

Issues and Solutions of International Understanding Education in China

Li Qin¹

¹ School of Foreign Language, Suzhou University of Science and Technology, Suzhou, China

Correspondence: Li Qin, School of Foreign Language, Suzhou University of Science and Technology, 1 Kerui Street, Gaoxin District, Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, 215009, China, Tel: 86-0512-6808-5460. E-mail: qinlizhengzhou@yahoo.co.jp

Received: September 23, 2013 Accepted: October 21, 2013 Online Published: October 28, 2013

doi:10.5539/ies.v6n11p100

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ies.v6n11p100>

Abstract

School in China has actively implemented International Understanding Education to foster a cosmopolitan perspective. The educational principle is to respect people of various socio-cultural backgrounds through comparing China's culture with that of other countries. However, my survey revealed that such education in practice is limited to preparation for study in Anglophone countries because of parental requirements. Additionally, because teachers concentrate on education for understanding Anglophone countries and English, they think little of education for understanding minorities in China. I propose a solution to these problems, which cause other problems by ignoring the principle of respect for diversity. One such potential problem is failure of mutual understanding. Another is ignoring the poor. To resolve these issues, education should include student's practice to understand others from their internal framework of reference with knowledge of their cultures, and simultaneous critical analysis of capitalism, the pragmatic basis of their daily life. The elements included in the suggested program could solve the problems resulting from their current International Understanding Education comprising only preparation for study in Anglophone countries and could provide teachers time and materials for education on understanding minorities in China. Parents can provide overseas study as a benefit from capitalism. Additionally, as minorities in China tend to be poor, understanding the problems of capitalism could make students (future parents) and their parents change their perspective by understanding their domestic minorities.

Keywords: International Understanding Education, China, diversity, the poor

1. Introduction

In modern China, International Understanding Education is popular in elementary, junior high, and high school, especially in economically prosperous areas like Beijing, Shanghai, and Suzhou. International Understanding Education itself has a long history. Immediately after World War II, UNESCO advocated such education for sustaining peace in the world by interactively understanding people of different socio-cultural environments. The appearance of such education in China dates back to the time when Wang Yuanmei and Li Jing, professors at the Beijing Institute of Education, established a research panel for International Understanding Education in 1999, upon their return from the fourth Asian and Pan-Pacific Conference of International Understanding Education in Tokyo. The professors encouraged teachers in China to develop a curriculum for international awareness and cosmopolitan perspective for Chinese students (Wang & Li, 2010). In 2010, the Chinese central government also advocated International Understanding Education in the Outline of Educational Reform and Development in 2010–2020 to strengthen students' knowledge and ability to understand other nations and cultures through understanding domestic culture and tradition.¹

Earlier, the Chinese government had required internationalization of education as a policy and urged students to study abroad. The government had considered overseas education "a concrete practice" for catching up with developed countries (National Institute of Literature of the Communist Party of China, 1983; Yang, 2011; P. Zang, 2012). As Chinese society become increasingly prosperous, as Yang (2011), Kamata, (2006), and Xu (2010) note, scholars began warning that the internationalization of Chinese education would cause the westernization or Americanization of China. They insisted that Chinese students should learn their own culture, including those of domestic minorities, and develop their understanding of people of other cultures through comparison of cultural differences between their cultures and Chinese culture (Chen, 2010; Kamata, 2006; B.

Zhang, 2009; Yuan, 2010; Feng, Feng, He & Chen, 2011). In response to this warning, Chinese scholars and government proceeded with International Understanding Education program. Thus, this is an educational revolution from one-way to interactive understanding.

It has been more than 10 years since Wang and Li began proposing International Understanding Education in China. What is the actual situation in schools? Is International Understanding Education in China working well? Is not there any problem in practice? To the best of my knowledge, numerous studies assert the importance, ideals, and principles of International Understanding Education like a slogan, but few examine and describe the actual situation in schools. With only a slogan and no research on the observable application, it could be a hollow argument. Indeed, China is vast and has numerous schools, which makes it difficult for scholars to perform empirical research. However, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Therefore, I examined the actual situation in Suzhou, a prosperous area in China, where many people from other countries stay because Suzhou's government has been developing the city in cooperation with other countries such as Singapore. According to my survey and interviews with teachers, the international education practice is going in a different direction from the goal of interactive understanding between the Chinese and people of other socio-cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the program could cause a failure in communication with people in other countries. Section 2 onward, I report, analyze, and discuss issues in each question item in interviews with teachers.

