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Integrating Chinese children into Irish Primary School

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Abstract

Ireland has recently undergone a sharp increase in the rate of immigration. As more immigrants come to the country, Irish schools have to deal with increased diversity within the classroom, and with problems associated with integrating children from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Chinese children represent a particularly large group within the school system. There are many significant differences between education in Ireland and in China, which can lead to series of problems. These include difficulty integrating into Irish primary schools, changing of parents' expectations, as well as difficulties associated with different teaching and learning styles. This article introduces the general information of Chinese children in Ireland, their difficulties and their individual experience in Irish primary schools. It compares the two curricula between Irish and Chinese primary schools. The article also examines the issue from the perspective of school principals, class teachers, language support teachers, parents and children and will present a more complete picture of the experience of Chinese children in Irish primary schools, with a view to identify the root causes of integration problems.

Keywords: *Chinese children, Primary school, Integration*

We live in a time when humanity, science and technology are developing at a tremendous pace, requiring people to acquire more skills to promote the development of the society. As a result, education is drawing more and more attention from governments in each country. This is especially true of primary education, the cradle of the talents and skills, which is the main object of reform. Ireland has recently undergone a sharp increase in the rate of immigration. As more immigrants come to the country, Irish schools have to deal with increased diversity within the classroom, and with problems associated with integrating children from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Chinese children represent a particularly large group within the school system.

The purpose of this research is to identify ways in which Irish schools can ease the

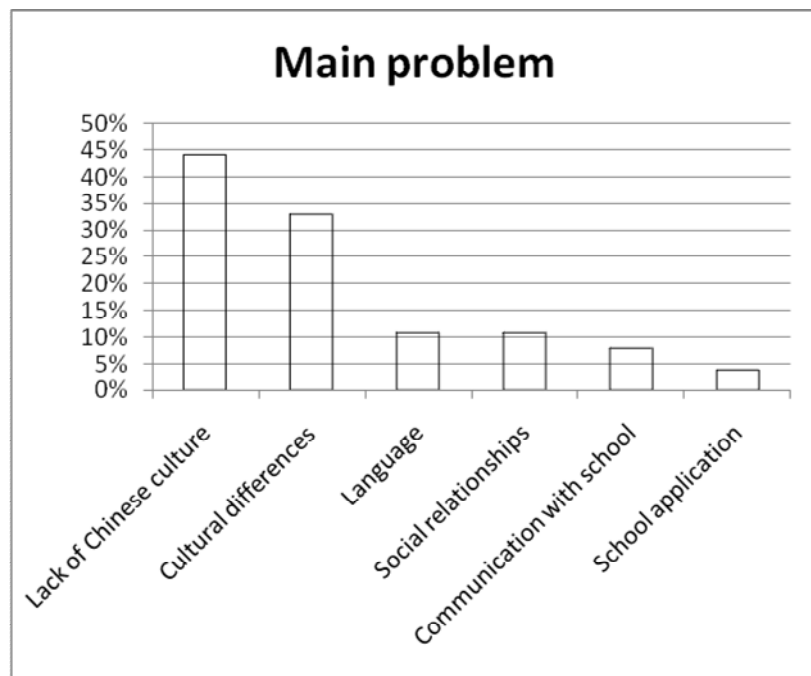
integration of Chinese students into Irish society. It is intended that the Chinese community in Ireland will benefit from increased knowledge of the process of integration, and what is involved in schooling at Primary level, providing them with a voice in the research process. It is hoped that this will be of direct benefit to the children, who are currently being integrated into Irish schools.

The research started from the three Chinese language and culture schools in Dublin which the researcher had identified. They are Ai-Hua Chinese School, the Chinese Association School and the Chinese Irish Cultural Academy School. They have approximate 120 Chinese children in total. In the first instance, questionnaires had been sent to the parents. Based on an analysis of the responses to the questionnaires and an identification of the key emergent themes, the researcher followed up with a number of interviews with parents, school principals, language support teachers and class teachers.

There are four distinct groups of children in this research, who are referred to collectively in the present text as Chinese children. The first type is those for whom both of the parents are Chinese, the children are Chinese, and they have moved from China after they are six years old and have had some experience with Chinese primary schools. The second type is where both of the parents are Chinese, but the children were born in Ireland or moved to Ireland when they were under six years old, and they don't have experience with Chinese primary schools. The third type is where one of the parents is Chinese, the other parents is non-Chinese, with the children born in Ireland. Finally, the fourth type is where both of the parents are Irish, and their children were adopted from China.

