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# The Intersection of Community, Culture and Learning Processes within the Setting of a Chinese Complementary School

THEO CREBER

**ABSTRACT** This article is based on a research assignment submitted for the PGCE Course at Goldsmiths College, University of London. It looks at a Chinese community school and considers the experiences of participating families and explores how the ethos and purpose of the school relate to the practices, activities and representations that occur within its communal space. Since writing this article the school has successfully relocated to new premises at another East London secondary school.

## **Introduction**

As Lytra and Martin (2010, p. xxi) explain, 'community' or 'complementary' language schools are: 'multilingual and multiliterate sites which provide a safe space outside mainstream schools for the maintenance and transformation of young people's community language and cultures'. I first encountered the Chinese complementary school based at an East London secondary school on a Saturday during my PGCE placement at the school. