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Boys and Girls: Chinese Future Teachers' Expectations

ZHAN, Ginny Qin, STOJEK, Monika and QIAN, Hong

### Abstract

The current study examines the expectations of Chinese education majors for their future students in the areas of academic behavior, classroom behavior, academic performance, and general behavior. Of special interest to us was the question whether the future teachers would have very similar or different expectations for boys and girls. A group of 152 education majors at a medium-sized university in Shanghai participated in the study by filling out a survey questionnaire. The results indicate that both male and female education majors had similar expectations of their future students in the areas of academic behavior, classroom behavior, and general behavior; however, they differed significantly on the Academic Performance Scale.

### Boys and Girls: Chinese Future Teachers' Expectations

Research has consistently found that boys and girls are treated differently in educational settings.<sup>1</sup> These differences range from how teachers respond to boys and girls in the classroom, what they expect from boys and girls academically, to textbook depictions of males and females. In all those areas, boys receive more favorable treatment than girls. It is possible that girls may be disadvantaged in the classroom because of their gender.

A typical student in the United States would spend approximately a total of 13,000 hours at school during a span of 13 years.<sup>2</sup> During that time not only does he/she study the conventional subjects determined by the curriculum, but also acquires social behaviors, among them gender-typing behaviors. In this context, teachers are important figures in contributing to children's gender socialization. The quality and frequency of interaction with the teacher contributes to the development of children's aspirations and productivity.<sup>3</sup> Masland believes that the teacher factor is a major part contributing to the kind of classroom environment for boys and girls.<sup>4</sup>

How do teachers influence the differential socialization of boys and girls in educational settings? Studies on classroom interactions suggest that boys receive more challenging and higher-level questions from teachers than girls do.<sup>5</sup> Boys also have more opportunities to answer questions because the teachers are more likely to call upon them.<sup>6</sup> By the same token, boys are also more likely to receive more attention, including negative responses, from the teachers than girls do.<sup>7</sup> These practices may put female students at a disadvantage in their classroom learning, as suggested by some researchers.<sup>8</sup>

To explore the causes of these differential treatments of boys and girls, Fang notes that it is the teachers' belief system that influences their actions.<sup>9</sup> If a teacher has gender-based biases

towards the students, then surely his/her behavior in the classroom would reflect that belief. Research seems to lend support to this claim. For instance, Li found that teachers have different convictions of students' abilities in mathematics depending on the gender of a student.<sup>10</sup> In general, mathematics teachers in this study had higher expectations of male students than females, and they tended to overestimate male students' math skills than females. Others suggest that teachers' self-report of their beliefs and views are not necessarily consistent with their behavior in the classroom. For example, it was found that even if the teacher indicated in a questionnaire that he/she was unbiased and fair, the observation of their classroom interactions with children suggested the opposite. In fact, the teacher usually was surprised at the gender-specific interaction patterns in the classroom when he/she watched the taped video of the class afterwards.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, Altermatt et al. argued that teachers simply respond to boys and girls' different styles in the classroom. They concluded that if teachers were calling on boys more, that's because most volunteers were boys, not because the teachers held biased views.<sup>12</sup>

Now let's briefly examine the current situation in Chinese education. It is well documented that historically, women had a lower status than men in Chinese society.<sup>13</sup> Women in the past did not receive adequate education. In fact, parents often did not consider education necessary or useful for their daughters, thus they did not send them to schools at all. Girls were perceived as less capable of learning than boys. However, access to educational opportunities has greatly improved to both boys and girls since the founding of the People's Republic.<sup>14</sup> The number of schools, both in urban and rural areas, grew rapidly. Guided by the Communist Party's official ideology of egalitarianism, girls were offered many educational opportunities,

particularly in urban areas. It has been report that by the mid-1960s, the illiteracy rate among women in urban as well as rural areas declined drastically.<sup>15</sup>

However, research suggests that despite the official policy, generally female students are still not considered or treated as equal to male students.<sup>16</sup> For instance, Niu reported that in the 1980's, the school admissions criteria required girls to have higher scores than boys to be accepted, and parents and teachers still reinforced the gender bias by having different expectations of girls. Girls are generally considered less competent than boys by their teachers, thus if a girl fails the test it is considered normal.<sup>17</sup> In a more recent study, Rong and Shi report that women lag behind men in completing at least 12 years of formal education, and they also constitute a majority of the illiterate population in all age groups in China.<sup>18</sup> Other researchers have found that there is a significant difference between male and female students in their aspirations. For example, even if a woman completes college, she is significantly less likely than a man to seek graduate studies. The researchers attribute this result to the fact that women are still socialized to consider family more important than professional careers.<sup>19</sup>

