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Intercultural Differences in Classroom Behavior and Teaching Pedagogy - An Analysis

Across Three Countries

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated differences in classroom behavior and teaching pedagogy

between the United States, Mexico, and Sweden. The study looked specifically at both

problematic and desired behaviors exhibited by students, and common interventions that

teachers use to both accelerate and decelerate both of these behavioral classes,

respectively. The study also investigated methods used to teach appropriate social

behaviors, those behaviors that teachers target for instruction, and the extent to which

social skill instruction is integrated into the presentation of academic lessons. An

analysis of differences across the three countries in these areas will be presented.

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The notion that cultural differences impact not only student behavior in the

classroom but the behavior of the teacher as well is certainly not new (Lahdenpera,

1998). In terms of students' behaviors in classrooms, it has been shown that students

from different cultural groups display different behaviors. (Smith, Polloway, Patton, &

Dowdy, 1998). These differences can be seen as a result of different cultural

expectations for behavior, and should be viewed as a significant variable in choosing an

implementing classroom management procedures. From a teaching perspective, it has

also been demonstrated, in the United States at least, that students from different cultural

and ethnic backgrounds are more often singled out for referral to special education

services (Kerr and Nelson, 1998). Additionally, Lahdenpera (1998) found that Swedish

teachers' perceptions of student difficulties was often attributed to their difficulties to

either their characteristics, background, or parents. According to her findings, teachers do

not blame the curriculum, or method of instruction for problematic student behavior, but

rather the student. Studies have also found that teachers tend to identify as problematic

acting out, externalizing behaviors much more frequently than withdrawn. depressed,

internalizing behaviors. (Williams and Haring, 1987; Walker, Severson, Haring, and

Williams, 1986). This, in part, explains the overrepresentation of boys with externalizing

behavior problems in programs serving students with behavioral and emotional disorders

in the United States (Williams and Haring, 1987; Walker, Severson, Haring, and

Williams, 1986; Walker and Fabre, 1987; Kerr and Nelson, 1998; Whelan, 1997).

Additionally, Walker, et.al. (1986), and Lahdenpera (1998) found that teachers viewed

students' problems as 'owned' by the student, rather than something that is either shared, or owned, by the teacher. This view has certainly been true from an historical perspective in the United States. Our assessment processes have reflected this view, with and emphasis on searching for student variables which are the genesis for problematic behavior, rather than a view that other variables can impact student performance, both academically and behaviorally. This is now beginning to change toward a more ecological view of student behavior (Sugai and Tindal, 1993)

If we look at the typical process of identification for special education services, some light is shed upon this problem. In the United States, the referral process begins with teacher. And, if it is the classroom teacher that singles out a student for referral, then how that teacher perceives the problem dramatically impacts those who are, and are not, identified as students with problems. Teacher perceptions and how they impact the management and identification processes thus becomes an important target of analysis.

Of particular interest then, given an emphasis on teacher perceptions as a critical variable in identifying students as problematic and in need of intervention, is how that teacher views student behavior, in particular problematic social behavior, and how they intervene to manage behavior. It is also of interest whether differences exist between teachers across different cultures along this dimension: Do teachers view student behavior differently given different cultural backgrounds, or do they have more in common than differences even through their cultural reference points are different? And, if there are differences, what can we learn from other cultures that will help us to more effectively manage student behavior in our own classrooms

A logical next step is to contrast methods of intervention across cultures. How teachers respond to student behavior (or misbehaviors) is also an important target for study. Research completed in the United States has consistently shown that teachers tend to focus on misbehavior (White, 1975; Shores, et. al., 1993; Walker, 1995). Walker (1995) also found that the cumulative effect of this disproportionate teacher attention, as well as peer attention, directed toward misbehavior dramatically strengthened the very misbehavior teachers were trying to weaken. We certainly have the technology to accomplish change in effective, efficient, and proactive ways. Whether we base our interventions on this technology is a good question. The extent to which different cultures address problematic student behavior in different ways may well enable us all to more effectively address effective management of our classrooms.

