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Early Childhood: Language and Bullying in an English-medium School in China

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Abstract

The purpose of this small-scale study was to examine whether language is a factor in the reporting of bullying behavior by young English language learners enrolled in an early childhood program of an English-medium school in China. Further investigated was whether an English-only language policy affects the reporting of bullying behavior. Participants of the study included eleven preschool students, their parents, five Chinese teaching assistants, and ten foreign teachers. Methods of data collection included student interviews and the completion of questionnaires by parents, Chinese teaching assistants, and foreign teachers. The results indicate both language and language policy are factors in the reporting of bullying behavior.

Keywords: bullying; early childhood; English-medium; English-only language policy; leadership

Introduction

Although the definition of what constitutes an international school is becoming blurred, apparent is the almost insatiable demand for international or western education in China as a means for English language acquisition and preparation for study in western universities. Unfortunately, many schools with the agenda of reaping profits are filling demand. As for-profit schools seek to lure students through the doors, often pushed aside are ethics in education. As a selling point for enrollment, heralded to the parents is the curriculum of the school. However, many students do not receive the necessary support for developing the linguistic skills needed to gain meaningful access to the curriculum or teachers. This article intends to raise questions concerning language, language policy, discipline policy, bullying, and the social well-being of students enrolled in early childhood English-medium programs in China that employ foreign teachers.

Background

In 2013, there were over 400 English-medium schools operating in China (Clark, 2014). As of 2015, that number had risen to more than 500 (Keeling, 2015). Due to the transient

nature of foreign staff in English-medium schools, maintaining consistency in school policy is a continuing process and a carefully crafted and implemented discipline policy is required for prek-12 educational facilities to be successful. Further complicating matters is when there is administrative turnover that results in the lack of enforcement or a complete change of policy without regard given to the biopsychosocial makeup of the school body. Due to the cultural and linguistic diversity found within many English-medium schools, attention to cultural norms of the host country and varied parental expectations are paramount in the development and implementation of discipline policy. Developing a school culture that promotes student accountability and personal responsibility should be a priority.

Discipline Policy and Student Accountability

Particularly debatable is the administration of discipline policy in early childhood programs. Discipline policy in early childhood programs should take into consideration the age in which student responsibility becomes a factor. Moreover, teachers, parents, and administrators often have differing opinions on when to hold students accountable for their actions and methods of discipline. From a sampling of 40 early childhood teachers in cities in south-central China, Arndt and Luo (2008) reported that half of the Chinese teachers believed the age of three was an appropriate age for accepting responsibility. Other Chinese teachers reported the age of five or above. However, Arndt, and Luo found some Chinese teachers reported that student responsibility could occur as soon as students acquired oral language, which could be as young as 18 months. Complicating matters is the fact that a majority of the students in English-medium schools are learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and foreign administrators and teachers should provide accommodations for students classified as having Limited English Proficiency (LEP). In the process of establishing or reevaluating discipline policy in early childhood programs, schools should consider at what age student accountability becomes a factor. School discipline policy should be made transparent, explained to parents, and include signed agreements noting parental awareness.

Language Policy and Bullying

English-medium schools using an international or western oriented curriculum usually have a policy concerning language even though that policy may or may not be in writing. Usually this policy requires instruction to take place solely in English. In most bilingual schools, instruction for some classes occurs in the native language and others in English, which usually results in the segregation of the languages. In addition, English is often the prescribed language for socialization amongst the students in international and English-medium schools.

In international school communities and English-medium schools, the use or non-use of language is often a topic of contention and many of these schools tend to embrace an English-only policy if a language policy is in place. Frequently, school administrators assert that an English-only policy mandating the use of English throughout the school day aids in student acquisition of English. However, such a policy may not be in the best interest of the school community. Furthermore, such policy collides with recent theories of language acquisition.

All schools should be concerned with bullying and continually seek ways to address bullying via the implementation of measures towards prevention and intervention. In the process of developing and implementing preventions and interventions for bullying, schools should examine how language plays a pivotal role by contemplating the following:

- Are students being provided with the necessary linguistic skills to report bullying behavior?
- Are teachers receiving the professional development that allows them to develop the necessary skills to understand the biopsychosocial makeup of the student body to meet both the academic and social needs of all students?