A questionnaire was designed, revised and sent to the parents of 120 Chinese children in the three Chinese schools and 27 responses were received. The return rate was 22.5%. While this response rate was below average, the information elicited was still essential to the further research. The low return rate could be attributed to fear on the part of the parents with regard to the usage of the research findings. While every effort was made to re-assure parents in this regard, it can be difficult to overcome such concerns in migrant communities. Of the 27 surveys returned (14 girls and 13 boys) there were 15 children whose native language is English and 12 children whose native language is Chinese. 60% of parents believed that both English and Chinese are equally important languages for their children to master, 33% of parents think English is the most

important language and 7% of parents think Chinese is the most important language. With regard to the question of the greatest challenge the child encounters at the Irish school, 44% of parents think the lack of Chinese culture is the main challenge, 33% of parents think the cultural differences between two countries is the main challenge, 11% of parents picked language, 11% of parents think the child's social relationship is the biggest problem, 8% of parents agreed that it is the communication between parents and the school/teachers and 4% of parents think that the school application is the most challenging thing.



The key research instrument used during the research was interviewing. There are a few reasons for this. 'The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on a person's mind...., to access the perspective of the person being interviewed...., to find out from them things that we cannot directly observe'. (Patton, 1990: 278)

'Qualitative interviewing is a way of uncovering and exploring the meanings that underpin people's lives, routines, behaviours, feelings, etc.' (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, cited in Arksey & Knight, 1999: 32) Qualitative interviews allow for understanding and

meanings to be explored in depth. It examines the context of thought, feeling and action and can be a way of exploring relationships between different aspects of a situation. (Arksey & Knight, 1999) Thus it was assumed that interviews would generate a greater depth of understanding of the issues faced by Chinese children in Irish Primary schools. Brief initial analysis of returned questionnaires facilitated the design of a semi-structured interview schedule. The interviews were carried out with reference to the topics outlined in the questionnaire. Open-ended questions were used to ensure that responses were grounded and emerged from the participants' perspectives. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. In addition to the identification of parents who were willing to be interviewed, the interview schedule also included principals of a number of schools where Chinese children were part of the school population and the principals of Chinese schools in Ireland who could give an insight into the cultural needs of both Chinese children and their parents. Finally language support teachers were interviewed, with a view to eliciting the response of the Irish State to the needs of migrant students, specifically in this instance, Chinese children. So far, interviews with thirteen parents, five school principals and two language support teachers and three class teachers have been conducted.

In general, the later the Chinese child comes to Ireland, the more challenging it becomes. The parents who adopted the Chinese children all think their children have no problem integrating into their schools. However, they are aware of the child's ethnicity, and both want their children to learn Chinese language and culture. Families, where one parent is Chinese, believe that the children do not have much of an integration problem. The only thing the parents were concerned about was that they hoped their children could learn Chinese language and culture. The ethnic Chinese children who are born in Ireland or move to Ireland before 6 years old tend to have some problems with language and culture issues. The children who move to Ireland after 6 years old have the most difficulties, especially with language. One thing that emerged from the interviews was that although the last category of children has the most difficulties, they seem to be happy to move to an Irish primary school as the Irish primary school seems to have a less pressurized culture than its Chinese counterpart. . However, for their parents this was a major cause of concern. They expressed worries about the short school day and the lack of a large amount of homework compared to a Chinese primary school. The parents worry that their children's English cannot improve quickly enough, the pressure on the children from the schools in Ireland is not high enough and if they go back China

at a later stage, they cannot catch up with their Chinese friends.

Yes, there is no pressure at all. The other thing is that there is too much spare time for them. In China, children may go to school at 7am in the morning and finish school at 4pm or 5pm. How many hours do they have in school here? They go to school at 9am and finish school at 3pm. There are also long breaks during the middle, very easy. (Parent A, 2009)

I used to ask him, "How can you survive if you were studying in China?" He asked me, "Why do I need to go back China to study?" He doesn't like the idea. I told him, because my sister has a child, who is half a year older than him; she is in the third class in China now. I told him that his cousin normally needs to write homework for several hours every day. "I don't want to be like that!" he said to me. (laugh) He just hopes there is no homework every day so that he can play and watch TV, that is his ideal! He is already used to the relaxed atmosphere in the school here. (Parent B, 2009)

The interviews with the school principals seem much more difficult to arrange. Fifteen primary schools had been contacted, but only five school principals agreed to do interviews with the researcher. The five schools are St. Nicholas's National School, Claddagh, Galway, Wicklow Educate Together School, Monkstown Educate Together, Esker Educate Together and St. Mary's Boys' National School Rathfarnham. It is interesting to note the readiness of the Educate Together Schools to co-operate with the research as these schools are committed to a system of education 'where children learn together to live together'.