2. Survey of Actual Situation of International Understanding Education

I visited five schools in Suzhou that are very active in International Understanding Education and interviewed teachers. The main question items are: 1. teachers' interpretation of International Understanding Education, 2. activities, 3. education on cultures of domestic minorities, and 4. teacher's awareness of problems in this program. The purpose of the first question is to analyze emphasis fluctuation in teachers' understandings of International Understanding Education. The goals and the principles of education in China itself needs to be discussed; however, here, I analyze specifically how different the teacher's goals and understanding of the principles are from those that the government and scholars hold, as mentioned in Section 1. The second question addresses teachers' concrete practice and whether that practice meets what they feel is needed for International Understanding Education. The third item examines teachers' awareness of the educational significance of domestic minorities and of the educational practice related to them. The fourth item examines problems in their practice of International Understanding Education and analyzes whether teachers are aware of problems. I visited the following schools: a private combined kindergarten, elementary, junior high and high school (School A), a public combined junior high and high school (School B), a public junior high school (School C), and two public elementary schools, one of which is traditional (School D) and the other comparatively new (School E).

2.1 Teachers' Understanding of International Understanding Education

I asked the following question—"How do you describe education for international understanding?" All the schools' answers were similar. They said that on the basis of their study of Chinese culture, students learn about people of different cultural backgrounds and respect them so they can live in a globalized world. It is noteworthy that they think this program requires direct interaction with people of other cultures, and to accomplish that, they recommend that students study overseas. Three of the teachers (one each in schools A, D, and E) even regard international education in school as preparation for overseas study.

2.2 Activities

School A has a class in International Understanding Education, which is held once a week for first and second year students. The school uses a textbook that the teachers wrote and edited in English specifically for the class. The textbook describes cultures, traditions, social realities, and other aspects of various countries, including China. Students can learn the content and English simultaneously. The teacher not only teaches the information but also directs students to research a country as a subject to study independently. Their learning results are evaluated by their portfolios and scores of presentations about their research based on the textbook contents. They have a project for participating in "International Cultural Week," an exhibition of students' research.

The other four schools have no special class for International Understanding Education. Instead, they incorporate such education in certain subjects, especially English class. For this class, they employ Anglophone teachers, and conduct activities and events with them. Three of the schools (C, D, and E) assert that direct contact and conversation with Anglophone teachers enables students to learn Anglophone culture and Anglophone people.

All five schools require overseas study. They have affiliated schools in foreign countries, largely Anglophone countries, and conduct student exchange programs during vacation. All the schools consider overseas study the most important and effective practice for International Understanding Education. However, actually, the

International Understanding Education program is a form of preparation for study in Anglophone countries within their schools' program and in the students' future.

2.3 Education of Cultures of Domestic Minorities

The principle of International Understanding Education in China includes understanding cultures of domestic minorities. However, all five schools focus on overseas cultures but provide no education about domestic minorities. Teachers responded that they are aware of importance of domestic minority culture education but cannot practice it because of insufficient time.

2.4 Teachers' Awareness of Problems in Their Program

First, all the teachers insisted that although they wanted to conduct more activities for International Understanding Education, the implementation and the contents of the program depend on the school managers, including the principal. For example, a teacher at school C said, "We have to follow our principal's ideals and goals of education." Their complaint lies not in the principal's lack of understanding of International Understanding Education but in the rigid curriculum of compulsory subjects (*xiao ben ke cheng*). The curriculum is required for all schools in China, and the principal, who controls academic affairs, determines the contents of education based on it. Thus, there is insufficient time for International Understanding Education.

Second, resulting from the existence of the required curriculum, teachers become very busy if they practice International Understanding Education because they must treat it as an extra subject and prepare thoroughly.