Local English-medium schools, defined as being broadly international, usually consist of a majority ethnic group. International schools defined as being broadly international can experience both intracultural and cross-cultural bullying. Intracultural bullying can occur in international schools due to the different languages and dialects spoken. Students from different geographical areas attending schools often form cliques. For example, students from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China frequently differentiate themselves from one another. In a comparative analysis for reasons of intracultural bullying amongst Hispanic students in the state of Washington, Mendez, Bauman, and Guillory (2012) reported that students who were not able to speak English were more likely to be bullied and experienced isolation and exclusion because of a language barrier. In discussing how schools could reduce bullying, one student interviewed by Mendez et al. expressed, "How would I feel if I couldn't approach a teacher or administrator?" As students acculturated and became more proficient in the dominant language, bullying tended to subside (Mendez et al., 2012). However, some students fall victim to the bully cycle and once bullied, some victims become bullies. Because school populations in international schools tend to fluctuate, schools should exercise diligence in developing language that allows students to avoid becoming victims of bullying behavior.

Native Language in the Classroom and Reporting Bullying Behavior

According to Krashen (1981), acquisition of language occurs through communication. Students who are unable to communicate in the dominant language become isolated and excluded and are thereby denied the communicative interaction needed to acquire language (Chang et al., 2007). Moreover, some students may lack the language skills needed to respond to verbal forms of bullying (Savage, 2005). In a study of Spanish-speaking pre-kindergarteners attending pre-kindergarten programs in the U.S., Chang et al. (2007) found that Spanish-speaking students were less likely to experience bullying when they received interaction from the teacher in Spanish. Interaction via language is vital to developing relationships within the classroom and communication between students and teachers is invaluable as an intervention and prevention to bullying. Furlong and Chung (1995) reported that non-victims of bullying were more likely to converse with teachers and discuss problems than victims of bullying. Administrators of English-medium schools should consider how teachers provide support to students and need to consider both the academic and social ramifications of this support when developing school language policy (Chang et al., 2007; Flaspohler, et al., 2009).

In a study of Dutch elementary students, Fekkes, Pijpers, and Verloove-Vanhorick (2005) reported that frequently bullied students were more likely to tell a parent instead of a teacher. However, as students get older students are less likely to report bullying to a teacher or parent (Naylor, Cowie & Rey, 2001; Oliver & Candappa, 2007). Furthermore, students with learning disabilities are less likely to report bullying behavior (Geisthardt & Munsch, 1996). Yet, Oliver and Candappa (2007) found that regardless of age, students were likely to inform their peers of bullying behavior. Reasons for not reporting bullying behavior to a teacher include retribution, loss of friendship, and fear of bullying getting worse because the teacher will not be able to stop the occurrences of bullying (Fekkes et al., 2005; Mishna & Alaggia, 2005, Oliver & Candappa, 2007; Smith & Shu, 2000). An intervention strategy commonly implemented is the encouragement of bystanders to intervene (Hawkins, Pepler & Craig, 2001). Intervention from bystanders can take the form of standing up to bullies or reporting bullying behavior. In the act of reporting bullying behavior to teachers, bystanders turned interventionists must have the linguistic ability to report bullying behavior to a teacher as do the victims.

Teachers and Schools

Teachers are often unaware of bullying taking place and a large portion of bullying takes place away from the eyes of teachers. In addition, teachers are sometimes unaware of the seriousness of observed bullying behavior (Alsaker & Valkanover, 2012). Unfortunately, failure of teachers to intervene can seemingly provide tacit approval of bullying behavior and can prevent students from informing teachers (Mishna & Alaggia, 2005). Further complicating matters is the fact that teachers in English-medium schools abroad lack knowledge of student native language (L1). As a result, teachers are often unaware of oral bullying occurring even in an overt manner.

