

Comparative research on the syllabi of child development courses in early childhood teacher education programs

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The current study adopted a case study design with mixed methods to examine the multiple features in child development course syllabi in early childhood teacher education programs in two countries, China and the US. This study provided insights into the twenty syllabi through document review and questionnaires. Twenty-six participants, viewed as “cultural outsiders”, were recruited in this study: thirteen from institutions in the US and thirteen from Chinese institutions. Results showed that the syllabi from the US universities could be considered “broad” learning and the syllabi from China as “deep” learning. The Chinese universities in the study focused more on helping students understand child development knowledge, whereas US universities emphasized helping teacher candidates apply the knowledge of child development in practice. Comparatively, US universities concentrated more on critical thinking and cultural perspectives.

Keywords: child development, syllabus, early childhood teacher education, cultural outsiders

INTRODUCTION

The discipline of child development is fundamental for early childhood teacher education programs as it provides teacher candidates with an essential knowledge base (Buettner et al., 2016; Horm et al., 2013; Katz, 1996; Stott & Bowman, 1996). It is believed that by learning child development theories, teacher candidates can gain a critical understanding of children’s developmental characteristics within a given framework. That understanding enables them to assess developmental milestones, make appropriate decisions to interact with children, and construct developmentally appropriate curriculum and learning activities (Buettner, et al., 2016). The position of child development knowledge in teacher education programs, however, faces criticism from teacher educators and other experts. One criticism is that normative developmental psychology had largely ignored the impact of social, economic, cultural, and political forces (Goffin, 1996; Lee & Johnson, 2007; Molitor, 2018). Researchers stressed that

diverse cultural expectations and preferences should be the basis of the link between child development knowledge and teacher preparation (Dixon, 2001; Katz, 1996; Molitor, 2018). Another criticism has to do with the disconnect between the child development course and early curriculum and instruction (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010); a particular shortcoming being that in some early childhood teacher preparation programs child development courses ignore a strong image of early childhood curriculum (He, 2010; Isenberg, 2000). What's more, Jiang (2014) notes that current child development courses do not include the latest findings from research in child development science.

These multiple criticisms of child development knowledge have significantly weakened its use as a determining directional guide for practice in early childhood care and education (Goffin, 1996). The Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council (2015), however, stated that scientific work on child development should be foundational to high-quality instruction in the field of early childhood education because "erasing it would seem to leave us in a mindless limbo in which everything is relative and nothing matters" (Lubeck 1996, p. 158). A survey by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2010) showed that the lack of exposure of teachers to child development science knowledge had a negative impact on the children they teach, with even a single course in child development being insufficient in early childhood teacher education. Hence, some scholars agree that knowledge of child development is foundational in the curricula of early childhood teacher preparation programs (Buettner et al. 2016; Child Care Aware of America 2012; 2013; Dixon, 2001; Institute of Medicine & the National Research Council, 2015; Katz, 1996).

Both the US and China have taken knowledge of child development as a core knowledgebase to the curricula of early teacher preparation programs. This recognition is reflected in *the Standards for Initial Early Childhood Professional Preparation Programs* issued by the National Associate for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2010) and *the Child Development Associate Credential (CDA)* by the Council for Professional Recognition (CPR) in the US, and *Teacher Education Curriculum Standards & Standards for Early Childhood Professionals* issued by China Ministry of Education in 2011. These standards emphasized that today's early childhood teachers are required to master and use the knowledge of child development in their classroom practice.

A syllabus of a child development course is the first document providing information on how the course would be taught to teacher candidates. Essentially, a syllabus is a curriculum document outlining key structural elements of the course and explaining how the course has been designed by the instructor to facilitate learning to achieve the course goals (Habaneck, 2005; Palmer et al., 2016). Palmer, Wheeler, and Aneece (2016) identified two different types of syllabi: content-focused syllabi and learning-focused syllabi. Parkes and Harris (2002) proposed three purposes of a syllabus: (1) a contract between students and instructor or university; (2) a permanent record about the course and the instructor; and (3) a learning tool for students. McDonald and colleagues (2010) conducted a survey and found that students used syllabi in various ways, such as a reference tool, time management tool, study tool, and documentation tool. Highly effective syllabi are characterized by such features as information, facilitating teaching and learning, rationales for course objectives and assignments to get students and

faculty working together (Slattery & Carlson, 2005). Each of these findings has implications for designing a syllabus, from its contractual and permanent document functions, to being a learning aid.