During the interviews, many issues were drawn out, such as the difference between Irish and Chinese primary school curricula (especially religious education), assessments, teaching and learning styles, parents' expectation, parental participation, trust between schools and the parents, and so on.

Irish and Chinese Primary School Curricula

In 1999, the *Department of Education and Science of Ireland* launched the *Primary*

School Curriculum, which is a significant milestone in the history of primary education in Ireland. It enhances the quality of children's learning and drives Irish primary education to a higher level. In 2001, the *Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China* published the new Curriculum Standard of Chinese School, which brings Chinese primary education into a new world.

As the two countries both have a long history and rich culture, there are many similarities but also many differences between Ireland and China. The Irish curriculum (1999) follows the child-centred educational ideology of the *Curaclam Na Bunscoile* (1971) and improved the previous curriculum in many different aspects. The Chinese curriculum standard (2001) changes the situation of putting too much emphasis on textbooks knowledge in previous decades, and starts to put the children's need at the first place and promote quality education.

In general terms, the two curricula share quite similar general aims and both aim at preparing the child to live and work in the 21st Century. Both of the curricula try to cultivate the students' life-long learning ability and advanced thinking abilities, such as abilities of analysis and problem-solving, which is also a strong thread in global educational development. They emphasise the children's life experience, also pointing out that the children should develop as social beings, know how to co-operate with others, to have social responsibility and to be good citizens in the society. However, there are slight differences as well. In the general aims of Irish primary school curriculum, it stresses the child's individual potential and the overall development of the child is the primary aim. The Chinese curriculum standard puts the love of nation and socialism, and moral develop in the primary position. It shows some socialist political leanings but the moral education is always the first thing the children should learn, according to Chinese educational history, and it has been the influence of Chinese culture and tradition of thousands of years.

The subjects of two curricula are quite similar. They both have *Language, Mathematics, Science, P.E.* and *Arts Education*. There are also differences in subjects. For example, the Irish curriculum contains *Social, Personal and Health Education, Religion, History* and *Geography*, whereas the Chinese curriculum standard has *Moral and Life* (or *Moral and Society*) and *Integrated Practice Activity*. However, although some subjects have very different names in two countries' curricula, such as *Social, Personal and Health*

Education, and *Moral and Life* (or *Moral and Society*), they can contain similar material. Both of the curricula reflect the needs arising from high-speed technological development in the 21st Century, especially information technology education. The new Chinese subject, the *Integrated Practice Activity*, includes information technology education, research study, community service, social practice, and labour and skills education. The information technology education has been put in the first position. It is also been stressed in the Irish curriculum. It is interesting to note that under the current Irish Government, a greater emphasis has been placed on literacy and numeracy (Department of Education and Skills, 2011).

One of the differences between the two curricula is how they develop children's spiritual and moral education. The Irish curriculum tends to use *Religious Education* to answer the children's aesthetic, spiritual, moral and religious needs. The Irish religious education curriculum is not provided by the NCCA, but by different church authorities, which were recognised by the Department of Education and Science for the right of design of curricula in religious education, to supervise the teaching and implementation in the context of Education Act in 1998 (Introduction, 1999:58).

China is a country with freedom of religious belief, and people can choose the religion they want to believe in, but religion is not involved in the education system. So should schools teach religion? There has been a great deal of debate on this. Some religious educationalists claim that religious faith is the best way to teach moral values; however, others believe that religious morality is outdated, dangerous and that children should not be put in a religious school before they can understand what religion is and make their own choice. Again from an Irish perspective, moves have been announced by the new government, to change the patronage of Irish schools to allow for greater access to students who may not belong to a specific religious grouping.

Ireland is a Catholic country and Christianity has been a part of the culture for a long time. China has always been a country of religious pluralism, but Buddhism has been in the dominant position for a long period of time. After the socialist government was established in 1949, people were educated to believe in Marxist scientific atheism and trust in modern science. However, the moral education in China has for a long time been politicized: children are taught to love the socialism, the mother nation, the Communist Party, collectivism, the school and other people, but not to mention personal needs.