The biggest problem for the schools, according to interviewees, is the Chinese tradition of education aimed at passing examinations for university (*ying shi jiao yu*). Students' parents expect the school to effectively educate their children to pass the examinations for entering a good university. Therefore, schools cannot easily obtain consent from parents for International Understanding Education because this program does not address the university entrance examination. Private schools in particular are supported economically by the parents; thus, they must adhere to the parents' wishes. As interviewees stated, although the school principal determines the curriculum contents, parents have the most power on that decision. School B said, "International Understanding Education is important for students in a globalized world, but we need to change parents' thinking if we are to sustainably implement this program."

3. Survey of Actual Situation of International Understanding Education

The schools I visited in Suzhou are active in International Understanding Education. The survey, however, clearly reveals the following problems.

3.1 Parents' Thinking

All the schools share the concept, the principle, and the goal of International Understanding Education with the government and scholars. They are also enthusiastic about International Understanding Education. The schools, however, focus on overseas study, especially in Anglophone countries, and their usual practice contributes to such study, especially English language. This practice reflects their lack of attention to non-Anglophone countries and their own domestic minority studies, even though they insist that the cause is lack of time. Even if they had more time, they would spend it teaching English and understanding of Anglophone countries as long as they think that most overseas study will occur in Anglophone countries.

As a hypothesis, their Anglophone-countries-study-centric education stems from the following reasons. First, teachers themselves focus on Anglophone countries. People from various countries live in Suzhou, and hence, understanding of various cultures and direct contact with people from those cultures is important for students, even in their everyday life. Teachers can broaden students' minds to Asia, Africa, Europe, and America. However, teachers limit students' study to English and in Anglophone countries. This attitude might come in part from teachers' view that Anglophone countries are more important for students' future. Still, from the teachers' answers to the interviews in 2.2 and 2.4, teachers' emphasis on Anglophone countries results from the following reason: schools must respond to the parents' requirement that student pass exams to enter a good university. Students' parents support education in English and understanding of Anglophone cultures as preparation for attending a university in Anglophone countries. Today, Suzhou is prosperous, and many parents want their children to go to Anglophone countries to study. International Understanding Education in China was born as a counterargument against internationalization of education, which impelled overseas study, because it was assumed only to westernize or Americanize Chinese people. The actual practice of International Understanding Education, however, does not differ from that of the original internationalization of education. The only difference from the past is that the practice is now supported by parents rather than by the national policy and scholars.

Teachers are sufficiently aware of the problem, but they lack the power to change parents' thinking. To solve this problem, the government should institute programs to change the parents' minds.

3.2 *Mutual Misunderstanding*

I propose another solution on which teacher can get a handle, addressing a problem of which none of the schools are aware. Though it is Anglophone-culture-centric, the schools practice International Understanding Education according to China's policy. The scholars and government recommend that students understand people of their own and other cultures through knowledge of cultural differences by comparing their cultures with Chinese culture. This policy means that students should respect diversity, based on cultural identities. However, diversity-centric, identity-respecting education has two problems. One is, as Kuwamura (2009) notes, failure in mutual understanding with people of other cultures. The other is, as Suzuki (2012) suggests, ignoring the poor.

Understanding people of other cultures through the knowledge of cultural differences by comparing others' cultures with Chinese culture could be a valuable method for understanding people in other areas. According to Kuwamura (2009), however, "simply knowing other cultures" does not always equal "understanding people of other cultures;" knowledge of other culture sometimes leads to judgment of others, rather than understanding. Additionally, Kuwamura (2009) suggests that acceptance and respect of other cultures could theoretically lead to failure in communication and even dissociation from others.

Although Kuwamura's (2009) argument is based on W. B. Michaels's (2004) study, according to Michaels, respect of diversity could cause a situation wherein no argument or disagreement occurs because everybody respects others' differing opinions, which are based on cultural identities. Thus, this situation is a failure in mutual understanding because people respect others' different stories as "their stories." Diversity-centric, identity-respecting education teaches students that they should understand and respect people of other cultures; however, it may teach students that they should always accept people of other cultures and not disagree with them.

