



A comparative study of Chinese and United States pre-service teachers' perceptions about ethical issues in classroom assessment



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of pre-service teachers in the United States and China about ethics of classroom assessment practices. To investigate pre-service teachers' perceptions, we developed 36 scenarios that described teachers' actions or thoughts related to ethics and assessment practices. Participants were 173 pre-service teachers in the U.S. and 174 pre-service teachers in China. Overall, the perceptions of Chinese and American respondents were divided within countries on different scenarios. In addition, chi-square analyses contrasting Chinese responses with American responses indicated that the pre-service teachers had statistically significant differences in their opinions on 22 out of 36 scenarios, but only 13 had practical significance (effect size $\geq .3$). Chinese and American pre-service teachers had similar perceptions on 14 scenarios. In some instances, respondents' perceptions of the ethics of assessment practices depicted in the scenarios did not agree with the literature on classroom assessment. The findings offer insights for developing ethical guidelines in classroom assessment in both cultures. In addition, we recommend that cultural issues as related to ethics should be included in assessment courses for pre-service teachers.

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1. Introduction

Ethics and human conduct have long been the focus of philosophers, researchers, and educators. Ethics education in western countries has been influenced by Plato who believed that ethics is "what we ought to do." Similarly, Confucius, an early philosopher in China influenced ethics education in eastern countries. He once stated, "Moral force never dwells in solitude; it will always bring neighbors" (Waley, *Trans. Analects of Confucius*, 1989, p. 106). We interpret this quote as indicating if we do as we ought to, then others (e.g., our neighbors, our colleagues) will follow, thus our exploration of ethics and classroom assessment.

The principles associated with ethical conduct are embedded within a culture and provide guidance in people's everyday life in that culture. Brandt and Rose (2004) stated that ethics emphasize the "principles of conduct" that people choose to guide their behaviors and actions in their lives. In the field of educational assessment, ethics has been described as rules of behavior or

practices that a profession imposes on itself (Sax, 1974; Thorndike, Cunningham, Thorndike, & Hagen, 1991).

Researchers have argued that (1) education is an ethical activity, (2) academic honesty and integrity are ethical behaviors that are relevant for both students and teachers, and (3) ethics provides guidance in terms of what people ought to do and ought not to do (Campbell, 1997; Mahony, 2009; Singer, 1993, 1994). To examine the challenges of ethics in education, some writers and researchers studied ethical dilemmas that teachers experience in their profession (e.g., Campbell, 1997; Ehrich, Kimber, Millwater, & Cranston, 2011; Johns, McGrath, & Mathur, 2008; Millwater, Ehrich, & Cranston, 2004; Pope, Green, Johnson, & Mitchel, 2009).

Pope (2006) argued that classroom assessment is a practice that should take the issue of morality and ethics into consideration. In the classroom, ethics serves to ensure the quality and fairness of assessment. Classroom assessment is defined as the practices that teachers use to gauge student learning both formatively and summatively. For better or worse, classroom assessment practices also involve preparing students to take high stake tests. Assessment practices interconnected with ethics include (a) communication about grading, (b) multiple assessment opportunities, (c) grading practices, (d) bias/fairness, (e) confidentiality, (f) standardized test preparation, and (g) test administration (Green, Johnson, Kim, & Pope, 2007). Ethical classroom assessment practices should be consistent with professional guidelines. For

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instance, *The Student Evaluation Standards* (The Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation—JCSEE, 2003) emphasized that student evaluations should be “ethical, fair, useful, feasible, and accurate” (p. 3).

To ensure ethical and fair assessment, Green et al. (2007) recommended that teacher education courses about classroom assessment should cover the issue of ethics and different factors underlying ethical activities should be explored. To address the issue of ethics in classroom assessment as presented by *The Student Evaluation Standards*, courses should provide pre-service teachers with a basis for addressing the ethical issues in assessment they are likely to face in the classroom. However, minimal assessment competencies of beginning teachers, which are due to the misalignment between assessment education and standards/classroom practices, have been documented by researchers (DeLuca & Bellara, 2013). This lack of competency likely influences the ethics of assessment practices in the classroom.

Initial research regarding ethics and classroom assessment examined the degree of agreement among educators in the United States. Educators from both graduate and undergraduate programs at two southern USA universities were the participants in one study (Green et al., 2007). Green and colleagues reported that in fewer than half of the scenarios did pre-service and in-service teachers strongly agree with one another on the ethics of the assessment practices. Johnson, Green, Kim & Pope (2008) examined educational leaders' perceptions of the ethicality of assessment practices in the U.S. and results showed the division of perceptions between principal and principal candidates and the need for professional development in ethical assessment practices. More recently, in Canada, Tierney (2013) focused on one aspect of ethics in classroom assessment—fairness. She found that teachers “emphasized different aspects of fairness with the most prominent involving students' opportunities to learn and demonstrate learning, transparency, the classroom environment, critical reflection, and the tension between equal and equitable treatment in assessment (p. 55).” These previous studies situate classroom assessment in an ethical framework and indicate the need for a continuing dialog in the educational field.