After the education reform in 2001, the new moral curriculum standard put a greater emphasis on moral education and the establishment of the curriculum of practical life and humanity. The main curriculum standards for moral education in Chinese primary schools are *Moral and Life*, or *Moral and Society*. The aim of the *Moral and Life* is 'to cultivate the children with good moral characters, good behavioural habits, and the love of life and exploration' (Curriculum Standard, 2001). When the children get to the higher grades, the aim of the moral education, *Moral and Society*, is 'to promote students to form good moral characters and social development, to establish the foundation for students of knowing, participating and getting used to society, become a qualified socialism citizen with love, responsibility, good behavioural habits and personality' (Curriculum Standard, 2001). The essence of the moral education reform is to stress that children's life experience is the root of the moral education. The organization of the children's curriculum standards should follow the children's developmental need but not the adults' logic, and it should be built on the children's life experience. The moral curriculum standard also points out that the children are the main body of their moral life, and advocates that the best moral teaching is the combination of children's self-construction and teachers' directing.

So is religious education in Irish primary schools an issue which prevents Chinese children from integrating with Irish children? All ten Chinese parents the researcher had interviewed (the other three parents are Irish) said they have no problem letting their children go to religion classes. Four parents had their children baptised and let them take the sacraments of Communion and Confirmation. When the researcher asked the reason they had their children baptised, two of parents said that they think religion is beneficial to the children's life; the other two parents responded because that was the requirement to get into a certain high profile school. To these two parents, as long as their children go to a good school, they don't mind what religion the children have. The remaining six Chinese parents professed that they didn't mind if their children went to religion classes, but they would not like the children to formally adopt a specific religion.

When my daughter asked me whether she can join in Catholic Church, I told her, you are too young to decide whether you should believe in a religion now. You can choose when you are eighteen years old. (Parent C, 2010)

Assessment

The *Primary Certificate Examination* (1929 - 1967) was the terminal examination in Irish primary schools until the first primary school curriculum, *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (1971), was introduced. After 28 years, the new Irish *Primary School Curriculum* (1999) outlined that assessment is an integral part of teaching and explains why it is so important to support children's learning (The Primary School Curriculum, 1999:17). In Phase 1 of the *Primary Curriculum Review (2005)*, teachers and parents gave feedback asking for more information about the assessment in primary schools. Afterwards, the document, *Assessment in Primary Schools (Draft)*, was launched in 2005. It describes the function of assessment in primary school is the assessment of learning and assessment for learning, and gives recommendations on developing a school policy on assessment. On the 28th of November 2007, *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum - Guidelines for schools*, was launched by the Minister for Education and Science, Mary Hanafin, T.D. It took a closer look at the re-envisioning of assessment, classroom assessment methods, assessment of learning, and school policy on assessment. The Guidelines lists assessment methods as follows: child self-assessment, conferencing, portfolio assessment, concept mapping, questioning, teacher observation, teacher-designed tasks and tests and standardised testing. This provides teachers with a variety of tools for assessment of the children (NCCA, 2007).

The Chinese primary school assessment used to have a lot of emphasis on questioning, teacher observation, teacher-designed tasks and tests, and standardised testing. The standardised testing, in particular, has played the main role in Chinese primary school assessment for decades. In the curriculum reform 2001, it advocates the building of an assessment system which can improve children's development from all dimensions. The *Elementary Education Curriculum Standard Guideline* (2001) suggests that assessment should not only concentrate on the student's exam result, but needs to determine the children's developing needs, to try to develop the children's potential in all dimensions, to help students to know themselves and to build their confidence. The Guidelines stipulate that the primary school examination system should be reformed and perfected more. For example, the Guideline suggests that students graduating from primary schools may go to the secondary school nearest their home without entrance examination. The Guidelines also encourages the schools to organise their own

graduation exams instead of having the traditional standard tests, emphasising that the exam content should build more connection to students' life experience and social reality, stress the children's ability of problem analysis and problem solving in order to reduce the students' burden of examination, and that the teachers should give individual help according to different exam results of each student. One of the greatest steps of this curriculum assessment reform is that the Guideline stipulates that students' exam results are not allowed to be announced publicly and forbids ranking students by their exam results (The Ministry of Education of China, 2001).

All of the Chinese parents the researchers had interviewed mentioned that they thought the study atmosphere in Irish primary schools was over-relaxed. One reason given for that is because there is not much formal exams in Irish primary schools. The Chinese parents worry that if there are no regular exams, the children will learn less.

