A Survey of Chinese Secondary Student Perceptions of Affective Education

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ABSTRACT
This article made an analysis of student opinions on affective education in secondary school in China. The purpose is to point out the obvious and potential problems as to affective education and contribute to improvement. The principal instrument was a questionnaire developed by the author. Semi-structured questionnaire was carried out in Zibo city -- 110 students in two secondary schools have participated in this small-scale research. In this research, a lot of cases have shown that the school and teachers still paid much attention to the academic development and affective education is basically “blind area”. The suggestions for improvement were discussed.

1. Introduction
For many years the Chinese education system has been examination oriented and focusing on the development of students’ academic ability. After some rethinking of the purpose of education and the implementation of education reform, a more humanistic side of education and the concept of ‘quality education’ have been developed in China since 1990s. It has been publicly recognized that education should cultivate more all-round students instead of just preparing them for taking tests and getting into college. Some schools in urban cities have begun to experiment with developing diverse and innovative teaching methods and promoting all-around ability of students. In the process of education reform, the affective aspects of education, namely, attention to individuals and interrelationships was given increasing importance.

The concept of ‘affective education’ is still quite new to Chinese; however, to some extent there is a quantity of similarities between affective education and moral education (‘De Yu’) in China. Lang has defined “affective education” as “a significant dimension of the educational process which is concerned with the feelings, beliefs, attitudes and emotions of students, with their interpersonal relationships and social skills” [1]. To put it simpler, it is about the holistic development of students both as a person and a society member.

This article will give an overview about the current situation of affective education in Zibo city, an industry-developing city in East China. It will draw on the voices of students, namely, their attitudes towards affective education in their schools. This essay will start with a brief review about relevant literature in this field. Secondly, research questions and methodology will be indicated in details. Thirdly, there is a wealth of examples of experiences and ideas on affective education aimed at viewing

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the way that affective education is implemented in school. And then strengthens and weaknesses will be critically evaluated. Finally, it will deal with the suggestion for further development and conclusion.

2. Literature Review

In relation to teaching student and morality, there is a person who I have to mention—that is Confucius, a dominant educator and philosopher morally and politically in Chinese history, whose doctrine of education has had great influence on contemporary education. Confucius implied that learning should be a wholistic knowledge of human character. According to Confucius’ ideas, Clark considered that the purpose of education is ‘to cultivate moral values in people’s minds and to encourage people to do the right thing’ and ‘only through education can people in society learn to live with each other in peace and harmony and support and help each other for the benefit of all, creating social prosperity and happiness’ [3].

Nowadays, there are ten millions of secondary school students in China. Secondary school is a key transition stage from adolescent to adult life. Therefore, school education at this stage played an important role of making secondary students move through secondary school smoothly and preparing for adult society.

Vasileiou (2003, p.1) has ever mentioned affective education is ‘an important yet under-researched feature of primary school life’. With the transition from primary school to secondary school, this situation seems not to be strengthened by curriculum and teachers but weakened. Additionally, Vasileiou also pointed out the importance of this kind of research that more information about affective education will help to find out ‘ineffecctual practices’ and identify and spread the good aspects in this area so that eventually it has a beneficial effect on standards raise and teaching and learning improvement [2].

In this article, we will throw light on pupil voice which seems not to arouse enough attention. Lang pointed out ‘there is currently little evidence that schools are paying more attention to the views of their students’. He has carried out a research to look at pupils’ attitude towards pastoral care because he indicated there was a lack of information on the perspectives of students after a brief literature review. There was much about his point of view in that article we can use for reference, such as analysis of pupils problems and so forth [3].

After a number of years for the same reason, the author carried out a similar and small-scale research. Although previous researches and articles have provided a quantity of information regarding the necessity and importance of affective education, this research still has its own value. It throws light on students’ perception on affective aspect of education and expectations of students in this field.

3. Research Question and Methods

This essay will explore the present situations of affective education in secondary schools in China from student perspectives and how to improve it. In order to achieve this point, semi-structured questionnaire which was developed by the author and carried out in Zibo city, mainland China was used to collect the data, and in questionnaire the following research questions were posed:

1) Could you give us some examples happened to you or around you about how affective education was implemented? (Please specify)
2) Make some comments on any aspects of affective education you think have been implemented very well in your school.
3) Make some comments or suggestions on any aspects of affective education you think need improving in your school.

A total of 110 students in two secondary schools, 64 females (58 percent) and 46 males (42 percent) have participated in this small-scale research. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the class teachers of the secondary schools. The purpose of the questionnaire and some appropriate explanations about ‘affective education’ were delivered in the front of the questions. And the students were asked to complete the questionnaires anonymously in order to produce more candid replies. The questionnaire coming back was carefully sorted out and analyzed from following aspects (in Chapter four and Chapter five).

