



Teacher voices

The perspectives of Chinese early childhood education student teachers in distance learning

Melanie Wong
New Zealand Tertiary College

Throughout the last decade, the numbers of Chinese immigrant and Chinese international student teachers engaged in studying Early Childhood Teacher Education distance learning courses have increased. These student teachers should have the required knowledge and skills to teach in New Zealand, and may need new cultural knowledge that is specific to the local education system. Furthermore, it is assumed that they will have sound technology skills and possess good study ethics.

Challenges for cross-cultural learning

As a Chinese immigrant and an educator, I am not surprised when I hear Chinese student teachers state that they have been struggling adjusting to live in New Zealand. Many Chinese student teachers may face stress from the different life styles, culture shocks, home sickness, lack of support from families as their families are in their own countries, and they may also fear the requirements of the combination of work and study. In addition, English is not the first language of most Chinese student teachers, they may need more time and support with their reading and writing.

Furthermore, for the Chinese student teachers who are educated in their own countries, most are accustomed to the educator being in control. However, student teachers in New Zealand have to be proactive in learning, which may be a difficult and unfamiliar learning style. These student teachers have to adjust fast to the new learning style. However, this may negatively impact their studies because they feel disconnected from other student teachers and educators.

Chinese student teachers are guided by Chinese cultural considerations, for instance whereby learners humble themselves, and learning occurs predominantly through instruction. In contrast New Zealand education requires a more vocal and 'aggressive' stance on learning whereby student teachers push themselves in all aspects. These challenges will be addressed differently between distance learning and traditional face-to-face environments.

In distance learning, it is not often that opportunities arise to have face-to-face contact both for teaching and learning. Chinese student teachers who choose the medium of distance learning have to control their learning, and be more independent. However the relationships between the Chinese student teachers and educators through technology – phone, email, fax and document and so on – is ideal for these student teachers. This is because they hail from societies and countries which are far more technology-savvy than New Zealand, thus the reliance on technology is a bonus in their learning. So their confidence with technology can help them learn to be more independent as learners.



Support by educators

Many educators understand the importance of establishing relationships with Chinese student teachers; student teachers should be valued for their experiences, knowledge, work and ability. However, the attitudes and perspectives of educators on how to support Chinese student teachers should be a very careful consideration. The needs of the individual student teacher may clash with the attitude and perspectives of the educator, thus impacting negatively on their relationship.

Some educators are concerned about the way they support Chinese student teachers, and how these student teachers can be supported with their academic needs. For one, Chinese student teachers have to learn subject knowledge of early childhood education. Secondly, the student must deal with new academic skills and thirdly they must overcome the language barrier.

When Chinese student teachers and educators established strong relations, learning is enhanced. The relationship may take some time to develop due to the cultural and language differences. The same approach to relationship building would be effective with all students. Chinese student teachers would be interested to learn as well as be motivated if they have a good connection with their educators, as they gain a sense of being valued and appreciated.

Communication methods and techniques between Chinese student teachers and educators are a pivotal consideration towards the motivating student learning. The role of educators should be proactive in approaching Chinese student teachers. It would acknowledge educators as helpers or supporters rather than dominant, controlled teachers. A proactive relationship permits the educator to be an effective teacher and support, help, maintain and retain communication lines.

Many Chinese student teachers have positive attitudes toward learning, but they are not familiar with being proactive learners. Thus, educators should encourage Chinese student teachers to be confident to ask questions, not simply replying with an email 'nod of the head', receiving information from educators and also in using emails and online discussions to express their views and ideas. Discussions need to be facilitated and all Chinese student teachers given the opportunity to respond in any form they are comfortable with. Their uniqueness and rich cultural heritage must be afforded an opportunity to be evident in their learning, as their cultural identities contribute to the identity of the institution through which they are learning.

Although this may be considered a heavy task, educators must acknowledge their key role in providing holistic support to Chinese student teachers. The role of the online educator is supported by a multitude of media. It is important to start with thinking about how the technology can support with communication and relationship development as this sets a solid foundation to all learning – academic, social and cultural, and must be reciprocal. To maintain this relationship, technology can be utilised as a substitute to face to face contact, allows for immediate contact, follow up and regular dialogue. This support is focused on the opportunities of supporting and interacting between educators and Chinese student teachers. To have a supportive relationship with Chinese student teachers, educators should be:



- Knowledgeable about the needs and backgrounds of Chinese students
- Encouraging in supporting the students to be proactive in their learning
- Have confidence that Chinese students are capable learners

One of the Chinese distance learning students that I work with has reflected:

I have too much pressure living alone in New Zealand, and I am worried about my studies as I have two assignments that have to be done at the same time. But thank you for looking after me and being my teacher, you are so helpful and an awesome teacher, it makes me feel happy and cared for.

Because Chinese students often live alone in New Zealand and they may need emotional support, it is very important that educators feel confident in establishing relationships. This requires knowing more about a student's culture and how the student communicates. With the benefit of feeling cared for, the conversations, emails and discussions help to set up this strong relationship between student and educator – this relationship will support the student in all aspects of their study.

These are considerations to better understand and support more effectively and proactively to Chinese student teachers, and serves as a humble contribution to profession development and inclusive practice.