

Comparison Between Chinese and American Elementary Education Through the Lens of Gender

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Abstract: In the era of knowledge economy, education determines the competition of a nation. The United States is famous for its quality education around the world. However, in modern times, new challenges have emerged, especially in K-12 education. Although China highly emphasizes on education, due to its limitation of history and development, there are still many problems that need to be solved. Through the comparison of Chinese and American elementary education, the educational strategy can be refined based on different cultural contexts. It is particularly important to stress on gender issues in elementary education in terms of sociological value. The intangible gender bias still exists in other forms. In other words, it is crucial to create a learning environment with gender equality as a response to current gender issues. This study is mainly carried out by reviewing literatures, and the paper is divided into five parts. With a brief introduction of elementary education and gender consideration, this study compares the Chinese and American elementary education system and gender impact. Then, two research results, as a quantitative data, are discussed in this paper, reflecting how gender stereotypes influence elementary education.

Keywords: Gender; Elementary education; Comparison

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1. Introduction

Sitting in the same classroom, reading the same textbook, listening to the same teacher, boys and girls receive very different kind of education ^[1]. This is clearly a stereotype; however, it is still on the modern stage in education, worldwide. According to Calvanese, education is home to one of American most pervasive gender stereotypes ^[2]. Stereotypes pervade all avenues of life, including gender, occupation, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The No Child Left Behind Act passed in 2002 has led to an increased in scrutiny on teachers, especially in regard to their quality, and has raised the issue of stereotypes that may exist in the education system and how they might affect students. Therefore, it is important to value the impact of the elementary education system on the students in terms of gender.

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The educational factors that may influence the qualitative aspects of performance include possible differences in the emphasis Chinese and Western education place on specific cognitive abilities and the lack of opportunity for elderly Chinese with no formal education to have acquired certain skills that are important for performing neuropsychological tests ^[3].

2. Comparison between the Chinese and American education system

In 2004, the Chinese education department once invited the principal of Boston East Elementary School, Judith, to talk about the difference between the two countries on elementary education. Judith shared her amazement for the high level of discipline that the students had in the sixth grade; she noticed that the students did not walk in and out of the classroom without permission, which would never happen in the United States. Another obvious difference is that Chinese students' study for the future and are motivated by the patriotic spirit, while American students would make more effort in activities and social practice. This partly explains why Chinese students value grades so much. In terms of teaching model, American education prefer to ask students inspiring questions. Besides, American teachers do not emphasize on the speed and quantity when solving mathematical problems; rather, they emphasize on the method of discussion and group work. In addition, the homework given to the students usually does not have one standard answer.

On the other side, just like its schooling regulation, Chinese students have limited creativity and imagination.

The “nearby selection strategy” is the basic principle as the response to the No Child Left Behind Act. However, as different schools have different teaching quality, teaching model, and curriculum, the public education system shows disadvantages in terms of inflexibility and low efficiency. The school selection system is the new revolution trend in the world education. Therefore, it is valuable to compare the different selection purpose, scope, and methods to better refine the selection strategies. America implemented the open enrollment strategy in the 1980s, while the Chinese also tested out the western system to keep pace with modern trends. Though very few, there are still a number of private elementary schools in China. Excluding the superior learning facilities, it is hard to value the teaching quality of private schools in China because the national admission criteria has changed.

A huge gap between elementary schools in China and America is the learning environment due to economic elements. In the United States, they provide general daily services for students, and each classroom has a bookshelf that can accommodate up to about 500 books in total; in addition, the teacher's office is situated along the classroom. Comparatively, in China, schools do not offer a bookshelf for every classroom, and there are about 50 students in each class. However, there are cases where students are encouraged to bring one or two books along with them to class so that they can exchange their readings at the book corner. Instead of describing the gap, the pictures below would describe the learning environment in a more direct manner (**Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4**).



Figure 1. An American elementary school classroom



Figure 2. The “amazing” bookshelf



Figure 3. A normal city elementary school classroom



Figure 4. A classroom in a rural part of China

3. Gender difference in cultural contexts

Based on the comparison between Chinese and American elementary education system, it advocates that instead of taking into account gender issues in elementary schools, China needs to get most kids educated first; whereas, in the United States, one can easily find studies on queer theories pinned on their education boards.

Regardless of that, with the help of western theories, more emphasis should be on gender equality in elementary schools ^[4]. The stereotype that male teachers are reserved for the upper grades, while female teachers for the elementary grades has become so ingrained in the society, that it has even reached the students. In America today, most students in schools go through their elementary years without having a single male teacher, except in specialty areas like physical education. Statistics from the National Education Association revealed that only approximately twenty-five percent of public-school teachers are male ^[4]. When looking at the percentage of females in elementary and secondary education, nine percent are in elementary grades while thirty-five percent are in secondary grades ^[5].