If there are no exams, the children will just become lazy, and their knowledge foundation will not be that solid. So normally I would give her extra homework at home....' (Parent D, 2010)

Meanwhile, the Irish Department of Education and Skills is trying to improve this situation as well. In July 2011, the Irish *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life – the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* was published. One of the aims of the strategy is as follows:

'At primary, increasing the number of children performing at Level 3 or above (the highest levels) in the national assessments of reading and mathematics by 5 percentage points; reducing the percentage performing at or below the lowest level (Level1) by 5 percentage points.' (Department of Education and Skills, 2011)

Teaching and Learning Styles

The teaching and learning styles in the two countries are different as well. The Irish curriculum pointed out that education should answer the child's need, the child is the centre of education, and the teacher's role is as the instructor. The teachers should teach in an open and interactive manner, and the ways in which the students learn should be

independent, explorative and co-operative. It is believed that high quality education enables children to realise their potential as individuals and to live their lives to the fullest capacity appropriate to their particular stages of development.

One of the greatest improvements of the *Chinese curriculum standard* (2001) is the change of the teaching and learning styles. The *Elementary Education Curriculum Standard Guideline* states that it should change the situation of students accepting knowledge negatively, reciting, and doing training mechanically; teachers should advocate students' positive participation, love of explore and cultivate the abilities of gather and process information, knowledge acquisition, problem analysis and solving, communication and coordination. (The Ministry of Education of China, 2001)

Before the curriculum reform of 2001, the Chinese teaching style tended to be knowledge-centred, curriculum-centred and teacher-centred, and tended to emphasise teachers' teaching instead of students' learning (Wang, 2001). The structure of a typical Chinese class in primary school at the time was that the teacher taught from the textbook according to the curriculum, listed the key knowledge on the blackboard, then the students took down the notes and did exercises afterward. The main teaching methods were lecturing, explanation and questioning. The children's main learning methods centered on listening to the teacher and doing the exercises. Sometimes the students had to recite large amounts of text and do a lot of exercises in order to pass the exams. These kinds of teaching methods normally have a very high expectation of students' achievement, provide children with a great amount of knowledge, and give children a solid knowledge foundation. However, its disadvantages are easy to see as well. The atmosphere in the classroom is usually full of tension, students are normally pushed to learn and can lose interest in learning, and initiative, easily. Compared to the Chinese teaching styles, the Irish teaching styles place greater emphasis on the individual needs of the child and his/her overall development. There is more class discussion and student group work involved in the teaching, and the learning atmosphere is relatively friendly in an Irish classroom. The Chinese curriculum standard (2001) tries to change the situation of placing too much emphasis on teachers' knowledge inculcation, to cultivate student's active learning ability, and to enhance the connection between the curriculum content and modern society, technology development and students' daily life. A great amount of teacher training has been carried out to train the educators to answer the children's need, to use a variety of teaching methods, such as students discussion, group work, project

work, using teaching materials which give children different sensorial stimulation, and so on.

Parental Perspective

The Principal of Wicklow Education Together School, pointed out that parents' expectations are quite different between countries. Some parents, such as Indian parents, would have very high expectations.

They would want to have them moved on very fast. They would have the opposite to the EU or East European grouping, because they would want to put a four and a half year old in with the five and a half year olds. They seem to have some understanding that the Irish standard is not quite as good as they would like it to be. On the other hand, if you are looking for non-Europeans you would find that they haven't been to school at all as early as we start here. So they would not have had any formal training. There are differences, no doubt. (Principal A, 2010)

Principals from all five schools emphasised the importance of non-Irish background parents' participation.

Now they don't always come, it depends on their level of English as well, as to how confident they are in the language. (Principal A, 2010)

If you trust then you must accept trust and give it back. Now for different reasons, people, maybe through shyness or for feelings of personal inadequacy, they may not come. (Principal B, 2010)

Conclusion

This paper has introduced a number of emerging aspects as to how Chinese children integrate into the Irish school system, it is envisaged that further research on how to ease the difficulties of Chinese children in the Irish primary school will be carried out in the future. Overall it is hoped that by engaging with this research process, it can ease the

integration of Chinese children into Irish primary schools, and benefit the Irish Department of Education through providing evidence of current practice in relation to integration into Irish primary schools and a holistic approach to the identification of best practice through qualitative dialogue with the Irish Community.

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