Judging from the tidy handwriting and congruous expression, it can be admitted that the students involved in this research took the questionnaires seriously, handling the questions with creative thinking and emotional wording and daring to give the straightforward and honest opinion. However, some students had very few words or no words on some questions, especially question 2 and 3 that asked to make some comments on the affective education in their own school. Overall, the students in this research, achieved or under-achieved, satisfied or dissatisfied, gave us a golden opportunity to share their affective experience and have an overview of their opinion towards the affective development in present-day secondary schools.

4. Findings

According to Lang, affective education is concerned with three dimensions, which were given detailed analysis as follows:

➢ The individual, attention directed to individual stu-
students, their self-esteem, emotional literacy, study skills, their life and career plans;
- The group, attention to the nature and quality of interactions within the groups in which students work and relate;
- The institution, a concern for the quality of the climate and ethos of the school itself, the guidance and support it offers students, its care and concern in relation to their welfare.

Regarding the factors involved in these three dimensions, the responses will be divided into three groups to be analyzed: students’ view toward affective factors in school, affective education and the academic, teacher-student and student-student relations.

4.1 Affective Factors in School

The majority of the students recalled their own experience in affection in primary or secondary school and their words were full of warmth and appreciation. What students have said about their experiences on affective education are mostly positive experiences and some negative. Students recollected and said that, ‘attention from teacher’s heart is the best catalyzer.’ ‘the teacher’s affable and smiling face makes me feel comfortable and approachable.’ ‘I was affected by the excellent characteristics of that teacher.’ ‘We are like friends and there is no gap between us.’ and so forth. It is not difficult to find out that most of the cases are related to teachers, especially class teachers.

By the analysis to the data we got from questionnaires, four main affective factors were involved in students’ affective education experience. The bar charts were provided to make the explanation be more vivid and easier to make out.

(Percent)

![Bar chart showing percentages of affective factors](chart.png)

**Figure 1. Students’ Views Toward affective factors in School**

1) Almost **69%** of the sample wished the teacher would communicate by heart with students so that the teacher could understand them better and solve problems from their angles.

2) More than **67%** expressed their hope for building up harmonious atmosphere in class or school, including friendly relationship, humorous class atmosphere, and meaningful weekly meeting or theme assembly.

3) Over **60%** of the students pointed out the influence of teachers’ personality or moral quality.

4) The results showed **45%** mentioned the teachers’ attitude toward students should be equal and teacher should respect students and pay attention to every student not just focus on few students.

The followings are some of the illuminating comments from questionnaires. Firstly, communication seems a key matter the students cared about.

Teachers should know how to communicate with students heart to heart and without any ‘gap’.

*(School A, Year 11, boy)*

More communication between teachers and students is expected. At the same time, communication among teachers, especially with the teachers who are both good at academic teaching and popular among students, is still in great need.

*(School A, Year 11, girl)*

Apart from teaching and psychological counseling, teachers should pay more attention to our humanity care and emotional communication.

*(School B, Year 12, girl)*

Secondly, secondary school is a stage when students quickly developed their individual character and had high expectations of teachers. What is known as ‘good teacher’ is not just motherlike, but have a perfect command of knowledge and ‘show something of themselves (their other side) to pupils’ *(Rudduck et al., 1996)*:

I had a teacher, smart but with lots of ‘bad’ habits, such as drinking and smoking. However, in teaching physics, he made the mysterious theory into easily be understood. We felt we are surrounded by humor and wisdom. The boss doesn’t like him but student do. The teacher should have the charming character. He is optimistic and open-minded and regarded the meaning of life is how good is not how long is. You can find his reflection on us.

*(School B, Year 11, boy)*

In relation to item 2 and 4, we will discuss them in details in the later part of this essay.

4.2 Affective Education and the Academic

Affective education should not be considered in isolation and be connected to the academic to see its effectiveness. If the appropriate affective factors are involved, it might enhance the academic; on the contrary, it will...
impede the study. A girl gave us an example that I think is quite convincing:

In secondary school, the seats of students are arranged according to their academic achievements. As a result, the top students can choose the seats in the first rows that are considered to be ‘good seats’ and the under-achievement students have to sit at the back of the classroom which are ‘marginal areas’ because they have no choice. Most of the teachers seldom care about the students at the back rows and even turn back when they haven’t reached the several back rows. However, there is still a teacher who patrols around the whole classroom and gives personal tutorial to the students at the back rows. With the help of that teacher, one of the under-achievement students improved a lot in the final examination.

(School A, Year 11, girl)

According to the evidence and students’ experience, the case like this is not rare. This example showed two sides: on the one hand, pastoral care played an important role in improvement of achievement; on the other hand, it exposed some weakness in educational system in secondary school. The traditional thinking that the teachers judge the students according to their academic achievement still exists.

