National context and teacher characteristics: Exploring the critical non-cognitive attributes of novice teachers in four countries

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HIGHLIGHTS
- Teachers’ non-cognitive attributes include empathy, organization, and resilience.
- Most attributes are similarly endorsed in England, Finland, Malawi, and Oman.
- Cultural context influences some non-cognitive attributes.
- Community-focused attributes are critical in more collectivist settings.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article was to examine what education professionals in four countries (England, Finland, Malawi, and Oman) deemed as the critical (i.e., most important for effective teaching) non-cognitive attributes of novice teachers. Results from an iterative comparative case study showed that participants consistently judged certain attributes of novice teachers as critical, i.e., empathy, organization, and resilience. However, there was also differential importance placed on teachers’ relationships with the community, reflecting theorized cultural differences. The findings provide new insight into how national and cultural context are associated with the perceptions of the critical non-cognitive attributes of effective teachers.

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1. Introduction

It is clear that effective teachers across the world share many of the same practices: they interact with students, share ideas and knowledge, and guide student learning. However, the influence of national and cultural context on the practices and attributes of teachers perceived as ‘effective’ is less clear. This lack of clarity may be due to the fact that most of the research on teacher effectiveness has been conducted in single, usually Western, settings (e.g., Bastian, Henry, Pan, & Lys, 2016; Pianta & Kerr, 2015; Rockoff, Jacob, Kane, & Staiger, 2011). Although research shows that some teaching practices vary across countries (e.g., McIntyre, Mainhard, & Klassen, 2017; Hofstede, 1986; Stigler, Gallimore, & Hiebert, 2000), less is known about cross-national variations in critical non-cognitive attributes (i.e., inter- and intra-personal attributes such as motivation, personality, and beliefs) associated with teaching. Examining the universality of non-cognitive attributes has been deemed “an important question needing attention” by researchers in organizational psychology (Steiner, 2012, p. 762), and is also a crucial question in education (Meng & Muñoz, 2016).

The purpose of this article is to examine how experienced teachers and teacher educators in four culturally contrasting countries—England, Finland, Malawi, and Oman—judge the importance of non-cognitive attributes associated with novice teacher effectiveness. By conducting the research in multiple settings that are diverse in a wide range of ways, including cultural
dimensions, geographical region, educational attainment, economic status, and national age distribution (a marker of relative demands on an education system), we offer readers insight into the universality of non-cognitive attributes associated with effective teaching.

1.1. Teachers' cognitive and non-cognitive attributes

For the purpose of this article, we use the term cognitive attributes to refer to the characteristics associated with academic skills, subject-area knowledge, and reasoning ability, typically assessed by measures of educational achievement and capacity (e.g., GPA, secondary school and university transcripts, SAT/GRE scores). Cognitive attributes have long been associated with workplace behaviors and outcomes (e.g., Murphy, 2012), including teachers’ classroom practices (Harris & Rutledge, 2010), but they do not act alone in influencing outcomes. In the cognitive activation (CDACTIV) model of teacher effectiveness (Kunter, Kleikmann, Klusmann, & Richter, 2013), cognitive attributes interact with environmental factors such as the availability of professional support, and also with non-cognitive attributes—‘soft’ personal characteristics such as beliefs, inter-personal skills, motivation, attitudes, dispositions, and personality—to influence teachers’ professional practices and subsequent student outcomes.

Teachers’ non-cognitive attributes represent a variety of constructs that have been linked to teacher effectiveness (Bastian, McCord, Marks, & Carpenter, 2016). For example, teachers’ self-efficacy and personality show significant associations with external measures of effectiveness (Klassen & Tze, 2014). Teachers’ personality shows significant associations with student evaluations of teaching in university (Kim & MacCann, 2017) and in secondary school (Kim, Dar-Nimrod & MacCann, 2017). Teachers’ epistemological beliefs influence teaching behaviors in primary and secondary school (Fives & Buehl, 2014; Susu & Gray, 2012). However, teachers’ non-cognitive attributes may not be endorsed in the same way across contexts. The emic-etic framework from cultural psychology describes how non-cognitive attributes might be understood differently across countries and cultures. Emic attributes refer to attributes that may be uniquely important in a particular setting, whereas etic attributes are those that apply more broadly across settings. National and cultural differences may play a role in the perceptions of effective teaching (Meng & Munoz, 2016), but little is known about how national context and shared cultural beliefs influence the characteristics that are most valued in novice teachers.