It is fair to say, however, that we found very limited research examining the syllabi of child development courses in the US and China. The purpose of this study was to reveal the diverse features in the syllabi of child development courses in current bachelor early childhood teacher preparation programs in these countries, based on the research questions: (1) What are the similarities and differences between the syllabi of child development course from two countries? (2) How do the “cultural outsiders” perceive the syllabi from two countries?

In this study, a participant is considered a “cultural outsider” if he/she is not familiar with the cultures in which certain educational activities are commonly practiced. For example, in the current study, cultural outsiders referred to participants from the US who do not know much or know little about the Chinese cultures in which the educational activities are contextualized; and vice versa, referring to Chinese participants who are not familiar with why aspects of the US educational system or some of its main instructional practices, including its curriculum design, are different from those known to them. It is believed that cultural outsiders may have different values, beliefs, and knowledge from their counterparts (Suwankhong & Liamputtong, 2015). These differences are more a product of cultural differences than individual instructors’ educational preferences. As a result, the authors of this article believe it is important and significant to find out what cultural outsiders think of the differences they perceive in the syllabi they are assigned to review from a cultural lens.

METHOD

Participants

Participants in this study included:

1. Six teacher educators; three were teaching in the Department of Early Childhood Education at universities in China and three in the US.
2. Ten novice teachers; five graduated from universities in China and five from universities in the US. Each teacher held a teaching certificate within one to three years’ experience teaching in early childhood education settings.
3. Ten senior students, five were studying in universities in China and five in universities in the US, all majoring in early childhood education.

All participants were early childhood education professionals and served as “cultural outsiders”. That is, they reviewed a syllabus of a culture different from their own. Participation in the study was voluntary and included those most likely to be interested in the study's purpose (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Participants were assigned numbers as A1–A13 representing US participants, and C1–C13 representing Chinese participants.

This study received Institutional Review Board approval. All participants signed and returned their consent forms. Participants were free to leave the study at any time for any reason.

Case study design

This study used child development course syllabi as source materials to compare child development courses in China and the US, acknowledging that syllabi are the first opportunity faculty have to demonstrate their values and beliefs about a course (Fuentes et al., 2021; Parkes & Harris, 2002) and the teaching content and learning activities for the course (Fuentes et al., 2021; Madson et al., 2004). In this study, syllabi provided an invitation for the researchers and cultural outsiders to be involved in an ongoing dialogue between the text and their own pre-understandings (Gadamer, 1989; Robinson & Kerr, 2015).

Child development course syllabi were requested from ten universities offering bachelors degree in early childhood teacher education programs in China, and ten universities in the US. Twenty syllabi were selected using two procedures: (1) directly emailing instructors who taught child development courses; (2) contacting friends who worked in the universities and asking them to contact their colleagues who taught child development courses. Syllabi secured for this study must be from separate stand-alone early childhood teacher preparation programs offering four-year baccalaureate degree.

From among the 20 syllabi, two syllabi were chosen as example syllabi. To be chosen, the syllabi needed to meet the following criteria:

- (a) have the information-rich capacity to inform the research questions
- (b) be a bachelor program in early childhood teacher education established after the start of the 21st century, and
- (c) be a bachelor program accredited by a national organization (NAEYC-recognized in the US and MOE-credited in China).

One syllabus was from a regional public university located in the east of the US and referred to as University A in this study. The second syllabus was from a regional public university located in central China and referred to as University B in this study. Both universities offered a four-year Early Childhood Education Bachelor degree. Identifiable information regarding university, department, instructor, course number, university website link was blinded. The “cultural outsiders” from China and US were sent a sample syllabus of the culture they were not part of; this was sent along with a questionnaire.

Data collection procedures

The current study adopted multiple case methods to get a deep understanding of the selected child development syllabi from two countries. In the first stage, document review on the child development course syllabi was the primary method for the researchers to identify similarities and differences among the 20 syllabi (10 from each country).

The document review protocols were developed as follows in support of data collection, storage, organization, and analysis.

- A. The objectives of the course
- B. The content of the course
- C. The instructional strategies for the course

D. The assignments for the students

In the second stage, a text-based questionnaire was adopted for cultural outsiders (i.e. novice teachers, senior students, and teacher educators) to enable interaction and interpretation of the syllabi text and distributed to 26 cultural outsider participants, 13 participants each from China and the US. In other words, two sample syllabi were reviewed by all the cultural outsiders before their participation in the questionnaire. It was assumed that the perceptions of syllabi from cultural outsiders would enrich the result. We believed that the different syllabi from other cultures would encourage a process of cultural de-familiarization instead of taken-for-granted beliefs (Tobin, 1989) so that participants may “make the familiar strange by making the strange familiar” (Alexander, 2000, p. 27).