Actually the participation of affective factors in class will complement learning efficiently. Let us look at what pupils said:

Once our class teacher spared one of his own class and listened to student’s ‘voice’ with other subject teachers. Students spoke out their mind, interests and ideal. According to these our teacher organized a series of activities such like quiz game, sports competition and so on which not only enhance our ability in various aspects but also stimulate our interest and academic motivation. Eventually we got good results in our studies.

(School B, Year 12, boy)

While some teachers used verbal abuse a lot, by this mean they think students’ self-esteem can be stimulated and their results will be enhanced. Actually, this caused psychological injure.

The teachers do not pay enough attention on students’ mental development but only attached importance to study. If we cannot get good results on study, what we got is verbal abuse with freezing irony and burning satire. They hurt our self-respect.

(School A, Year 11, boy)

4.3 Teacher-student Relationship

The second dimension of affective education is about the group students study and live. Puurula et al. expressed the similar opinion that the affective education of students relies on simultaneous attention being granted to the educational process (e.g. relations between students and between students and teachers, classroom and school climate).

Davis pointed out young people in school experienced conflict either with teachers or among themselves and easily influenced by that [5]. Therefore the harmonious and democratic relationship between students and teachers and among students played a vital role in successful implementation of affective education. In this research, some cases mentioned about this point. Here are some examples:

Our school paid too much attention on academic study and ignored the interpersonal relationship. I think more get-together or parties should be organized to promote the relations between teachers and students and between students.

(School B, Year 12, boy)

Teachers should keep the equal attitude towards different students. Communicate with us in peaceful way.

(School B, Year 12, girl)

5. Critically Evaluate Strengthens and Weaknesses

5.1 Strengths

For one thing, most secondary schools have kind of pastoral organization and organize some activities related to affective factors inside or outside classes. Like some students mentioned, there are psychological consultants who will help students find problems either in study or life and lead them out of ‘the wrong region’. Other comments about teachers caring for students are: some teachers are concerned with students’ daily life and have free chat with students after class, for instance ‘did you watch the European Championship?’, ‘Are you tired?’ or ‘You must have dyed your hair’ and other related to life. When there are students who got sick and were in hospital, teachers often went to see them with several students. (Student comment: although it was a little bit formalistic, the students still can feel the warmth.) Moreover, according to the hot issues that students are concerned about and the things happened around them, school designed and edited student newspaper to provide a place to exchange ideas.

Secondly, the affective world of students is still varied and colorful. Although the rigid education system and heavy burden on students immerse themselves in books and study all day, they are full of perceptive insights into the things around them. They dare to express their feeling in a variety of forms and are easily touched in psychology. One student described an example vividly as follows: in the morning of that Christ-
mas, when classmates came into the classroom, unforgettable scenes appeared before everyone’s eyes: on each table lied a little orange or a little tomato that cutely and naughtily flashed in the sun. Nobody knows who did that, but there was lasting love and move in everybody’s heart. Above all, the level of student’s awareness is gratifying. ‘Positive affective education can be transformed into motivation, not strong or visible sense of right and wrong, but cater to the side of softness in human’ (School B, Year 12, girl). ‘Affective factors should permeate through every aspect in which student will be influenced unconsciously.’ (School A, Year 11, girl)

Thirdly, some Chinese teachers are concerned about students’ study and life successfully, such as celebrating birthdays with students, paying the tuition fee for the poor students, playing with students and sharing their joys and tears, encouraging the under-achievement students and so forth. However, comparatively what they have done might not be so efficient and sufficient due to the large class size, but still are influential to students’ feeling and personal development.

5.2 ‘Affective Education’ was Neglected

In relation to the problems existing in traditional class teaching, the famous educationist Professor Ye Lan expressed his opinion as follows: the biggest limitation for traditional class teaching is to simplify the vivid and liberal teaching and learning process to be knowledge study, and abstract and separate learning from entire vital life activity [5].

‘Affection’ should be put at the first place in education because it is crucial to the all-round development of the students. In this research, a lot of cases have shown that the school and teachers still paid much attention to the academic development and affective education is basically ‘blind area’. It is an outcome that is to be expected—a high proportion of negative comments. These included ‘no affective education in school at all’, ‘do not hold any hope to the education reform’, ‘do not expect too much in affective aspect, extremely few affective examples’, ‘it is woeful’ and so on. There are several impressive remarks about students’ opinion:

It is not necessary to talk too much because I have no time to comment. There are loads of academic problems in front of me that need to be thought time and again and solved finally.

(School A, Year 11, boy)

NO HOPE! (Note: the author was surprised at the huge exclamation mark ‘!’)