Schools and teachers are viewed in a multitude of ways depending upon the culture and country. In China, school administrators and teachers are authoritarian figures and Chinese parents often look towards them for guidance and support (Arndt & Luo, 2008). Educational organizations should be proactive and strive to foster a relationship with the community, seeking ways to develop and communicate a school culture that meets the needs of all stakeholders. Administrators, teachers, and parents need to be informed about, and agree to, planned strategies to prevent bullying behavior and actions to intervene if bullying does occur. A poorly conceived or implemented intervention can exacerbate the occurrences of bullying behavior (Smith & Shu, 2000).

Research Questions

- Is language a factor for students in the reporting of bullying behavior?
- Does an English-only language policy affect the reporting of bullying behavior to foreign teachers in English-medium schools?

The Study

The researcher, at the time of the study, was a Junior Kindergarten (JK) teacher at a Canadian international school in China aspiring to utilize Ontario, CA curriculum. JK is the equivalent of preschool in the United States. The school is a broadly international school and at the time of the research project, approximately 150 students, the majority of which

were Chinese nationals, attended the school. Although the board of directors has stayed intact, the school has had a short, tumultuous history with high administrator and staff turnover. Due to lack of consistent leadership and administrative support, teachers often implemented classroom policies of their own design. Although the researcher was a teacher, he provided no contribution to data as a participant.

Method

The research process involved gathering data through recorded interviews and written questionnaires. Acquisition of data from students occurred through interviews. During each interview, a translator whom the students knew was present. Data obtained from parents, Chinese teaching assistants, and foreign teachers were gathered through questionnaires. Responses to the questionnaires were of yes/no, Likert scale, and open-ended types.

Participants

Parents of all sixteen students in a pre-kindergarten class received permission forms in addition to a parent questionnaire. The consent form and questionnaire were in both English and Mandarin. Of the sixteen students, eleven parents provided consent. The data from one questionnaire was removed from the research project as the consent form was not signed.

Of the eleven students participating in the research study, five were male and six were female. Mandarin is the native language for all students. Although two students had passports from European nations and had one non-Chinese parent, their primary language is Mandarin. The participants had the following passports: five China, two Hong Kong, two Taiwan, one Britain, and one France. The five students not participating in the study maintained passports from China and Hong Kong. All students participating in the study began the school year in September at four years of age.

Five native Mandarin speaking Chinese teaching assistants working in the early and elementary years through grade five took part in the study. All Chinese teaching assistants had degrees from Chinese universities and most had teaching credentials issued in China. Ten foreign teachers working in nursery (reception) through grade five took part in the study. Of the ten foreign teachers, six maintained government issued teaching qualifications in their home country and three possessed TEFL certificates. Foreign teachers were from Canada or the United States and most foreign teachers had previous international teaching experience. All foreign teachers possessed at least a college degree. All teachers and teaching assistants had a choice of receiving the questionnaire in either English or Chinese.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred from May through August of 2015. Collection of permission forms and parent questionnaires occurred at the beginning of May. Data obtained from students occurred in the last week of May. Collection of both Chinese teaching assistant and foreign teacher questionnaires occurred at the end of June and early July. During the months of July and August, clarification of data with some of the teaching participants took place via email and Skype in order to ensure accuracy.

During individually recorded interviews, students responded to the following questions in English and through a translator as needed:

- Do you feel safe in school?
- Did you or could you tell a parent; Chinese teaching assistant; foreign teacher when or if someone treated you badly?
- Is it hard for you to tell a foreign teacher [when bullying occurs] because the teacher does not speak Chinese?
- Through written questionnaire format, parents responded to the following questions:
 - Do you feel the school has adequate disciplinary policies? Circle: Yes No
 - Has your child complained to you about being hit, pushed, or kicked? Circle: Yes No
 - Has your child complained to you about having something taken (theft) from them? Circle: Yes No
 - Has your child complained about being called bad words by another student? Circle: Yes No
 - Has your child complained about being socially excluded from activities or playing by other children? Circle: Yes No
- Through a written questionnaire, Chinese teaching assistants and foreign teachers responded to the following questions:
 - Is there a disciplinary policy in place in the school? Circle: Yes No
 - Is there a policy concerning language use in the school? Circle: Yes No
 - Further, teachers were asked to identify the language(s) of the policy. In addition, teachers were asked on a scale of 0 to 5 with 0 being never, 1 being very rarely, 2 being rarely, 3 being occasionally, 4 being frequently, and 5 being very frequently, to estimate the following:
 - How much an English-only policy affects student reporting of bullying behavior to foreign teachers?