. Whether differences are present across cultures in the ways that teachers instruct students in appropriate behavior also an interesting question. A proactive approach which emphasizes social skill instruction is seen as a more desirable and effective approach than an one which focuses exclusively on consequating student behavior. Social skills and school survival skills are explicitly taught in this approach. We do have a highly developed technology for teaching social skills. Numerous textbooks highlight social skills instruction, and social skills curricula (Kerr and Nelson, 1998; Oden and Asher, 1977; Mathur and Rutherford, 1994). Of interest is how these skills are taught, and whether they are effectively taught. The model of choice for instruction in social skills is a direct instruction approach. This approach focuses on directly teaching target skills, providing students with models of the skill, and giving them opportunities to practice the skills under the guidance of the teacher (Kerr and

Nelson, 1998). Most often, this involves pulling student aside and instructing them in

small groups on selected social skills. The overall effectiveness of this approach remains

questionable, however, in terms of providing generalized and socially validated

outcomes. Another approach is through integrated curriculum (Williams, 1998,

Reisberg, 1999). This approach seeks to fully integrate social skills instruction into

academic lesson content. This approach has proved effective in changing the perceptions

of students toward levels of conflict and inappropriate behavior in their classrooms

(Williams, 1998).

In this study we wanted to gather information around three main points. First, are

there differences in classroom behavior - as perceived by the teacher - across three

countries; the United States, Sweden, and Mexico. Secondly, what specific behavior

management strategies are used by teacher in these countries to both accelerate and

decelerate appropriate and inappropriate behavior, respectively. Third, what approaches

do teachers use to instruct students in appropriate social behavior, and do they use

structured curricula and instructional methodologies to accomplish that. All of this was

done in order to ascertain how different culture's approaches to classroom management

and teaching pedagogy might help all of us to better manage and teach students in our

classrooms.

<div align="center">Method</div>

<u>Participants</u>

Participants in the study were practicing teachers from three different countries -

Mexico, Sweden, and the United States. These teachers were selected from both

elementary and secondary schools in the three countries. Some of the participants were

selected because of their participation in graduate programs in education, some were selected because of their participation in workshops and other educational programs provided by the authors. The total number of participants were 63. Thirty Three were from Sweden, 20 from the United States, and 40 from Mexico.

<u>Materials</u>

The material used was a questionnaire designed by the authors. This questionnaire was comprised of nine questions in the areas of perceptions of student behavior (four questions), management strategies used (two questions), and methods of teaching social skills (three questions). Several of the questions were open ended format, several were selected response format. Copies of the questionnaire may be obtained by contacting the first author.

<u>Procedure</u>

The questionnaire was initially designed by the first author, and written in English. It was then translated into both Swedish and Spanish. The specific method of translation was back translation. In this process, the english version was translated into the other language, and then back to the first using an interactive process involving the authors. Through this process, we were able to ensure that regardless of language used, the same questions were being asked of the participants.

Subsequent to this activity, the authors then enlisted practicing teachers (as noted above) to complete the questionnaire. Teachers were contacted through their participation in classes, workshops, or through contacts with the authors in their work in schools. Graduate students were used on occasion to assist in data collection. The process involved sitting down with the participants, explaining briefly the intent of the

study, and to then ask them to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire, because of

it self-explanatory nature, usually did not require any further explanation on the part of

the researcher to complete, but if questions were asked, they were answered as succinctly

as possible. The questionnaire usually took about 30 minutes to complete.

<div align="center">Results</div>

Question #1 asked respondents to identify the types of behavior that they find the most

desirable. Responses were grouped into four categories; On Task (interest in school

activities), Discipline (following directions, general compliance), Cooperation (getting

along with peers and adults), Order & Neatness in Assignments. Respondents from the

USA indicated the first three categories of responses (On Task, Discipline, and

Cooperation) were equally desirable, with each category scoring 13/20 responses.

