

Why Yu Chen can't read: Working with Chinese families of children with identified learning and behaviour problems

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Introduction

Schools in New Zealand and especially in Auckland are facing the increasing prospect of working with families from a multitude of cultural backgrounds (McIntosh, 1997). This can be an enriching experience for the school community as the diverse range of culture adds to the learning and appreciation of social norms and practices that are different from our own. This important value of “learning to accept our differences”, if taught appropriately, has the potential to create a more tolerant and understanding community.

However, these same differences can also cause much confusion, frustration, misunderstanding and anger within a school community. Often, cultural differences are seen to be positive when things are going smoothly or when students are cooperative, making good gains and contributing to the classroom learning. It is when problems occur that cultural differences seem to exacerbate the presenting issue and create communication barriers. None is as apparent as in the area of special needs. Families of students with identified learning and

behaviour problems are often stressed out and unsure of what to do. Teachers, on the other hand, are often frustrated and lack support in managing students. Language barriers add greatly to the presenting problems. Cultural differences make it difficult for all parties to understand each other. All this makes for a situation that has the potential to create much anguish and desperation for everyone involved.

This article is written in an attempt to prevent this from happening. It is hoped that the information presented here will help the school teacher, guidance counsellor and school management to understand the thoughts and reactions of a typical Chinese family when told that one of its younger members has a problem at school. Obviously, it is inappropriate to generalise and say that all Chinese families would react in the same way, as every family's circumstances and experiences are different, and they would therefore behave differently to a given situation. However, there are common cultural elements that determine the mindset and attitude that Chinese parents bring to a presenting issue, and

an understanding and acceptance of these attitudes will hopefully help establish bridges to collaborative problem-solving.

The initial reaction

When Chinese parents are told that their child has a problem at school, often the initial reaction is to go on the defensive and be extremely suspicious of the intentions of the person giving the information. This initial reaction occurs because having a difficulty is often perceived as upsetting the “harmony” of the community as well as being singled out as different and problematic (Dao, 1991). This perception, together with the high regard Chinese families have towards education, means that this news is almost always extremely upsetting to the parents. If the family has recently arrived in New Zealand, this news may add to a sense of alienation and dissociation from the school community. It is much worse if there is a language barrier, as this prevents the communication that could help alleviate the alienation.

Emotions

Very often, when presented with news of their children's difficulty, Chinese parents feel shame and embarrassment. Parents may perceive the situation as a personal and family failure. Some may think, “I must be a bad parent!” They may have philosophical and religious interpretations that suggest

present tragedy is a direct result of inappropriate behaviour committed in the past. These interpretations could bring about intense feelings of guilt, shame and frustration. Parents may ask themselves, “What have I done wrong to deserve this?” Although these feelings may be intense, they are rarely expressed, as cultural norms do not encourage an open acknowledgement, much less expression of feelings. Furthermore, parents who feel alienated may think that it is best not to add to the problem by voicing their frustrations. They then withdraw and internalise the presenting problem and try to solve it themselves. However, this decision and approach is more likely to be taken without communication with the school.

Denial

Sometimes as a reaction to the shock and frustration felt by parents, they deny there is a problem. The blame is shifted to other causes such as teasing, bullying, ESOL difficulties or previous experience at school. Sometimes they go on the offensive and blame the school for not catering to the needs of their child.

Non-verbal communication

Many teachers and support workers have reported much difficulty in working with Chinese families, as it is often very difficult to “read” the response of the parents. Parents may nod and smile as if in agreement during meetings but then

may not respond, or may even act in a contradictory manner afterwards. This is a great source of frustration to many professionals working cross-culturally with Chinese parents. To confront the issue makes it worse, as Chinese parents seek to avoid confrontation at all cost, and would much prefer informal discussion and indirect communication.

What to do? – Managing the initial reaction

It is important when informing Chinese parents of concerns regarding their children's behaviour or learning that the message is given as clearly as possible, and that they are assured that the school is not seeking to remove the child. Although schools in New Zealand are generally very good at providing support and affirming acceptance and inclusion, this message is of particular importance to Chinese parents, and it would help to have it repeated a few times both by words and action. This will help create an atmosphere of trust, and dispel the suspicion and fear that is often present in the initial phase.

Language and culture

Sensitivity in addressing the issue in a language that Chinese families can understand and in a culturally appropriate manner will go a long way in overcoming the defensive reaction that hinders open communication. Using a translator can help but the choice of a translator is very

important in influencing the outcome of the interaction. There are some pitfalls involved in the use of translators and this will be discussed later in this article. Appropriate use of language and cultural sensitivity help immensely to convey a message of acceptance to the family. This message is very important to the family, as it also acts as an initial bridge in overcoming existing barriers. Cultural sensitivity may mean that the issue is addressed in small incremental steps rather than through a formal "meeting" where the presenting concern is "spelt out fully". This approach helps the family to cope with the initial shock. The focus of the initial meeting should be on problem-solving and discussing appropriate programmes that could be implemented to address the issues. It would also help build bridges if the school explains what has been done to support the child through its own class or school-wide management programmes.

Relationship

Another bridge-building exercise is to focus on what the parents can do to help their child improve. This activity gives the message that the school wants to support the family in working through the difficulties experienced by the child. However, there are no simple solutions, as it can be difficult identifying an appropriate role for the family when there is no suitable resource person in the family who is able to support the child,

especially if learning in English is an issue. Working together in partnership with the school is something that would be new to most Chinese families who are not used to this model of collaborative problem-solving in an education setting. As such it would work better if this partnership were built upon an ongoing relationship of trust.

