer to help teachers manage classroom order.

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(3) With specific respect to **homework**, reports indicate that homework, per se, does not lead to higher grades; rather, the reason Chinese students do better academically probably is the additional effort, involvement, and self-discipline they devote to homework (Maslen, 2008). Ramdass and Zimmerman (2011) state that with repeated homework completion, good students gradually develop self-regulation (e.g., motivate themselves, inhibit distractions, use strategies to complete homework, manage time, set goals, self-reflect on their performance, and delay gratification). All this contributes to higher grades.

In encouraging students to do homework, the literature emphasizes assignments need to be interesting, helpful, purposeful, and not too time consuming. Vatterott (2010) delineates five qualities of effective homework: it has an explicit purpose; it is designed to be accomplished efficiently; it establishes student (as contrasted to teacher) ownership; it matches student competence (neither too burdensome nor too easy); it has aesthetic appeal.

(4) ***What about students who don't respond well to the teaching practices in China?***

China's highly disciplined classrooms are seen as having a negative effect on some students' motivation and academic performance (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Zhou, Lam, & Chan, 2012). According to the self-determination theory (SDT), autonomy is one prominent component in facilitating learning (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Thus, as would be expected, not all students thrive in Chinese schools. Some students even become rebellious to the high degree of control. Indeed, student behavior management was rated as the second biggest stressor for teachers by more than 400 teachers in Hong Kong (Lewis, Romi, Qui, & Katz, 2005).

For many students, how they react is related to the degree of relatedness they feel to their teacher (Zhou, Lam, & Chan, 2012). Those who feel less connected feel controlled and hurt and are less likely to internalize self-discipline. Something even worse can happen. Students can become resistant to learning and misbehave frequently in class (Lewis, Romi, Qui, & Katz, 2005).

Most techniques and strategies teachers incorporate are targeted at most students not students who need special attention (Kasari, Locke, Gulsrud, & Rotheram-Fuller, 2011). Probably more than many countries, the United States has the goal of ensuring all children have an equal opportunity to succeed at school (Kritzer, 2012). Since some individuals require more individual help and alternative strategies, teachers are expected to make some changes and exceptions for these students. For example, teachers can widen "limits on acceptable behavior for a time to minimize rule infringement" (Adelman & Taylor, 2015). Teachers can also be more caring and attempt harder to understand these students before they apply the rules.

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Emmy's Conclusions

One fundamental reason why Chinese education succeeds in preparing academically prominent students is its encouragement of self-discipline through strict rules. Chinese students are more self-controlled in learning, and specifically, managing their time, finishing their homework, and reviewing after class.

Schools can boost students' self-discipline through caring and disciplined classroom management and effective homework assignment. These techniques aim to establish a good school climate and stimulate students' participation in learning.

As the literature stresses, preparing students to be self-disciplined is not an easy task. It involves acceptance by schools that they are responsible for helping students recognize the need and benefit of being self-disciplined. Schools need to help students foster good learning habits, including paying attention to teachers, obeying classroom discipline, and finishing their homework. Therefore, it is crucial for schools to manage classroom effectively and assign meaningful homework. Once students have formed these habits, schools should encourage these acts to further strengthen and maintain them.

However, in fostering students' self-discipline, it is essential not to inhibit other facets of positive development, such as creativity, practical skills, and group heterogeneity, and it is important to make accommodations for those who need special assistance.

As Wen Ma (2014) stresses, educators need to search for a "middle ground" between Chinese education and Western education. American teachers can blend strategies for developing self-discipline from Chinese education with Western student-centeredness practices to the benefit of both ideologies.

A Few References to Other Views

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