Respondents from Sweden indicated that On Task related behaviors were the most

desired, with 20 of the 33 respondents noting these behaviors. Cooperation was noted by

16 of the 33 respondents. Discipline was noted by four of the 33 respondents.

Respondents from Mexico noted that [INSERT MEXICO DATA HERE]

The second question asked respondents to note those behaviors that they found

most problematic. Respondents from the USA noted three categories of problematic

behaviors; aggression (both verbal & physical) with 11 of 20 responses, , last of interest

and motivation with 12 of 20 responses, and disruptive and attention seeking with 12 of

20 responses. Sweden noted behaviors such as disruptive and attention seeking as the

most problematic in their classrooms (25/33). Few of the teachers noted behaviors such

as not being motivated, not concentrating on school work, or not being responsible for

their own learning. Mexico teachers 'INSERT MEXICO DATA HERE]

The third question queried teachers as to their perceptions on responsibility for providing moral and ethical guidance/education to students. A Majority of the teachers from both USA (13 of 20) and Sweden (23/33) indicated that it is a shared responsibility between the home and school.

Questions four and five queried teachers about management strategies that they use to both decelerate problematic behavior, and accelerate desirable behaviors. Table Four notes responses made by Swedish, USA, and Mexican teachers in the area of decelerating inappropriate behavior. Swedish teachers noted the use of interviewing, talking to, negotiating with students and restating their expectations for behavior as the most often used methods. The only negative type of intervention mentioned was the use of mild aversives (verbal comments such as 'stop statement' delivered by the teacher). Teachers from the USA primarily used ignoring, modeling, emotional support and parent conferences to decelerate student problematic behavior. USA teachers noted the use of two negative interventions - time out and mild aversives. [DISCUSS MEXICO DATA HERE]

Table Four - Most Often Used Management Strategies To Decelerate problematic

Behavior As Noted By Swedish, USA, and Mexican Teachers

Swedish (N=33)	USA (N=20)	Mexican (N=40)
Negotiate With Students (23)	Ignore Inappropriate Behavior (12)	Interview with student (30))
Interview & Talk To Students (19)	Parent Conferences F (12)	
Restate Rules & Expectations (19)	Model Appropriate. Behavior F(12)	
Increase Positive Statements (17)	Provide Emotional Support (12)	
Use Mild Aversives (17)	Increase Positive Statements (11)	

Establish Goals For Student (15)   Use Time-Out (11)

Consult With Other Teachers (14)   Use Mild Aversives (11)

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Table Five notes responses made by Swedish, USA, and Mexican teachers in the

area of accelerating appropriate behavior. Both Swedish and USA teachers listed

modeling, extra privileges, and increasing positive statements as primary means of

increasing desirable behaviors. Swedish teachers also listed, as their first choice for

increasing behaviors, negotiating with students. This was listed as their primary means

of intervening with problematic behaviors as well. Both groups also noted that they

provide emotional support to students in these efforts as well.

Table Five - Most Often Used Management Strategies To Accelerate Desirable

Behaviors As Noted By Swedish, USA, and Mexican Teachers

Swedish (N=33)	USA (N=20)	Mexican (N=40)
Negotiate With Students (20)	Increase Positive Statements (12)	Mexican Data here
Increase Positive Statements (17)	Model Desired Behaviors (11)	
Extra Privileges (10)	Extra Privileges (10)	
Establish Specific Goals (10)	Provide Successful Academics (9)	
Provide Emotional Support (10)	Provide Emotional Support (7)	
Chart Progress (9)	Ignore Inappropriate Behavior (4)	
Model & Teach Social Skills (8)	Restate Rules & Expectations (3)	

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There were three questions in the area of social skill instruction for students. A

majority of the teachers from the USA (16/20) indicated that they do not explicitly teach

social skills to their students. Comments about 'teachable moments', discussions with

classes, conferencing one on one with students were mentioned by a few of the teachers.