All researchers came together to discuss and designed an open-ended questionnaire in order to gather cultural outsiders’ perceptions on the sample syllabi. The questionnaire consisted of two sections: one designed to collect data on the roles of participants and the other for data on the participants’ perceptions of the syllabi. Before the questionnaire was sent to participants, the syllabus from the US university was translated into Chinese, and the syllabus from Chinese university was translated into English. In order to ensure the translations of the syllabi were validated, we invited three colleagues who were educators and proficient in both languages (English and Chinese) to review the translations. The questionnaire was also prepared in both languages. Then, the US syllabus and questionnaire were sent to Chinese participants, and the Chinese syllabus and questionnaire were sent to the US participants.

The questionnaire comprised:

- A. What are your first impressions of the syllabus of child development? (please describe)
- B. What are your comments on the content of the course in this syllabus?
- C. What are your comments on the assignments of the course in this syllabus?
- D. What are your comments on the instructional strategies of the course in this syllabus?
- E. Imagine what you (or your student) would benefit from the course of child development if you (or your student) were a student in the class?

Data analysis and interpretation

Thematic analysis utilizing open-coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) on the data was used to generate meanings. We adopted six steps as recommended by Braun and Clark (2006) to find patterns/themes across the dataset:

1. All the researchers read the 20 syllabus documents and 26 cultural outsiders’ responses to the questionnaire.
2. Each researcher then individually color-coded similar information in the data.
3. Each researcher collated the codes for potential themes.
4. The researchers came together to discuss and organize the data into categories for comparison and contrast.
5. The researchers then discussed similarities and differences in categories to refine and define themes.
6. The final themes were provided with an in-depth description in order to generate a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena in the study.

In order to ensure validity, a few strategies were employed in this study including (a) all the syllabi were coded by all the researchers, (b) peer review of the analysis of the data, and (c) selecting some participants' review of the draft report (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Yin, 2003, 2014).

RESULTS

The results of this study were based on analysis of 20 syllabi and responses from 26 participants. While preparing for the report of the data result, the researchers organized the themes and, accordingly, the results are here presented in three sections: (1) Instruction for learning versus instruction for teaching, (2) "Broad" learning versus "deep" learning, (3) Cultural perspective, critical thinking, understanding/application of knowledge

Instruction for learning versus instruction for teaching

All the US child development course syllabi (100%, n=10) provided detailed and clear requirements, rules, class schedule, and criteria conducive to students' understanding of what they were expected to do for this course.

Most of Chinese participants (77%, n=10) were impressed with the very detailed instructions, clear and strict rules, and explicit deadlines for each assignment in the syllabus and believed "that would enable students to become responsible for their learning and keep students on the track of the course" (C5). One Chinese senior student explained, "that information guided students to develop autonomous learning through task-based instruction emphasizing the ability to write and think critically rather than directly teaching" (C12). "It was believed that students could better master knowledge of this course if they followed the syllabus and completed all the tasks" (C9).

On the contrary, only 10% of the Chinese child development course syllabi (n=1) provided detailed directions for the assignments. None of the syllabi presented criteria for grading and project schedule. However, all the syllabi (n=10) provided explicit objectives and very detailed content for each topic with specific key points. The syllabi also marked the instructional strategies of lectures and practices with specific content and hours.

"Broad" learning versus "deep" learning

As for the content of the course, all syllabi (n=20) covered overall aspects of child development, including physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development in addition to theories of child development and research methods in child development. The content of the course in the syllabi, however, demonstrated two different learning orientations. The syllabi from the US universities featured "broad" learning, and syllabi from Chinese universities featured with "deep" learning. "Deep" learning, otherwise known as intensive learning, refers to a course design which concentrates on students acquiring a deep understanding of concepts closely related to the course. This design is characterized by the inclusion of many related theories to help students develop a solid concept map.

For example, the example child development syllabus (chosen in stage two of the study) from the US discussed developmental issues from pregnancy and prenatal development, childbirth and the neonate, postnatal period, first three years, early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence, (i.e. from conception to adolescence) and focused on the physical, cognitive, and psychosocial aspects of development. Several topics included in the course were heredity, pregnancy, infertility, childbirth, neonate, parenting styles, attachment, gender roles, theories of learning, intelligence testing, socioeconomic status, and cultural differences in addition to research methods.

Thus, the US university syllabi featured “broad” learning covering a wide range of content completed in one semester (3 credit hours out of 120 credits). As one Chinese participant commented, “the content involved a broader age spectrum of child development from conception to adolescence focusing on the physical, cognitive, social and emotional aspects of development which contributed to students’ understanding of developmental issues, but the targeted content at early childhood development was very limited which should be key for early teachers” (C5).

