



# Chinese Student Perceptions of Early Education in the United States

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*“I think the most important thing I learned from this trip is that we should give more respect and freedom to children. Children have their own thoughts—that’s very wonderful and special”*

*—ECNU visiting student*

## Background

In 2012, the University of Nebraska (UNL) Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies created an exchange program with East China Normal University (ECNU) to familiarize students at both universities with early learning and care in the United States and China.

Study abroad experiences, such as the exchange between UNL and ECNU, can have a powerful impact on facilitating college students’ perceptions of cross-cultural pedagogy and teaching practices (e.g. Brindley et al., 2009).

Benefits students receive from international study abroad experiences include opportunities to: (a) gain academic ability, (b) establish interpersonal relationships, (c) explore personal inner growth, and (d) broaden their understanding of pedagogical approaches from a multicultural lens (e.g. Zhao et al., 2009).

To expand upon the extant literature, we used a qualitative analysis to examine ECNU students’ perceptions of early childhood education in the United States before and after a study abroad experience.

## Purpose of Current Study

The purpose of the study is to **identify what ECNU students attended to** during observations and interactions that occurred during the study abroad exchange and **generate common themes**, which describe visiting students’ **perceptions of cross-cultural pedagogical approaches**.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 18 Chinese undergraduate and graduate ECNU students (1 male) who applied the exchange program in the fall of 2017.

### Data collection

Open-ended survey responses were used to examine ECNU students’ perceptions of early childhood pedagogy in the United States before and after a study abroad experience.

### Data analysis

Open and axial coding was used to categorize 230 total references (127 pre, 103 post), note relations among codes, and identify common themes. Coding schemes were determined among 4 coders, with 100% agreement. This analysis revealed **five main themes** in the ECNU students’ perceptions of early education in the United States related to: **(a) culture, (b) openness, (c) ratio, (d) play, and (e) exploration**.

Themes	# of references	Pre-Survey Response	Post-Survey Response
<b>Culture</b>	Pre: 31 (24.4%) Post: 7 (6.8%)	“American Culture is open and contains many kinds of culture. Chinese culture is more traditional.”	“Chinese culture has a long history about 5000 years, but American culture is multicultural.”
		“American culture: individualism, independent children open. Chinese culture: collectivism, dependent children, not open.”	“American culture is more free and comprehensive. While Chinese culture is more serious and traditional.”
<b>Openness</b>	Pre: 58 (45.7%) Post: 39 (37.9%)	“More open, more flexible, more communication between teachers and students, and maybe teacher could respect students ideas.”	“American is more free, emphasis on equality.” “They give more freedom to kids.”
		“Students may have more changes to share their ideas in class instead of sitting there and just listening.”	“The teaching is individual and flexible and the learning is based on the students’ interests and initiative.”
<b>Ratio</b>	Pre: 1 (.7%) Post: 6 (5.8%)	“Maybe the class is smaller than Chinese class.”	“As for them number of teachers and students, American schools have more teachers and less students.”
<b>Play</b>	Pre: 30 (23.6%) Post: 39 (37.9%)	“They may have more sports time.”	“They have more chance to get close to nature, no matter it is cold or windy.”
		“Play! (music, drawing, sports is better than TV shows and computer games.)”	“An environment which is more close to nature that can help children have a better learning experience”
<b>Exploration</b>	Pre: 7 (5.5%) Post: 12 (11.7%)	“More critical thinking.”	“They focus on the ability of exploration by kids rather than tell them directly.”
		“...Encourage students to chat and introduce questions.” “They solve problems by themselves.”	“Teachers are more like doing the guiding part instead of telling them what to do, they help students to explore by themselves. Besides, they encourage students to have their own ideas.”

## Discussion

ECNU students most often referred to **“openness”** and **“play”** in both the pre and post-survey. **“Openness”** was consistently discussed in conjunction with terms such as freedom, choice, flexibility, and open communication when describing pedagogical practices in the United States before and after the program experiences.

References related to **“openness”** and **“culture”** dominated the ECNU students’ pre-survey responses. However, the decrease in post-survey responses relating to **“openness”** and **“culture”** may be a result of their attention being more toward other novel areas such as **play, exploration, and student-teacher ratios**. The increase in the number of general statements related to these areas in the post-survey, suggested that these areas were possibly more unexpected, capturing the ECNU students’ attention in the observations and exchange experiences.

There were marked differences in how the ECNU group attended to **play**, and increased pre/post-responses related to this theme. Initially the exchange group expected to see more sports time and various games, but post-survey references to **play** emphasized nature and outdoor activities. Perceptions of how and where children play in the United States seemed to change based on student experiences in the exchange program.

ECNU students’ attention focused more on **exploration** and **ratio** in the post survey. Initially one student responded that she expected the class sizes to be smaller, but several students in the post survey attended to the student-teacher **ratio** and recognized “more teachers and less students”. With respect to **exploration**, prior to the exchange experience the ECNU group expected to see more critical thinking in American classrooms. After experiences in child care centers and schools, the ECNU group emphasized an observed focus on exploration, problem solving, and teachers facilitating—or guiding—learning, over direct instruction.

## Implications

The cultural exchange provided opportunities to expand perceptions of pedagogy in early education and care.

Interactions and observations during the exchange program encouraged more precise comparisons between early education practices in China and the United States.

Continued collaborations between universities can generate new ideas to refine work with young children and prospective teachers.

## Limitations

Exchange students only visited selected schools in Lincoln, which influenced their perceptions.

Several selected centers and experiences emphasized nature and outdoor learning.

Lincoln, NE is designated as a “refugee-friendly” city, and is more diverse than rural areas of Nebraska.