(School A, Year 11, girl)

‘Education’ is like a mud trap, devouring the education reformer relentlessly. Reform is not allowed by present situations in China. Let Chinese education emerge of itself and perish of itself.

(School A, Year 11, boy)

School took some unsatisfactory and undemocratic actions, which cannot reflect students’ minds at all.

(School A, Year 11, boy)

If there is so-called affective education, the only thing I can remember is a couple of psychological classes that were only taken in the first year of senior school. Don’t mention about second or third year. Just imagine that how we can enjoy affection, and how we can experience the quality education in such a big class of forty to fifty students? That what in our minds is marks and academic questions.

(School B, Year 12, boy)

Above all, although there is only a small number, we have to admit that in the influence of social and political system some teachers with strong character were not accepted by school. Teachers are difficult to find a balance between leaders and student. In many cases students like the one that the leaders do not like, vice versa because students need a teacher listening to their voice and standing in their positions. One student gave us an example: his secondary school class teacher was discharged due to the radical ideas and had to make a living by teaching pen handwriting in a primary school. Chinese schools have not been so democratic and open-minded to include people with a variety of opinions and behaviors.

6. Further Development

Although this article described the present situation of affective education in China, it is only one corner of the whole iceberg and more researches await further exploration.

6.1 The Role of Subject Teacher and Class Teacher

The first point for improvement concerns teachers. In secondary school in China, the teachers are regarded as both the transmitter of information and the carer for students’ affection. Among all the teachers, the class teachers played the most active and multifaceted roles in providing guidance and pastoral care to students’ 16. The class teachers took the responsibility of ‘subject teacher and student guardians’, that is to say, they helped students in academic problems and took care of their everyday life as well.

I have a couple of teachers who treated us equally. We are like friends more than teacher-student. We can exchange ideas of many questions, such as study, family, even emotion (which is always considered to be the sensitive questions). Nowadays, the emotional questions are not avoided as taboo by some young teachers. Due to their understanding, the students
are glad to share or listen to them.

(School A. Year 11, boy)

Old Chinese proverb goes like this: teach others by personal examples as well as verbal instruction. Actually, ‘model’ is more powerful that utterly ‘told of’, that is to say, teaching someone by their own examples are much more efficient than the empty instruction. If teachers themselves possess the good qualities and set good examples to their students, that might lead to better results due to deep affection to students’ heart and soul.

6.2 The Arrangement of Teaching Activity

Although the teachers play a vital role in affective education, it is not only the responsibility of specific teacher or school specialist. It is suggested that affective education be seen as ‘a cross-curricular concern of all school professionals: the transformation of the ‘hidden curriculum’ into an area for open and critical debate, and a discourse about the shared ethical principles of the school are key elements in affective education’[7].

Some students mentioned apart from class of Chinese they cannot relate any subject to the affective education, in particular the science class, such as physics, chemistry. Due to the trait of Chinese class and specific curriculum content, it is easy to embrace some texts involving feeling, philosophy and emotion and so forth. Therefore, Chinese teachers have advantage to make full of this point to educate students. But that does not mean other subject teachers cannot make this point. For other subjects, the teachers still can guide students to find and solve problems, arouse their interest and enthusiasm toward the world of science, encourage them to discuss and debate on truth, provide them chance of communication and exploration. In this process, the affection and passion are involved and reflected.

7. Conclusions

This essay made an analysis of student opinions on affective education in secondary school in China. The purpose is to point out the obvious and potential problems as to affective education and contribute to improvement. Through a quantity of comments from students, strengths were confirmed and problems were found. Finally, the suggestions for improvement were discussed.

Through the data obtained from questionnaires, it is similarly concluded that in Chinese secondary schools most of the teachers are mainly supportive in students’ learning aspects and do not adequately take care of the development of their personality which grows up with the accumulation of knowledge.

The function of the school cannot be purely academic and students’ moral and spiritual development is the important element of school education. As Lang pointed out, the purpose of education is not only to produce academically processed pupils but autonomous people capable of contributing to their societies and living fulfilled lives in ways that work well beyond that facilitated by basic skills and academic knowledge.

However, students had few comments about the role of parents than might have been expected. Apart from school and teachers, it is not deniable that parents as the first initiator of knowledge and family as a background for children to live and study in have great responsibility for students’ personal and mental development. In addition, the generalizability of the results of this research is limited to students in one city. Other young people in other cities may show different responses to the questions.

We can see there is still a lot of hope: in Shanghai, affective factors were taken into consideration in syllabus at the first time and ‘affective education’ was arranged in the school curriculum in some schools. Although it is still at the very beginning stage in Chinese educational development, we believe a single spark can start a prairie fire, namely, affective education will develop like fire throughout the whole schools and strike in the hearts of every student.

References

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