Based on the research on gender inequity in educational practices and gendered socialization for children in the United States and China, we concurred with past studies that many teachers may have gender-biased views of their students and may have different expectations of boys and girls. But we were interested in the question of whether the teachers develop these views after they have classroom teaching experience or before. We decided to examine college education majors both in the US and China. We hypothesized that due to gendered socialization in both countries, these college students would already have developed certain views and beliefs about girls and boys' abilities and would thus very likely to have higher expectations of boys than of girls in academic performance, and would have traditional gender

specific expectations of boys and girls in their overall behavior. We believe that once they become teachers, their gender-specific expectations would influence their actual behavior in the classroom. The first author and a group of students conducted a project examining American education majors' expectations of their future students.<sup>20</sup> It was done in a Southeastern regional university. The results indicate that there were no significant gender-based differences in these American education majors' attitudes and expectations of their future students in several areas, including academic and classroom behavior. In the study reported in this paper, we examined Chinese education majors' attitudes and expectations of students. The study was conducted in a Shanghai university in China. We were interested in examining how the Chinese future teachers would respond to the same questions.

## Method

### *Participants*

One hundred fifty-two Early Childhood Education majors from a medium-sized university in Shanghai participated in the study. The mean age of participants was 20.3 years old with a minimum age of 18 and a maximum age of 25. Of the sample, 119 (78%) were women and 31 (20%) were men, with two participants not identifying their sex. This male-female ratio is quite common in similar educational programs at other universities. A majority of the participants were either first-year undergraduate students (40%) or second-year students (53%).

### *Instrument*

A survey questionnaire was used as the instrument in this study. The questionnaire was originally developed by Ogley, Whiddon, and Cox, under the supervision of the first author, for a similar study with American education majors in a university, as mentioned earlier. The questionnaire consisted of demographics, the Academic Behavior Scale, the Classroom Behavior

Scale, the Academic Performance Scale, and the General Behavior Scale. There were a total of 37 items. Two versions of the questionnaire were developed based on the sex of the hypothetical student. In the first version, the 9-year-old elementary school student was named “Susie” whereas in the second version, the 9-year-old elementary school student was named “Tommy.” The participants were asked to rate the importance of certain characteristics exhibited by the student on a Likert-type scale where the ratings ranged from 1 (*definitely not expected*) to 4 (*absolutely expected*). Other than the name of the hypothetical student in the scenario, all statements describing the characteristics and behaviors of the student were the same for both versions.

In the current Chinese study, 82 (54%) students completed the survey in “Tommy” version, and 70 (46%) students completed it in “Susie” version.

The first scale, the Academic Behavior Scale, measured the future teachers’ expectations of students’ academic attitudes and behavior. There were a total of eight items in this scale. An example of an item describing academic attitudes and behavior is “*Completing all assignments in a timely manner.*” The second scale, the Classroom Behavior Scale, also had eight items. They asked the future teachers how important it was for the students to exhibit certain behavior in the classroom such as “*Calling out in class.*” The third scale, the Academic Performance Scale, consisting eight items, measured future teachers’ expectations of their students’ academic performance. For example, they were asked to rate how important it was for the student to be “*Making A’s in mathematics.*” The last scale, the General Behavior Scale, measured teachers’ expectations of students’ general behaviors outside the classroom. This scale included 13 items. An example in this scale is “*Being assertive.*”

The reliability of these four scales was assessed by calculating Cronbach's alpha for each scale. Results ranged from .25 to .85.

The relatively high level of English proficiency of these Chinese education majors rendered it unnecessary to translate the English questionnaire into Chinese. The survey questionnaire was therefore administered in English.