All the Chinese syllabi (100%, n=10) focused the course topics on psychological development of neonate, infant, toddlers, and early childhood (i.e. birth to six year old), including sensory, memory, thinking, language, imagination, emotion and feelings, will, attention, personality and social development. Included also, were discussions of theories and research methods. As one US participant said, “It is a very in-depth study of a child’s development which leads nicely to knowing how to teach a child at any development stage” (A3). Another US participant commented, “The contents help the student learn about the whole child and will help teachers tremendously to understand when, why, what, how kids do, say, cry, scream” (A2). Yet another US participant highlighted particularly impressive topics in the syllabus, such as imagination development, thinking development, memory development, will development, personality development, which were great attributes to early teachers’ professional knowledge. In addition, the participant commented that “research and experiment projects are very straightforward” (A9). As a participant said, “From a student’s perspective, I would be quite excited about this course and engaging in in-depth learning” (A7). But another participant explained that “students would just be overwhelmed by the amount of work” (A10). In a sense, the syllabi from Chinese universities were featured with “deep” learning. Among ten syllabi, one syllabus (10%, n=1) marked the course as 5 credit hours (out of 150 credits) through first two semesters; three syllabi (30%, n=3) indicated as 4 credit hours (out of 130 credits) in second semester; six syllabi (60%, n=6) have 3 credit hours (out of 120 credits) within second semester.

Cultural perspectives, critical thinking, and understanding/application of knowledge

The syllabi demonstrated that universities emphasized different abilities they wanted students to achieve, such as cultural awareness, critical thinking, and understanding/application of knowledge.

Among 20 syllabi, only one syllabus (5%, n=1) identified diversity studies in the objectives; 15% syllabi (n=3) from universities in the US and 5% syllabi (n=1) from universities in China mentioned cultural perspectives in their one or two assignments.

For instance, students were expected to observe children from different cultural backgrounds in a syllabus from the US and “children in minority areas” appeared in one of Chinese syllabi.

More syllabi (n=7) from the universities in the US stressed critical thinking in assignments and one syllabus stated that showing critical thinking in papers was a very important criterion for the highest quality of the assignments. And the key aspects to “critical thinking” were listed in the syllabus as a guidance for students to follow. Most of the Chinese participants (92%, n=12) appreciated that the assignments in the syllabus from University A connected theories and practice, emphasizing critical thinking. The researchers believed Chinese universities valued critical thinking in higher education as well, but it didn’t appear in the syllabi selected for this study.

All syllabi from both countries showed that they valued child development knowledge in practice. Based on the sample syllabi (stage two in this study), the Chinese syllabus emphasized how to help students understand knowledge of child development in real life situations through experiments and practices in the major assignments, which included Piaget's series of experimental studies of conservation, and observation and testing of a child’s attention level. Some US participants (69%, n=9) highly valued the practice activities coupled with each concept, which were engaging and realistic ways to help students fully learn about all the concepts being taught, and “experiments were very hands-on” (A11).

US University A tried to encourage students to practice applying the knowledge of child development. For instance, in the syllabus of University A, one of the projects was to design a public service campaign to bring about a positive change in families or for children in the community. Additionally, University A had students take weekly readings and weekly quizzes to absorb child development knowledge.

DISCUSSION

Our findings showed that the syllabi from the US universities can be categorized as encouraging “broad” learning and the syllabi from China can be categorized as encouraging “deep” learning. While the researchers acknowledge the need for further studies to expand the discussion of how cultural differences led to the findings in this study, there are indications of causes from other cross-cultural studies of college student learning (You & Jia, 2008). In addition, one explanation for the differences found in this study may be the fact that child development courses in the US are taught by faculty from the Department of Psychology, while in China they are taught by professors from the Department of Early Childhood Education. Therefore, the child development courses in Chinese universities focused more on birth to six-year-olds, while in the US the focus was on conception through to adolescence.

As for the content of the course, all syllabi, whether from the US or China, covered overall aspects of child development, including physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development in addition to theories of child development and research methods in child development. Nevertheless, Pan and Luan’s (2011) research finds that the Chinese syllabus focused on the solidity of the knowledge body; while Western countries attach an importance to connection of the child development knowledge with

the society. Our finding showed that child development course syllabi in the US also concentrated the content on the systematicness of the knowledge body. In other words, the American syllabi focused on the fluidity of the knowledge body on child development.