Schools need to consider other creative ways of involving Chinese families in supporting their children's learning. Schools also need to be aware that the concerns conveyed to the parents will be taken seriously (even if denied outwardly) and intensive attempts will be made to "rectify the problem". Often this means that parents will pressure their children to perform better and to set goals to avoid further shame to the family (Lese & Robbins, 1994).

Home-school communication is a very important component of the problem-solving process when dealing with students having difficulty at school. This essential communication takes time and effort to be established with Chinese parents, as they generally view the school as an educational institution where teachers are given the authority to teach and discipline their children. Teachers are treated with respect as authority figures, and the teacher-parent relationship is seldom viewed as a partnership working towards the good of the child.

Next steps – A suggested model of case management

As a model for effective practice in working with Chinese families, a transactional model that combines an ecological problem-solving approach appears to be the most useful. More research needs to be done before a clear working model can be identified. However, it is without doubt that the strength of the ecological perspective in examining issues related to the child from both human ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and family systems (Hong & Domokos-Cheng Ham, 1992) is highly appropriate for the present-day Chinese new settler in New Zealand. Every immigrant family will have their own "story" to tell regarding experiences in their previous country and in New Zealand.

Knowledge of this "before" and "after" narrative is extremely important in understanding why and how a child is functioning both at school and at home. This information should include previous pre-school and school history, access to educational support services, developmental history, language development, social adjustment at school and at home, access to family support systems, caregiver responsibilities and family dynamics. One should not underestimate the importance of this information in developing an understanding of the child. It is also essential to understand the impact of the adjustment that had to be made by all members of the

family during the immigration process.

In developing intervention programmes, it is important to note that most Chinese families see the school as the “authority” and the professional as the “expert”. The expectation would then be that the expert will “fix” the problem. Thus, having undertaken an ecological approach towards assessment, the practitioner would then have to shift into a more solution-focused approach during programme planning. This expectation gives greater leeway for schools to make recommendations in programme development. However, it is also important for schools to balance this openness with continued efforts to allay fears of expulsion and rejection in order to maximise cooperation. Rather than adopt a directing approach, it would be better for schools to provide leadership in setting appropriate goals and developing workable strategies to address presenting issues.

Receiving further professional support

Attitudes towards support services

After the initial phase of informing parents of concerns that the school may have and the accompanying initial reaction, Chinese families would then enter an extended period of intense activity to try to “fix the problem” themselves. This is often the case with new migrants who have had to be resourceful and independent in coming to a new

country (Edwards & Beiser, 1994). Most Chinese immigrant parents are not familiar with the New Zealand education system and are even more unaware of the support services that are available in this country for children with learning and behaviour difficulties. As different migrant families come from countries that have vastly different school support services, expectations and experiences may be very varied. However, rather than expecting government agencies to provide support services, Chinese immigrant parents on the whole prefer to take on the responsibility of managing the situation themselves. There is often a great reluctance to involve other agencies.

One reason for this reluctance is the fear that the involvement of other agencies may be the first step in removing the child from the school. An even greater fear is the possibility that the child would be transferred to a learning support class or a special school. Chinese parents are generally resistant to the provision of education through a special needs placement, as there is often a stigma attached to this. Often, because of a lack of information and knowledge of the enormous range of well-developed (relative to the country of origin) support services available in this country, a special needs placement is viewed as a place for “failed” students. There is very little awareness of the provision of increased

teacher attention available through smaller student ratios, individualised programming and specialist teaching. Obviously it is important to provide as much information as possible to new immigrant families regarding educational support systems and special needs in New Zealand.

Using a translator

As mentioned earlier, the use of a translator may be helpful in establishing a channel of communication, but the choice of an appropriate translator is crucial in determining the outcome of the interaction. Schools have often used “other parents” as translators in communicating with families. This often works well for general home-school communication, but may not be appropriate for specific issues and circumstances related to behaviour or learning problems. This is because the Chinese community in a specific location is often small and very close-knit. Chinese parents may not want news regarding their children to be told to members of the community. Thus the use of “other parents” often adds to the communication barrier.

It is best to use the services of a Chinese-speaking professional with working experience in schools who is from outside the school community. It is advantageous for the Chinese parents to see this spokesperson as an independent professional who can be relied upon to keep matters confidential. If this is

unavailable, the use of a Chinese-speaking teacher from the school itself may be helpful.

Difficulty in diagnosis

When working with immigrant students with English as a second language, it is often extremely difficult to identify whether the problem in class is due to a learning or intellectual disability, or to a language or cultural adjustment issue (Dao, 1991). When a student struggles in class, has no friends, is often alone and isolated, is unable to understand teacher instructions and has almost no expressive language, it is very easy to come to the conclusion that there is an intellectual or developmental disability that hinders learning. This is because the presenting behaviours for both diagnoses are very similar.

It is essential that, before a conclusion is made, two factors be taken into consideration. First, students need to be given sufficient time to learn a new language. Teachers often point to bright immigrant children as a benchmark for the rate of learning a new language. This may not be appropriate, as every child is different and learns at a different pace. Even siblings from the same family may have widely differing coping mechanisms and learning rates. Secondly, a bilingual assessment has to be administered. This means that the student needs to be assessed for functioning in the “other” language. Consideration also

needs to be given to the pragmatics of the language used, as the student may use the “other” language for everyday use, with English as the language of learning at school.

To conclude, working in a cross-cultural context is not easy, and the Chinese family is no exception. A relationship of trust is the key to a positive outcome in supporting Chinese families who have children with learning and behaviour problems. This takes time, effort, sensitivity and much patience.

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