2. A comparative perspective

Is the schism in educators' views about ethics and classroom assessment seen in the studies of Green et al. (2007) and Johnson et al. (2008) unique to the United States or does the division of educators' views reach beyond the USA? This type of question can be informed through comparative research and, in turn, inform policymakers in education (Phillips, 1999; Sasaki, 2004).

Morality and ethics have been examined in the context of educational assessment in other countries. For example, in South Africa, Vandeyar and Killen (2007) found that regarding the issues of ethics, teachers felt challenged to conduct outcome-based assessment, especially for the accommodation of the culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Similarly, in South Africa, Beets (2011) studied the assessment practices of teachers. He explored the position of the teacher as mediator between educational policies and diverse learner needs in a framework of morality and ethics. Beets studied the principles of ethical caring, and caring about, and suggested the infusion of ethical principles in assessment practice. Beets suggested that these principles might help provide a framework in emphasizing morality and ethics in the assessment practices of South African schools.

Although there were variety of studies about ethics in different countries, a majority of the articles focused only on educators' perceptions within one culture. Comparative studies of ethics in different cultures are needed since countries are becoming more diverse. Schools and classes have more culturally and linguistically diverse students, and the original assessment policies and

practices might no longer suffice. Comparing the beliefs and perceptions of teachers in different cultures in term of ethics in classroom assessment can inform educational policy and better address the needs of students.

Regarding the issue of diversity of students, the United States provides a useful example. Currently, the increasing number of immigrants to the United States has brought to the forefront the issue of teaching and assessing students who are non-native speakers and have diverse language and cultural backgrounds. Based on a report from *Education Week* (Quality Counts, 2009), there were 4.5 million English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students in K-12 settings during the 2005–2006 academic year, which was an increase of 18% from 2000. The number of the ESL students is expected to comprise 40% of the total student population by 2050 (Goldenberg, 2008). Thus, ethics in instruction and assessment practices should take into consideration ESL students with linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds.

Among ESL students in the elementary, middle, and high schools in the United States, a high percentage are Chinese. Chinese parents want their children to learn in an English speaking environment. Similarly, in international schools in China a mix of expatriate and Chinese teachers instruct and assess the children of Americans who work in China. If teachers differently perceive the ethics of their assessment practices, these children who learn in a different culture might face difficulty in the classrooms. For example, concern about accommodations that address language is an issue in both the United States and China. In the classroom, teachers and students might face ethical conflicts related to assessment. To address such issues in both cultures, it is important to know educators' perceptions about ethics and assessment. Understanding the differences in their perceptions, as well as the similarities, can guide teachers in providing appropriate classroom assessments.

Recent events in China have raised awareness of Chinese teachers and researchers about ethics and assessment. For example, cheating has been a serious issue with the Gaokao, which is a college entrance examination used in China. The Gaokao has served as a major tool to help identify qualified college students and inform secondary education in China. The Gaokao is also perceived as a way to promote social equity and mobility (Liu & Wu, 2006).

The practice of “teaching to the test” is a common practice in the United States and Great Britain (e.g., Berliner, 2011). Similarly, the Gaokao in China possibly influences the learning process through testing preparation (Liu & Wu, 2006). The enrollment in most Chinese universities is impacted predominantly by test-takers' scores in the Gaokao. It leads to the situation in which the classroom teaching is influenced by what will be tested in the Gaokao. Davey, Chuan, & Louise (2007) pointed out that the goal of school teaching in China is to prepare students for the university entrance exam rather than to develop their abilities (p. 392). The influence of this examination is reflected in assessment activities in high schools being designed to achieve higher test scores for the Gaokao preparation. Thus, “teaching to the test” is a common practice in different countries.

For several decades ethics issues have received special attention in the case of high stakes tests, such as the Gaokao. For example, Sax (1974) acknowledged that professional ethics should guide assessment in *standardized testing*. Other authors have provided ethical guidelines related to the preparation of students for standardized testing (e.g., Haladyna, Nolen, & Haas, 1991; Mehrens and Kaminski, 1989; Popham, 1991).

A new generation of researchers and writers in the field of assessment have extended the dialog about ethical and unethical practices to classroom assessment in the U.S. (Green et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2008; Pope et al., 2009). That ethics includes the issue of classroom assessment is supported by Ryan (1997), who

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