As a solution of these problems, Kuwamura (2009) proposes "a practice of understanding of others from their internal frame of reference, or their own logic, feeling, sensibility, tradition, and so on, with knowledge of their socio-cultural background, and after that, debating certain issues with them." This type of understanding helps to avoid judgment of others and failure in mutual understanding. Kuwamura (2009) states that "Understanding others requires, first, empathy, and in order to achieve it, people must understand others from their internal frame of reference. Otherwise, they could form a simple judgment of others or regard other cultures merely as theirs without empathy" (p. 94).

This solution could improve International Understanding Education in China. The practice of the education is now almost equal to learning Anglophone culture, respecting its cultural difference from China with no argument and no disagreement. Argument and disagreement could lead students' eyes to other cultures. Additionally, whether students agree or disagree, they could empathize with Anglophone people as well as the others when they understand them from their internal frame of reference.

3.3 *Gap between the Rich and the Poor*

Regarding the problem of ignorance of the poor, as Suzuki (2012) notes, "diversity-centricism is based on postmodern theories ... which take notice of identity and criticize oppressive definitions of 'I' as an agency for a good society because everybody should have a right to fulfill self-actualization without any oppression. However, the politics in which postmodern theory seeks a better society overlook problems of capitalism including poverty. ... Postmodern theories are theories that support those who have money" (p. 101). Although Suzuki's argument is also based on Michaels's study, Michaels (2004) makes the following observation:

"[I]f postmodernist authors have, in their attention to racial, cultural, and sexual difference, neglected class difference, they have surely done so because class difference—more or less money—has always seemed an implausible candidate for promotion to the status of a subject position that we must respect. Writers whose model of "oppression" is "marginalization" have, in other words, had a hard time thinking about economic inequality, since the problem of the poor is not the problem of a minority and is not the problem of the subject articulated through its relation to an oppressive norm (a median income, unlike, say, heterosexuality, is not a norm). And because the poor are not marginalized, and because they are victimized by capitalism rather than by "oppressive definitions of the subject," writers committed to Butler's version of "a Left political project" have tended more or less to ignore them" (pp. 180-1).

Suzuki (2012) states that "the theory highlighting cultural diversity tries to save the poor by respecting their culture. But the poor cannot be saved even if their culture is respected because poverty is not the problem of

identity based on borderline personality but more or less the problem of money, or capitalism” (p. 102). He continues, “[I]t becomes important, hence, that we listen to the voice of the poor with Marxism as a negative theory, that is to say, that we read and interpret” their voice “as the problem of capitalism,” putting their voices “back to the paradigm, but not replacing the problem of poverty with the problem of identity” (p. 102). Therefore, “anti-identity theory is valid when we consider the problems of capitalism, which the postmodern theories have overlooked, while reading and interpreting” “the voice of the poor” (p. 102). In short, he insists that we should look at the basis of our current daily life, or capitalism itself.

If we think highly of respect for diversity, it could lead us to ignore the poor. This issue is critical for education. Suzhou has certainly been prosperous and student’s parents want their children to study in Anglophone countries. Their ideal is supported by their very prosperity. Tuition for a university in Anglophone countries costs much more than universities in China, and parents incur additional costs for their children’s housing and travel. Chinese parents’ strong aspirations of overseas study stem from reform and door-opening policies, that is, from capitalism. Modern Chinese society is well known to suffer from problems of the growing chasm between the rich and the poor. This problem relates to the problem of domestic minorities, which tend to be poor. The poor cannot access good education, and they certainly cannot study abroad. As long as International Understanding Education in China is practiced on the basis of comparing cultures in China to those of other countries and respecting diversity, the program is flawed in part by the very inequality of their education. International Understanding Education should also focus on criticism of the basis of students’ daily life, or capitalism. Such an education may draw students’ attention to domestic minorities and change their parents’ minds as well as their own (that is, the minds of future parents).