### *Procedure*

The survey questionnaire was group administered by an instructor of English, the third author, in several classes at the Department of Early Childhood Education in a medium-sized university in Shanghai. Participation was voluntary and no class credit was given. The students were informed that the study concerned future teachers' evaluations of their students; however, the fact that the gender of the child was a factor in the research was not revealed to them. The participants were not informed that there were in fact two versions of the survey questionnaire. The two versions were distributed randomly, with an equal probability for a participant to get a "Tommy" or "Susie" version. The procedure took an average of 20-30 minutes, during which time the students were encouraged to ask the instructor if they had any questions or if they needed any clarifications.

### Results

The mean scores on all the four scales are presented in Table 1. The mean score for "Tommy" and "Susie" was quite similar ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = 0.28$  for "Tommy" and  $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 0.27$  for "Susie"). An ANOVA indicated no significant differences in these scores between "Tommy" and "Susie" versions. Similarly, the ANOVA did not reveal any significant difference in the overall mean scores between male and female participants on all the scales.

However, when the four scales were examined separately based on the sex of the participants, a significant gender difference ( $F(1, 150) = 8.85, p < .05$ ) showed on the Academic Performance Scale. Male participants rated “Tommy” ( $M = 2.67, SD = 0.44$ ) significantly higher than they did “Suzie” ( $M = 2.14, SD = 0.58$ ). The results indicate that male future teachers may have higher expectations of boys than of girls on academic performance. No similar results were found with female future teacher participants.

### Discussion

The current research examined Chinese education majors’ expectations of their future students based on the student’s sex. Out of the four areas studied, three did not yield any significant gender differences, indicating that overall, these future teachers may have a fairly egalitarian attitude and expectations of boys and girls in their academic behavior, classroom behavior, and general behavioral traits. The participants’ general attitudes towards their students were similar regardless of the sex of the hypothetical student. Therefore, our hypothesis that Chinese education majors would have significantly different expectations of boys and girls on all the areas studied was not supported. This finding is consistent with the study by Ogley et al. in the College of Education at a medium-sized university in the southeastern part of the United States. In their study, Ogley and her colleagues surveyed education majors using the same questionnaire. Their research indicated no overall gender differences.

However, our hypothesis was partially supported by the result from the current study. What differs from this study from Ogley et al’s is that in the academic performance area, male future teachers in the Chinese study expected boys to have significantly higher academic grades than they did girls.

Viewed in its totality, the results do not indicate that education majors necessarily hold gender-biased beliefs when evaluating students with the exception of male future teachers. There are several explanations for these findings.

First of all, the participants in both Ogle et al's and the current one were college students, not actual teachers. It's possible that most of them hold fairly unbiased views while in college but may develop differential expectations for boys and girls after they start their teaching career. If that is the case, then it will be very interesting to examine whether these differential expectations for boys and girls are developed simply as a response to students' behavior, as suggested by Altermatt et al.

Second, the research was conducted in China, but the hypothesis for this research was formulated based primarily on the empirical studies from the United States. It is possible that this problem simply does not exist in China. In fact, it is expressly stated in the Chinese Constitution that men and women are equal in all aspects of life.<sup>21</sup> However, it will be naïve to assume that gendered socialization would have little to no impact on young people's value system. Research clearly suggests that boys and girls are not treated equally in schools despite the provisions in the Chinese Constitution. Instead, study by Shu may shed more plausible lights on these results.<sup>22</sup> Shu found that attitudes towards gender egalitarianism vary in the Chinese population in that individuals with higher education hold more egalitarian beliefs than those with less education. In fact, women with higher education were found to have most egalitarian ideology. In the current study a majority of the participants was female. Out of 150 participants who reported their gender, 119 were women. Thus, most participants not only had some higher education but also were female, which may explain their lack of differential attitudes toward boys and girls. It is also worth mentioning that the research was conducted in Shanghai, which is among the best-

educated and most affluent cities in China. This factor may also have contributed to the more liberal and egalitarian attitudes of most participants.

Third, research findings by Garrahy offer another plausible explanation of the results of the current study.<sup>23</sup> As mentioned earlier, Garrahy found that teachers are not aware of their biases. Their patterns of interacting with male and female students in the classroom are not necessarily consistent with their stated beliefs on a self-reported measure. It is clear that self-report may not be the best method to examine teacher's gender-based classroom expectations and behavior. A more preferable method would be to administer a survey first and then observe the actual practices in the classroom.