Findings

School Discipline Policy

Four out of five of the Chinese teaching assistants believed there was a discipline policy in place at the school. Eight of the ten foreign teachers believed there was not a discipline policy in place. In describing the discipline policy, one foreign teacher wrote, "Unclear." Another foreign teacher wrote, "I'm really not sure if we actually have one." A foreign teacher who stated there was a discipline policy wrote, "But it seemed there were various ones 'in place' but nothing consistent or enforced." Lastly, a foreign teacher who answered stating there was a discipline policy wrote, "Students and parents never received a copy of the formal discipline policy." Ten out of eleven parents believed there were adequate disciplinary policies in the school. The dissenting parent stated, "At school, has corner time but I think that's not severe punishment." Table 1 reflects the perceptions of school discipline held by parents, Chinese teaching assistants, and foreign teachers.

Table 1. School Discipline Policy

Parents (n = 11)		
Do you feel the school has adequate disciplinary policies?	10 Yes	1 No
Chinese Teaching Assistants (n = 5) Is there a disciplinary policy in place in the school?	4 Yes	1 No
Foreign Teachers (n = 10) Is there a disciplinary policy in place in the school?	2 Yes	8 No

School Language Policy

Five foreign teachers reported there was a language policy in place at the school while the other five reported there was no language policy (see Table 2). Of the five foreign teachers reporting there was a language policy, two believed the policy was English-only; one of those teachers reported, “Although no follow through with policy.” A foreign teacher reporting there was a language policy could not identify details of the policy because “It keeps changing.” Another foreign teacher stated that the language policy was “Not strictly defined.” Of the five Chinese teaching assistants, three reported there was a language policy while the other two did not answer whether there was a language policy in place. Of the Chinese teaching assistants reporting there was a language policy, one reported it was English-only, another reported it was bilingual, and the other believed that the policy was inclusive of all languages.

Table 2. School Language Policy

Chinese Teaching Assistants (n = 5)		
There is a language policy in place in the school? (Answering yes: 1 English-only, 1 bilingual, 1 inclusive) *Two Chinese teaching assistants did not answer the question	3 Yes	* No
Foreign Teachers (n = 10)		
There is a language policy in place in the school? (Answering yes: 2 English-only, 1 bilingual, 1 English & bilingual, and 1 could not identify the details of the language policy)	5 Yes	5 No

Student Well-Being

Table 3 reflects student perceptions of their well-being at school. Seven students reported being the victims of bad behavior at school while four reported otherwise. None of the students reported a teacher treating them badly. Of the eleven student participants, ten students reported they felt safe at school while one student reported feeling unsafe. During the interview, the student who felt unsafe at school said in English, "Somebody hit me or I take a ball and somebody take me ball."

Table 3. Student Well-Being

Students felt safe at school (n=11):	10 Yes	1 No
Treated bad at school (n=11) by another student:	7 Yes	4 No

During student interviews, students were questioned whether they informed a parent, Chinese teaching assistant, or a foreign teacher (see Table 4). If treated badly, six students reported having told a parent, two students reported having told a foreign teacher, and one student reported having told a Chinese teaching assistant. Students reporting to a foreign teacher did so during recess. Two students reported they would tell a foreign teacher. One student offered no response to questions presented in either English or Chinese.

Table 4. Students Reporting Bullying Behavior

Tell a Parent (n=11)	Tell a Teacher (n=11)
Told a parent: 6	Told a foreign teacher: 2
Would tell a parent: 2	Would tell a foreign teacher: 2
Did not tell a parent: 2	Did not tell a foreign teacher: 5
No response: 1	Told a Chinese teaching assistant: 1
-	No response: 1

On the parent questionnaires, parents responded whether their child reported bullying behavior (see Table 5). Four parents reported that their child had complained about being hit, pushed, or kicked. Two parents reported that their child had complained about something being taken (theft) from them. Three parents reported that their child had complained about being called bad words. Lastly, four parents reported that their child had complained to them about being socially excluded.