This question generated little response from teachers in Sweden as well, , with only 3/33

teachers responding.. Those three that did respond indicated a preference for discussion

groups as a vehicle for instructing students in appropriate behavior. [INSERT MEXICO

DATA HERE] When asked to identify specific social skills/behaviors that they teach

their students, teachers from the USA noted behaviors such as listening, sharing, respect

for others [INSERT SPECIFIC NUMBERS HERE]. Swedish teachers indicated being

considerate (20/33), cooperating with others (14/33), self-responsibility (6/33), self-

respect (4/33), and self-confidence (3/33). [INSERT MEXICO DATA HERE] Teachers

were also asked as to whether they include social or affective skill objectives in their

lesson plans. Twelve of the 20 (12/20) USA teachers indicated that they do not include

affective or social skills in their lesson planning. Nine of the 33 (9/33) Swedish teachers

indicated that they do include these objectives in their lessons. [INSERT MEXICO

DATA HERE]

 Another set of questions asked teachers to identify the most problematic

behaviors that both boys and girls exhibit in their classrooms. Results from Swedish

teachers are displayed in Table One. These indicate that for both boys and girls,

disturbing others was the most often noted problem behavior. Lack of responsibility was

also in the top three for both sexes. The only difference in the top three behaviors was

that girls were noted to be 'uninterested' and boys were described as 'lacking

responsibility'.

Table One

Most Problematic Classroom Behaviors As Noted By Swedish Teachers

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Problem Behaviors

Boys	Girls
Disburbing Others (20/33)	Disturbing Others (12/33)
Lack of Responsibility (8/33)	Uninterested (11/33)
Not Concentrated (8/33)	Lack of Responsibility (10/33

Table Two

Most Problematic Classroom Behaviors As Noted By USA Teachers

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Problem Behaviors

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Boys	Girls
Off Task Behaviors (15/20)	Rude / Disrespectful (11/20)
Aggressive / Confrontational (11/20)	Excessive Talking (10/20)
Apathetic (4/20)	Lethargic (7/20)

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Table Two notes those behaviors that teachers consider most problematic for both boys and girls. For boys, the two most frequently noted problematic behavioral class involved being off task and not engaged in school work (15/20), with aggressive behaviors (both verbal and physical) being noted as well (11/20). Relatively few of the teachers (4/20) noted apathy as a problem with boys. Teacher reported problematic behavior for girls focused on being rude and disrespectful (11/20), talking excessively (10/20), and lethargy (7/20).

Table Three notes most problematic behaviors exhibited by boys and girls as reported by Mexican teachers.

Table Three

Most Problematic Classroom Behaviors As Noted By Mexican Teachers

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Problem Behaviors

_____

Boys   Girls

_____

INSERT MEXICO DATA HERE

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Discussion

In analyzing the results of this investigation, we are going to consider the three questions that we asked at the beginning of our study. First, , are there differences in classroom behavior - as perceived by the teacher - across three countries; the United States, Sweden, and Mexico? Our result suggest that there are, in fact, differences across USA and Swedish cultures. Sixty five percent of USA teachers consider that discipline, defined as following directions and general compliance with classroom procedures, was an important set of behaviors for students to exhibit. Their colleagues in Sweden considered this area of classroom behavior to be much less important, with only 12% noting this as a behavioral class that they consider 'most desirable'. Both groups consider 'on task' and 'cooperation' as important behaviors for students to exhibit. This seems to indicate an emphasis by these USA teachers on 'control' and 'do what you're told'' that is not present in the Swedish teachers classrooms. In terms of behaviors that these teachers found most problematic, USA teachers focused more on aggression than did Swedish teachers. That could be because of several reasons; higher rates of aggression in the USA teachers' classrooms, or a greater sensitivity to those behaviors on the part of the USA teachers. In any case, it is consistent with the 'most desirable behaviors' noted above: USA teachers are concerned with aggression (both verbal and physical), and their management procedures seek to control students more to avoid these types of behaviors. Both groups of teachers agreed that disruptive and attention getting behaviors were not desirable.