4. Conclusion

Schools in China have focused on International Understanding Education and practice it actively. The operant principle is to understand people of other cultures through comparison with Chinese culture, including minority cultures in China, and to respect others. The purpose is to foster a cosmopolitan perspective. My survey, however, reveals that the actual practice is limited to preparation for overseas study, especially study in Anglophone countries, in response to parents’ demands. As long as parents’ thinking remains, International Understanding Education in China could merely repeat the original internalization of education despite the fact that the program has been criticized because it merely westernized and Americanized the Chinese people. Additionally, the current program continues to ignore the cultures of domestic minorities.

However, International Understanding Education in China should achieve a balance. School could expect the government’s institution of program to change parent’s mind. Furthermore, there are some solutions on which teacher can get a handle. International Understanding Education in China is based on respect for diversity, a concept with two problems in education. One is a failure in mutual understanding. The other is the ignorance of poverty. Without improvement of the program, Chinese education could exacerbate the problem of the gap between the rich and the poor, and thus decrease equal access to a good education. As a solution, International Understanding Education in China should focus on understanding others from their internal frame of reference, with knowledge of their socio-cultural reality and critical analysis of their culture and daily life, or capitalism, as well. Through critical analysis of capitalism, the program should sharpen students’ awareness of domestic minorities and change their parents’ worshipful attitude toward Anglophone countries.

Suzhou is only one region in China; it does not represent all of China. However, I think that certain problems found in my survey of International Understanding Education in Suzhou might hold true for other areas in China, as well as for other countries. From this perspective, the proposed solution could suggest practices of International Understanding Education in areas other than Suzhou. Finally, one issue that requires a solution in the near future is sufficient time for teachers to implement the practices that I suggest. As the teachers I interviewed reported, they have insufficient time even for their current curriculum. I will attempt to solve this issue in a later study.

Acknowledgement

I express my gratitude to cooperation of the five schools in Suzhou: Suzhou Waiguoyu Zhongxue, Suzhou Shiyan Xiaoxue, Xinggang Xuexiao, Xinghai Xuexiao, and Zhenghua Zhongxue.

References

- Chen, C. (2010). History education should not forget “international understanding education. *Education of thought and theory*, 4, 59–61.
- Feng, H., Feng, Y., He, N., & Chen, H. (2011). Development of structure of teaching materials of international

- understanding education. *Annual report of Beijing institute of education, 2011*, 67-70.
- Kamata, S. (2006). International understanding education in a globalized world: Symposium in the conference of international understanding education in China. *Journal of international understanding education, 12*, 166–179.
- Kuwamura, T. (2009). On solution of hermeneutic deficiency of “encounter group” in C. Roger’s “Student-centered education”: Centered on criticism of communication in multiculturalism. *Formation of humanity and culture; Annual report of department of education-culture-information science, Nara Women’s University, 7*, 85–96.
- Michaels, W. B. (2004). *The shape of the signifier: 1967 to the end of history*. Oxford, NY: Princeton University Press.
- National Institute of Literature of the Communist Party of China. (Ed.). (1983). *Selected works of Deng Xiaoping*, 2. Beijing: People’s Publishing House.
- Suzuki, A. (2012). In the times of supremacy of politics: From the perspective of world literature. *The Katahira, 47*, 99–114.
- Tian, Y. (2000). Comparison of educational revolution between China and Japan: Review of education of human qualities in China. *Journal of humanism, Tokyo Metropolitan University: Education, 35*, 112–120.
- Wang, Y., & Li, J. (2010). Reflection and speculation on international understanding education in Beijing. *Annual report of Beijing institute of education, 2010*, 49–53.
- Xu, X. (2010). “Study on practice of international understanding education in elementary and junior high school in the industrial areas, Suzhou” (Master thesis for Suzhou University).
- Yang, Q. (2011). *The design of practice and development of international understanding education*. Beijing: Social Science Academic Press.
- Yuan, L. (2010). On educational innovation from the perspective of education for international understanding. *Higher education of science, 90*, 18–24.
- Zang, P. (2012). An essay on international understanding education of Japan of today. *Japanese Studies, 1*, 90–101.
- Zhang, B. (2009). Establishment of international understanding education from the perspective of ethics. *Annual report of Xinzhou Teachers University, 25*, 99–102.

Note

Note 1. For the difference in International Understanding Education between Japan and China, see Tian (2000).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).