



Chinese kindergarten teachers' beliefs about young children's classroom social behavior



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ABSTRACT

This study examined Chinese kindergarten teachers' beliefs about children's classroom social behaviors. Participants were $N=672$ kindergarten teachers in Shanghai, China. Teachers viewed hypothetical vignettes depicting kindergarten children (i.e., aged 4–6 years) displaying aggressive (physical/relational), socially withdrawn (shy/unsociable), exuberant, and prosocial (empathetic/sociable) behaviors and responded to questions regarding their attitudes, beliefs, and reactions. Exuberance and aggression were least tolerated and most likely to evoke anger among teachers. However, teachers reported more negative views toward physical than relational aggression, and were more worried about shy than unsociable children. Implications of the similarities and differences among teacher beliefs across cultures are considered.

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1. Introduction

Teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward children's social behavior can have both indirect and direct influences on children's academic and social development (Fang, 1996). For example, such beliefs not only contribute to teacher's general classroom style (Charlesworth, Hart, Burts, & Hernandez, 1991; Sakellariou & Rentzou, 2011) but can also influence teachers' specific responses to child behaviors in the classroom (Cunningham & Sugawara, 1988). Moreover, teachers' beliefs about children's social characteristics are related to their beliefs about children's academic characteristics, including intelligence and academic skills (Coplan, Hughes, Bosacki, & Rose-Krasnor, 2011; Espinosa & Laffey, 2003; Lerner, Lerner, & Zabski, 1985).

In the present study, we explored Chinese kindergarten teachers' beliefs regarding children's classroom social behavior. Cultural differences can play a substantive role in shaping attitudes toward social behavior (Chen & French, 2008). However, there have been few previous studies of teacher beliefs about children's social

behaviors in Asian cultures (Killen, Ardila-Rey, Barakkatz, & Wang, 2000; Pochtar & Del Vecchio, 2014). Moreover, to our knowledge, there have been no previous studies specifically focusing on teacher beliefs about different types of young children's social behavior in China. Understanding the distinctions that Chinese teachers may (or may not) make among different types of children's classroom social behavior has important implications for the early identification of young children experiencing socio-emotional difficulties. Accordingly, the primary goal of this study was to examine Chinese kindergarten teachers' responses, beliefs, and emotional reactions to hypothetical vignettes depicting young children displaying a range of social behavior, including aggression (e.g., physical, relational), social withdrawal (e.g., shyness, unsociability), exuberance, and prosocial acts (e.g., empathy, sociability).

1.1. Teachers' beliefs in China

Traditional Chinese culture espouses child characteristics pertaining to social responsibility (e.g., contributing to group well-being), self-constraint, collectivism, and obedience (Chen & French, 2008; Liang, 1987; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2007). In contrast, children who do not inhibit their emotions and constrain their behaviors may be viewed as selfish and impolite (Ho, 1986). As well, an extremely high value is placed on academic achievement and school success (Wang & Pomerantz, 2009). These values

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are reflected in the socialization, school education and peer group activities of Chinese children (Fang, 2000; Li, 2011; Phillipson & Phillipson, 2007).

However, over the past 30 years, China has carried out a substantive reform toward a market-oriented economy, particularly in urban regions. This dramatic societal shift appears to have not only influenced beliefs about children's education, but also attitudes toward children's social behaviors (Chen, Cen, Li, & He, 2005). For example, social initiative and self-expression appear to be becoming increasingly valued (Chen, Wang, & Cao, 2011). In contrast, whereas shyness and social reserve were previously considered as positive characteristics and were associated with school success (Chen, Rubin, & Sun, 1992), these same behaviors are more recently associated with school difficulties and indexes of socio-emotional maladjustment (Liu, Bullock et al., 2014).

Previous studies of teachers' beliefs in China have focused on aspects of epistemology and approaches to student learning (Chan & Elliott, 2002), general beliefs about teaching (Sang, Valcke, Tondeur, Zhu, & van Braak, 2012) or conceptions of effective pedagogical methods – particularly in the area of mathematics (Cai & Wang, 2010; Correa, Perry, Sims, Miller, & Fang, 2008). There have been few previous empirical studies of Chinese teachers' beliefs about children (Ho, 2004; Hui, 2001; Hsueh & Tobin, 2003). For example, Hui (2001) reported that teachers in Hong Kong believed that their students' primary concern pertained to their educational future, above all social and emotional concerns. We are not aware of any previous studies that have specifically examined Chinese teachers' beliefs about children's different social behaviors in the classroom.

1.2. Teachers and young children's classroom social behaviors

It has long been known that teachers hold very different beliefs about different forms of children's classroom social behavior (Cunningham & Sugawara, 1988; Gordon & Thomas, 1967; Safran & Safran, 1984). In the current study, we assessed Chinese teachers' beliefs about four commonly studied broad types of young children's social behaviors in the classroom: aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), social withdrawal (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009), exuberance (Degnan, Hane, Henderson, Moas, Reeb-Sutherland, & Fox, 2011), and prosocial (Hastings, McShane, Parker, & Ladha, 2007). In the following sections, we provide a brief description of each of these behaviors and our expectations regarding Chinese kindergarten teachers' beliefs.