A related question asked teachers to specifically identify the problematic

behaviors exhibited by both boys and girls. Differences in this area are also apparent.

Swedish teachers focused, for both sexes, on behaviors that can be seen as related to

academic engagement. Disturbing others, not being responsible for their work, and not

staying focused on school work were noted. USA teachers noted, for boys, such

behaviors as being aggressive, confrontational, and off task as being problematic. This

is, once again, consistent with the results reported above - that USA teachers are

concerned with aggressive behaviors. Predictably, these behaviors are assigned to boys

rather than girls. For the girls, USA teachers reported a different set of problematic

behaviors. Being rude and disrespectful was a concern, but the other top rated behaviors

were excessive talking and lethargy. These behavioral descriptors are much different

than those reported for the boys. Across both sexes, the descriptors noted by USA

teachers are much different than those reported by Swedish teachers.

Given these perceptions of classroom behavior, another question that we asked

was what specific behavior management strategies are used by teachers in these countries

to both accelerate and decelerate appropriate and inappropriate behavior, respectively?

A view toward specific interventions used by teacher, differences across cultures is apparent.   Swedish teachers tend to talk to their students as a first strategy. They negotiate, interview, and restate rules and expectations. In fact, Swedish teachers most often identified negotiation as a means of intervening to not only decelerate, but accelerate behaviors as well. USA teachers, on the other hand, will initially ignore inappropriate behavior and model appropriate behavior, and will also use parents as a resource through parent conferences. These interventions are more 'external' in nature than those used by teachers in Sweden. Both groups noted the use of mild aversives to decelerate behavior. One interesting difference was a willingness on the part of USA teachers to use time-out as a consequence for inappropriate behavior. Only two of the Swedish teachers noted this as a means of management. For both groups, the use of group contingencies, point systems, meta-cognitive approaches such as problem solving, or consulting with other teachers were not frequently mentioned.

We also asked teachers about methods they use to increase appropriate behavior. As noted above, Swedish teachers high ranked method used to increase behavior was the same intervention that was ranked highest to decrease behavior - negotiation. Both groups were similar in that they listed modeling, providing extra privileges, providing emotional support, and increasing positive statements as means for increasing desired behavior. A major difference between the two groups was the aforementioned use by Swedish teachers of negotiation. This was not in the top seven methods noted by USA teachers.

The third area of questioning was what approaches do teachers use to instruct students in appropriate social behavior, and do they use structured curricula and instructional methodologies to accomplish that?

We found that very few teachers in either country explicitly teach social skills. They mentioned that it was mentioned in discussions with groups or individuals, but for the most part, actual direct teaching just is not taking place. Although teachers can identify what they want their students to do in terms of social skills, they do not actually teach those behaviors to them in any systematic manner. It is not surprising then, to note that less than 25% of teachers across both groups include social or affective learning objectives in their lesson planning.

Overall, we found some interesting differences across these cultures. First, we found that USA teachers are more concerned with aggressive behaviors than Swedish teachers. We also found that when intervening with problematic behaviors, USA teachers tend to focus on controlling behavior(s) more than their Swedish counterparts. Swedish teachers tend to 'talk' to their students more, whereas USA teachers tend to focus on more external means of management.

We also found some similarities. Both groups, while wanting many of the same behaviors from their students, do not actually 'teach' those behaviors in any kind of systematic way. The inclusion of social skill objectives was also an unusual occurrence across both cultures. It would seem that both groups of teachers could learn from the adage 'what you teach is what you get, and where you teach it is where you get it'.

Further research in this area could focus on direct observation of student and teacher behavior in classrooms in these countries to ascertain actual rates of student classroom behavior, as well as a finer delineation of teaching and management methods. Additionally, an analysis of teacher education curriculum in the area of social and affective skill instruction and management would give us some insight into how teachers are being prepared to manage classrooms in both countries.

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