Table 5. Parents (n=11) Receiving Reports of Bullying Behavior

Hit, pushed, or kicked	4 Yes	7 No
Having something taken from them	2 Yes	9 No
Called bad words	3 Yes	8 No
Social exclusion	4 Yes	7 No

Documented during interviews were student concerns about reporting bullying behavior to a foreign teacher (see Table 6). Seven of the eleven students disclosed that they felt reporting bullying behavior to a foreign teacher was hard because of language. Six students told a Chinese-speaking translator they were worried foreign teachers would not be able to understand them because the foreign teachers did not speak Chinese and they could not tell them in English. Four students reported they could tell a foreign teacher. One student offered no response to questions presented in either English or Chinese.

Table 6. Students (n=11) Concerns in Reporting Bullying Behavior

Hard to report bullying to a foreign teacher because of language:	7*
Could tell a foreign teacher:	4*
No response:	1
*One student answered both. Able to tell a foreign teacher, but concerned the teacher may not be able to understand because of language.	

Teacher Perceptions of an English-only Policy

Provided to foreign teachers and teaching assistants was the opportunity to report their perceptions of an English-only policy and student reporting of bullying behavior to a foreign teacher (see Table 7). Teaching assistants (TA) and foreign teachers (FT) were asked on a scale of 0 to 5 with 0 being never, 1 being very rarely, 2 being rarely, 3 being occasionally, 4 being frequently, and 5 being very frequently, to estimate how much an English-only policy affects student reporting of bullying behavior to foreign teachers. Four of ten foreign teachers reported that an English-only policy very frequently affects students reporting bullying behavior to foreign teachers and two of ten foreign teachers reported that an English-only policy occasionally affects students reporting bullying behavior to foreign teachers. One foreign teacher responded that an English-only policy would very rarely affect a student reporting bullying behavior to a foreign teacher.

Unfortunately, three of the ten foreign teachers chose not to answer the question. One of the five participating Chinese teaching assistants reported that an English-only policy very frequently affects students reporting bullying behavior to foreign teachers and another Chinese teaching assistant responded that an English-only policy occasionally affects students reporting bullying behavior to foreign teachers. One Chinese teaching assistant reported that an English-only policy very rarely affects students reporting bullying behavior to a foreign teacher. Lastly, two of the five Chinese teaching assistants reported that an English-only policy never affects students reporting bullying behavior to foreign teachers.

Table 7. Teacher Perceptions of English-only Policy and Reporting of Bullying Behavior

FT (n=10) TA (n=5)	Never	Very Rarely	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Very Frequently
Foreign Teachers (3 FTs chose not to answer)		1		2		4
Teaching Assistants	2	1		1		1

Discussion

Although this study was limited to a single school with a small number of participants, the information provided is useful in understanding some of the complexities involved in early childhood programs in English-medium schools abroad, especially in China. Originally, this study started as an action-research project specifically studying a single class. After analyzing observational data taken both in and out of the classroom during months prior to the beginning of data collection from participants, the researcher decided to acquire data from participants outside of the class who were in a position to interact and observe the participating students during recess, lunch, after school clubs, and during time before and after school.

A first concern was raised when seven out of eleven students reported during student interviews that it was hard for them to tell a foreign teacher when someone mistreats them. For more than half of the student participants, language was a factor in the reporting of bullying behavior to a foreign teacher. In alignment with data reported by Fekkes et al. (2005), more students were likely to report mistreatment to a parent than to a teacher. As student interviews were taking place, follow-up questions through a translator occurred in an attempt to fully understand the reasons behind the answers provided by each student. A second concern arose from the realization that a limited number of students reported bullying behavior to a Chinese teaching assistant.