1.2. How does national and cultural context influence teachers’ beliefs and practices?

Culture refers to the shared beliefs, goals, and values that serve as trans-situational guiding principles in people’s lives and that influence how people interpret relationships, expectations, duties, and activities (Schwartz, 1994). Differences in shared cultural values emerge between geopolitical entities (e.g., countries or regions within countries) as people interact with their environment over time (Guay, 2016; Kim & Park, 2006). ‘Nation’ (or ‘country’) is not synonymous with culture: countries and regions are not culturally homogeneous, and much variation exists between people within countries (Schwartz, 2014). However, particular cultural beliefs vary predictably across countries, and are more strongly linked to one’s country than to religion, employer, or personality (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Markus, 2016).

Previous research has shown that national context plays a role in teachers’ non-cognitive attributes such as beliefs, personality, commitment, motivation, and emotions about teaching (Klassen, Usher, & Bong, 2010; Cohen, 2007), and influences teachers’ interpretations of successful teaching and learning behaviors (Jiang, 2016). Hofstede (1986, 2001) proposed that national context influences a range of teacher and teaching factors, including the social position of teachers, the ways that curriculum is understood and followed, how teachers process information and acquire and use new concepts, and how teachers and students interact with each other. Hofstede’s proposed cultural dimensions—individualism/collectivism, power distance, masculinity/femininity, and uncertainty avoidance—provide a description of how specific aspects of widely held cultural beliefs and practices influence the way that teachers think and act in the classroom in different settings. These cultural dimensions are hypothesized to influence teachers’ cognitive processes (i.e., how they interpret new information), their social processes (e.g., how they interact with peers and students), and their motivational processes (e.g., the reasons underlying their behaviors) (Klassen et al., 2010; Hofstede, 1986; Jiang, 2016).

If education is, at its essence, about relationships (e.g., Cornelius-White, 2007), then the dimensions of individualism/collectivism (strength of the ties that people perceive within an in-group) and power distance (level of societal acceptance of social hierarchy) play an important role in what we consider to be the most important non-cognitive attributes of novice teachers. The four countries in this study show variation on these two dimensions. England, as part of the UK, shows relatively high individualism, whereas Finland, Malawi, and Oman show relatively low levels of individualism (Hofstede, 2001). In terms of power distance, England and Finland show relatively low power distance, whereas Malawi and Oman show relatively high levels (Hofstede, 2001). Societal expectations and norms about how individuals and groups interact may influence perceptions of teachers’ expected behaviors in and outside of the classroom.

1.2.1. Model of culture and teaching

In Fig. 1, we present a model of the interactions among cultural context, national educational environment, non-cognitive attributes, and teaching behaviors. The model proposes that shared cultural beliefs within a country shape perceptions about which teachers’ attributes are viewed as important by providing social guidelines—spoken and unspoken—about expected teacher behaviors. In a school setting, shared beliefs about cultural dimensions such as collectivism and power distance can play a role in influencing how teachers perform their job. In settings with higher levels of collectivism, a teacher’s need for autonomy over decisions about teaching practices may be less important than fulfilling a sense of duty fostered by the need to maintain positive relationships with colleagues (King & McInerney, 2016). In more individualist settings, a teacher may be encouraged to make idiosyncratic teaching decisions based on personal study and self-reflection. Teaching practices are influenced by culture through shared understanding of social norms and the weight given to considerations of collective versus individual expectations (Gelfand et al., 2011).

Cultural context also influences the broader educational environment, where national educational standards and expectations are influenced by a country’s shared understanding of the relative importance of particular educational practices. Meng and Munoz (2016) found that Chinese and American teachers perceived effective teaching differently, with Chinese expectations regarding instructional approaches and evaluation influenced by shared beliefs rooted in Confucianism. The educational environment simultaneously influences teachers’ non-cognitive attributes (e.g., motivation to teach in certain ways) and teaching behaviors, with teachers choosing teaching approaches that serve a country’s educational expectations while simultaneously meeting the expectations of culturally appropriate behaviors (Chia, 2015). Cultural context plays a key role in influencing the educational
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