1.2.1. Aggression

Hypothetical depictions of two forms of aggression were included in the current study. *Physical aggression* refers to the intent to hurt or cause bodily harm to another, whereas *relational aggression* is a non-physical form of aggression that harms others through damage and manipulation of their social relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006). In North America and Western Europe, there is considerable evidence to suggest that physically aggressive young children are prone to significant social, emotional, and academic difficulties at school (Campbell, Spieker, Burchinal, & Poe, 2006; Ostrov, Woods, Jansen, Casas, & Crick, 2004). Although relational aggression has been less studied among young children, there is evidence to suggest that this form of aggression is also associated with negative school adjustment outcomes such as peer rejection and behavior problems (Crick et al., 2006; Juliano, Werner, & Cassidy, 2006).

North American and Western European teachers tend to have very negative views of young children's aggression, which is not surprising given its adverse and disruptive classroom effects (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Cunningham & Sugawara, 1988; Yoon & Kerber, 2003). For example, as compared to other forms of

child classroom (mis) behaviors depicted in hypothetical vignettes, teachers of young children report that they would respond to physical aggression with the least tolerance, most anger, and greatest likelihood of intervention, as well as anticipating the most negative social and academic implications for the hypothetical aggressive child (Arbeau & Coplan, 2007; Coplan, Bullock, Archbell, & Bosacki, 2015; Hurd & Gettinger, 2011). In contrast, although teachers of young children also consider relational aggression to be problematic, they report that they would be less likely to intervene in the case of relational as compared to physical aggression, and perceived relational aggression as having less negative consequences than physical aggression (Coplan et al., 2015; Hurd & Gettinger, 2011).

In Chinese culture, aggression is strictly prohibited because it is threatening to the social harmony and well-being of others (Chang, 2003; Chen & French, 2008; Luo, 1996). Children are socialized at a young age to inhibit the expressions of anger, hostility, and frustration (Cole, Tamang, & Shrestha, 2006; Zahn-Waxler, Friedman, Cole, Mizuta, & Hiruma, 1996). Further, aggressive children may even be overtly humiliated by their teachers and peers (Chen & French, 2008). In this regard, it is not surprising that physically aggressive children in China are prone to peer rejection, internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety, depression) and academic difficulties (Chen, Huang, Chang, Wang, & Li, 2010; Kawabata, Tseng, Murray-Close, & Crick, 2012; Tseng, Banny, Kawabata, Crick, & Gau, 2013).

There is also at least some evidence to suggest that relationally aggressive children in China also tend to experience negative peer relations and increased internalizing problems (Kawabata et al., 2012; Tseng et al., 2013). However, Kawabata et al. (2012) speculated that the Chinese culture might actually facilitate the development and use of relational aggression given the strong emphasis on interpersonal relationships. Moreover, because of its more covert nature, relational aggression may appear less disruptive to classroom functioning. Accordingly, although it was anticipated that Chinese teachers would have negative views toward all forms of aggression, relational aggression was expected to be considered less problematic than physical aggression.

1.2.2. Social withdrawal

We also included two vignettes depicting different types of social withdrawal, which refers to the process whereby children remove themselves from opportunities for peer interaction (Rubin et al., 2009). Whereas *shy* children experience wariness and self-consciousness in social situations, *unsociable* children are characterized by a non-fearful preference for solitary activities (Coplan, Prakash, O'Neil, & Armer, 2004). Young, shy children refrain from talking at school and are prone to internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety, depression), peer exclusion and victimization, and academic underperformance (Coplan, Arbeau, & Armer, 2008; Gazelle & Ladd, 2003; Hughes & Coplan, 2010). In contrast, unsociability appears to be a comparatively benign form of childhood social withdrawal (Coplan et al., 2004; Coplan & Weeks, 2010; Harrist, Zaia, Bates, Dodge, & Pettit, 1997).

Results from previous research in samples of teachers from North America and Western Europe suggest that teachers may have more positive attitudes toward withdrawn children than toward their aggressive counterparts (Arbeau, & Coplan, 2007). However, teachers do perceive shyness as problematic in both the academic and peer domain, among preschool- (Coplan et al., 2015), kindergarten- (Thijs, Koomen, & van der Leij, 2006) and elementary-school-aged children (Coplan et al., 2011). Indeed, teachers of young children report that they are just as worried about shy children as they are about physically aggressive children in their classrooms (Coplan et al., 2015). In contrast, in the few studies of teacher attitudes toward unsociable children, this form of social withdrawal is viewed quite positively when compared to

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