With a combined participating total of fifteen foreign teachers and Chinese teaching assistants, eight teaching participants reported that an English-only policy occasionally or very frequently affects student reporting bullying behavior to a foreign teacher. Although eight of fifteen represents slightly more than half of the teaching participants,

unclear is whether or not an English-only language policy decisively affects the reporting of bullying behavior to foreign teachers in English-medium schools. Because of the limited number of participants, the subjective nature of the responses, and the numerous variables involved, further research in this area is recommended. Moreover, open to debate concerning participant subjectivity was the use of language in and out of the classroom. It was the understanding of the researcher that the board of directors for the school had mandated that teachers were to use only English in and out of the classroom. The school website and literature given to parents makes the statement that all instruction takes place in English. However, there was a wide discrepancy in individual teacher knowledge of whether there was a language policy in place within the school. Half of the foreign teachers reported there was no language policy and two of the five Chinese teaching assistants failed to report whether or not there was a language policy. Yet, five foreign teachers and three Chinese teaching assistants reported there was a language policy, but there were discrepancies in the language policy that was reported to be in place.

After reviewing data, it became very apparent that there was a lack of administrative leadership in implementing and following through with a whole-school discipline policy and in communicating a transparent school language policy. Within any pre-K-12 school, a discipline policy based upon sound research and reason must be in place. Discipline is closely associated with academic success in such a way that a high level of academic achievement in a school is almost impossible without discipline. The wide discrepancy in perceptions concerning discipline in the school held between parents, Chinese teaching assistants, and foreign teachers is an alarming issue. A possible explanation for parental satisfaction with school discipline policies may be reflective of the classroom management abilities of the foreign teachers and Chinese teaching assistants. Another interesting difference in perception was how the majority of Chinese teaching assistants believed there was a discipline policy in place. This may be because the Chinese teaching assistants are under the supervision of the foreign teachers and foreign teachers developed their own classroom discipline policy due to the lack of disciplinary support and guidance received from the school administration.

The intention of this research project was to focus on students reporting bullying behavior and to assess whether an English-only policy could affect the reporting of bullying behavior. Because the school administrative leadership had not implemented or maintained a transparent discipline policy, discipline issues were continuing to mount. In the process of answering whether an English-only policy affects students reporting of bullying behavior to foreign teachers, one teacher responded, "The students are also able to bully the teachers by continuously swearing and saying inappropriate things in their native tongue due to the lack of expectation." Because the school administration had not developed, implemented, or maintained a transparent discipline policy, bullying not only occurred from student-to-student but also student-to-teacher.

In order to remedy such situations, schools need to implement and maintain a prevention or intervention model interwoven into the discipline policy, language policy, and curriculum. A possible remedy could be the employment of the School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports model, which is a research-based framework

providing guidance to improve student outcomes in both academics and behavior. In addition, closely monitoring new students who lack command of the language(s) used for instruction and social interaction is important in preventing initial peer rejection and social exclusion (von Grünigen, Kochenderfer-Ladd, Perren & Alsaker, 2012). Support from the principal and other administrative leaders is essential in developing and implementing anti-bullying measures (Olweus, 1993). Moreover, school administrators should ensure the topic of bullying is part of the curriculum. Directors, principals, curriculum coordinators, department heads, ESL/EFL/EAL departments, and teachers should seek ways to enhance the curriculum by providing opportunities for students to develop linguistic skills enabling the reporting of bullying behavior in the language(s) used to teach the curriculum. At the very least, use of picture charts can be used as a starting point for providing young language learners with the means to communicate their needs with their teacher(s). Lastly, the implementation of carefully designed lessons and activities should enable students to actively participate and develop language pertaining to the reporting of bullying in a communicative instructional environment with a lowered affective filter.

Conclusion

Although this study took place in China, at the core are issues pertaining to ethics in education and social justice. School administrative leadership has a professional obligation to provide guidance in implementing and maintaining empirically supported policies for school management. Consequences, both positive and negative, should be consistently enforced throughout the school in a timely manner. In addition, school administrative leadership should strive to ensure all students feel safe in school and are equipped with the necessary means to report bullying behavior in order to be safe. The researcher implores owners, directors, and principals of English-medium schools abroad to implement and maintain school policies ensuring the safety of the students and teachers. Furthermore, the researcher encourages English-medium schools to provide services ensuring linguistic growth thereby enabling students to have access to both the curriculum and socially acceptable communication with English speaking teachers and peers.

About the Author

Clayton Lehman has taught in pre-k12 public and international schools in the U.S., China, and South Korea. Mr. Lehman is currently working towards an Ed. D. in Educational Leadership. His areas of research interests include school policies, culture, and leadership.

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