Interestingly, based on the different teaching models, the biggest difference between the elementary education in China and America is that in America, one teacher usually takes care of one class for all subjects, whereas in China, a teacher is responsible for one subject, but the teacher needs to teach that subject for different classes. This means that in China, teachers need to have the ability to teach students from grade 1 to grade 6 for a specific subject. Ironically, due to the stereotype, math teachers and science teachers are mainly male, while literature teachers are mainly female in China. Throughout history, Americans also have had the belief that men should be working, while women should be at home with the family.

Moving on to the impact of the behavior of teachers on elementary students, the impact of masculinity on the Chinese education system has always been notable. Especially in the countryside, even teachers have been deeply impacted by the stereotypes of masculinities. Impacted by traditional culture and economic limitation, it is commonly seen that girls easily drop out of school to save money for the family and pass on the opportunity for education to their male counterparts. According to the national survey, only 50.7% female completed the ninth grade, while only 17.5% female graduated from high school ^[6].

Viewing gender inequality in reading materials is quite a new area for Chinese elementary education, although it is not unusual for American education. According to a survey, female figures in elementary school textbooks have been narrowed down to certain roles – aunts, grandmothers, girls, and nurses. Even in portraying Marie Curie, she was described as a delicate and kind mother, rather than focusing on her scientific contributions. In the current Chinese textbook, data have shown that there is a total of 149 articles that refer to human characters, but female characters only appeared 55 times, and only 19.2% are the main characters in the article. According to feminist pedagogy, it is important to value teaching materials to gain real gender equality ^[5].

4. Quantitative research on gender difference

In the trend of quantitative research, it is valuable to test the impact of gender on elementary education via data. A study aimed to view elementary science fair projects through the lens of gender ^[7]. A significant gender difference was found, with girls more likely to be involved in science projects related to social and biological sciences, while boys within the field of physical sciences (**Figure 5**).

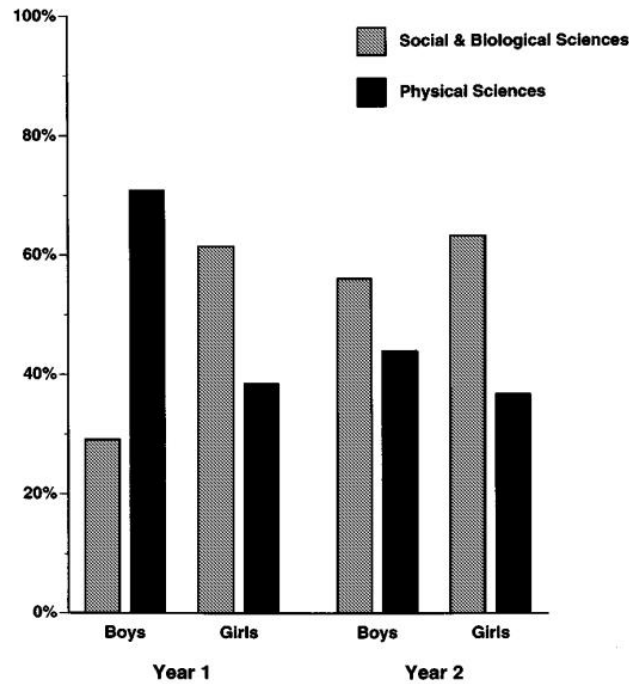


Figure 5. Elementary school activities with gender distribution

The results showed that boys tend to focus more on physical sciences, while girls tend to go for biological and social sciences, suggesting that the trajectories propelling boys and girls toward different subfields in sciences are rooted at a very young age. However, it is interesting to note that although they have selected different subfields, their levels of participation and achievement did not differ.

In terms of cultural context, a Chinese version of Mattis Dementia Rating Scale (DRS) was administered to elderly individuals in Hong Kong, and their performance on the test was compared with that of elderly participants in San Diego [3], in order to determine the cultural differences between elderly Chinese and elderly American individuals.

DRS is a standardized, clinical mental status examination that provides a global measure of dementia derived from the subscale scores of five cognitive areas: attention, initiation-perseveration, construction, conceptualization, and memory. DRS has been widely used in the United States for detecting and staging dementia.

In the aforementioned study, the male and female participants from Hong Kong differed significantly in the “Construction” and “Memory” subscales, while the total scores or any of the subscale score of male and female participants in San Diego did not differ significantly. This result suggests that Chinese elementary education is still trapped in the stereotype that girls would have lower performance in the academic learning process.

5. Conclusion

All in all, although the world has changed dramatically in the modern society, gender bias still exists. People often use stereotypes to make quick judgments, despite the fact that the stereotypes themselves and the judgments concluded are commonly fallacious. Through the comparison of Chinese and American elementary education, the educational strategy can be refined based on different cultural contexts. For China, the impact of gender on elementary education should bring on the discussion board, whereas in America, its academic teaching methods should be refined to meet the global environment. The finding of the research about the impact of gender difference on the selection of certain subfields of science among students

participating in science projects is interesting given that prior research has shown that subject matter is an important factor in both childhood and adult patterns of science participation and achievement.

Disclosure statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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