On the other hand, the significant finding that this study yielded should not go unnoticed. It may be beneficial to examine the teachers' attitudes towards their students not only based on the gender of the student but also the gender of the teacher. The fact that men rated "Tommy" higher on the academic achievement scale, but not on the academic behavior, classroom behavior, or general behavior scales may indicate a certain trend in the Chinese society. Perhaps male teachers still consider academia a male domain whereas in other areas, they hold more egalitarian views. As numbers of male teachers in general increase from elementary to middle and high school, they will have more and more influence in their students' gender socialization at school. Their attitudes, expectations and classroom behavior will directly impact their students. We need to further explore this area of research in Chinese schools.

A limitation to the study was that almost all participants were first- or second-year education majors. Most of them have not had teaching experiences so it was not possible for us to examine the effects of teaching in the classroom on their attitudes. In future studies, we may want to use a longitudinal research design following a group of education majors for several

years to capture any possible attitudinal and behavioral change over time. Also, both questionnaire and classroom observation should be used to obtain accurate data.

## Appendix A

Table 1: Average means and standard deviations on all scales and on Academic Performance Scale by sex

	Overall Scores on all Scales		Scores on Academic Performance Scale	
	Tommy	Susie	Tommy	Susie
All Participants	M = 2.89 SD = .28	M = 2.88 SD = .27	M = 2.58 SD = .39	M = 2.50 SD = .46
Participants (M)	M = 2.90 SD = .27	M = 2.76 SD = .46	<b><i>M = 2.67</i></b> <b><i>SD = .44</i></b>	<b><i>M = 2.14</i></b> <b><i>SD = .58</i></b>
Participants (F)	M = 2.89 SD = .28	M = 2.90 SD = .23	M = 2.55 SD = .37	M = 2.56 SD = .42

Appendix B  
Questionnaire

**Demographics:**

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Sex: \_\_\_\_\_

**Academic status:**

First year \_\_ Second year \_\_ Third year \_\_ Fourth year or plus \_\_

Major \_\_\_\_\_

Unknown/Undecided check here \_\_\_\_\_

**Scenario: Now imagine that you had completed your teacher education program and had become an elementary school teacher. Tommy is one of the 9-year-old students in your class.**

- A. How important is it to you for Tommy to demonstrate the following behavioral characteristics? Rate each on a scale of 1 to 4.

1= Not at all important  
3= Somewhat important

2= Somewhat unimportant  
4= Very important.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Completing work neatly
- \_\_\_\_\_ Having good behavior
- \_\_\_\_\_ Making A's in Art
- \_\_\_\_\_ Being quiet in the classroom
- \_\_\_\_\_ Being creative in projects
- \_\_\_\_\_ Making A's in mathematics
- \_\_\_\_\_ Raising hand before talking
- \_\_\_\_\_ Actively participating in classroom discussions
- \_\_\_\_\_ Making A's in Social Studies
- \_\_\_\_\_ Completing all assignments in a timely manner
- \_\_\_\_\_ Asking a lot of relevant questions in class
- \_\_\_\_\_ Making A's in Physical Education (P.E.)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Assisting classmates
- \_\_\_\_\_ Calling out in class
- \_\_\_\_\_ Having high self-confidence in assignments
- \_\_\_\_\_ Making A's in Writing
- \_\_\_\_\_ Being assertive in the classroom discussions
- \_\_\_\_\_ Making A's in Music
- \_\_\_\_\_ Working well independently
- \_\_\_\_\_ Having poor handwriting

- \_\_\_\_\_ Working well in groups
- \_\_\_\_\_ Having high self-confidence with peers
- \_\_\_\_\_ Making A's in science
- \_\_\_\_\_ Being passive in the classroom

- B. Imagining that you are a teacher, which behaviors or characteristics do you expect from Tommy during free/break time?  
Please rate each on a scale of 1 to 4.

1= Definitely not expected

2= Somewhat not expected

3= Somewhat expected

4= Absolutely expected

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| _____ Having a sense of humor                   | _____ Looking out for peers               |
| _____ Engaging in responsible play              | _____ Having leadership skills            |
| _____ Getting dirty on the playground           | _____ Having the ability to adapt         |
| _____ Being popular with classmates             | _____ Appeasing classmates                |
| _____ Being creative in play                    | _____ Being passive                       |
| _____ Being assertive                           | _____ Forming select groups at break time |
| _____ Being considerate of others on playground |   |

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