One interesting finding in this study was that all syllabi included “practice” as an important learning strategy. Directly working with children may allow students to experience firsthand how children learn and how children interact with one another. This experience helps teacher candidates combine an understanding of the characteristics of child development with its application in their classroom instruction (Beisly & Lake, 2021). Ragpot’s (2020) research demonstrated that students gained in-depth learning of child development during their longitudinal pairing with an individual child and that assigned observation activities had taught them to recognize and support nuanced differences in a child’s learning. The syllabi from the two countries considered in this study had different ways of including practice. The Chinese syllabi helped students deeply understand child development knowledge through practice. This finding supports You and Jia’s (2008) contention that Chinese students were more interested in understanding knowledge and had an intrinsic desire for knowledge than US students. Whereas US syllabi placed an emphasis on the application of theories and the knowledge of child development in real-world settings. NCATE (2010) reported that, in the US, teacher candidates must not only be given time to understand child development knowledge but must also be taught and allowed the time to apply this knowledge in schools and classrooms; and coursework in child development must be integrated with ongoing opportunities to experience this principle firsthand.

In examining assignment topics in the syllabi, the researchers were able to identify those requiring critical thinking. Most US syllabi highlighted critical thinking as a purpose of higher education (Ennis, 2018; Erikson & Erikson, 2019) because critical thinking is essential to demonstrating subject-matter knowledge (Ennis, 2018). The assumption in the US syllabi is that the assignments could demonstrate high-quality critical thinking in an understanding of child development.

Knowing the children culturally is as important as knowing the content being taught (NICHD, 2007). Surprisingly, though multicultural perspective is highly valued in the field of education in the US, not all syllabi had it as an emphasis. This means that some universities in the US and most universities in China subscribed to a universal child and a scientific practice when they discuss child development. Students, therefore, would fail to see child development knowledge as a cultural construction (Lubeck, 1996); they would note labels, such as “egocentric,” “not ready,” “at risk”, rather than children (Wilson, 1994). Based on what the data showed from the study, the authors tend to agree with other colleagues in that it is imperative that diverse cultural expectations and preferences should be the basis of the link between child development knowledge and early childhood teacher education (Katz, 1996; Lee & Johnson, 2007). Fuentes and colleagues (2021) encouraged faculty to include a diversity statement in the syllabus.

Our findings revealed that the US syllabi of the child development course were presented as a contract between the students and the instructor or university as well as a learning tool for students (Parkes & Harris, 2002). So, the syllabus was learner-centered for the benefit of the instructor and students in teaching and learning (Richmond et al., 2019). The Chinese syllabi of child development courses was an instruction for teaching rather than serving as students’ learning. The researchers noticed that “syllabus” means

an outline and summary of topics to be covered in a course in Chinese universities. Hence, the syllabus was seen as a permanent record about the course and the instructor (Parkes & Harris, 2002).

LIMITATION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

It should be pointed out here that this study is unique in adopting a “cultural outsider” to explain the text of the syllabi from two different perspectives inherently influenced by the cultures. Contrary to many other studies, which generate explanations from the authors’ perspectives, this study invited Chinese participants to review the syllabus from the US universities and US participants to review the syllabus from Chinese universities. We believe people from different cultures would generate diverse opinions and increase the validity of the comparative study results. Although we believe the study makes a valuable contribution to both methodology and study topic, we recognize a number of limitations.

The first limitation is that our study only focused on syllabi documents. Though the syllabi can set the tone for classroom environment (Fuentes et al., 2021), they are subject to change throughout the semester (Barrett et al., 2015). Therefore, it might be necessary to probe more deeply into the course-design process in order to gain a better understanding of the courses offered in different cultures by interviewing the professors who designed the syllabi and taught the child development course. It might also be interesting to investigate the teaching styles in both countries via classroom observation.

The second limitation is related to the sample. This study included a small sample size with ten syllabi from each country and just one syllabus each was provided for “cultural outsiders” to review. The findings could not be generalized into all child development courses in the two countries. This study might have shown a small part of the picture in child development courses. In order to obtain more powerful investigation into the significant cross-culture differences in child development courses, future studies may consider a large sample of syllabi of child development courses from both countries or increase the number of countries included in the study.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the discussions, we came to a conclusion that the syllabi from both countries shared similar pedagogical methods of lectures and classroom discussions to help students better understand child development, but there was a significant difference in terms of learning methods and learning objectives. The results may inspire teacher educators to reassess the relationship between child development knowledge and early childhood teacher preparation in order to develop a more comprehensive child development course with intercultural sensitivities for future teachers and children who are living in ever-changing societies.

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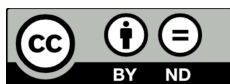
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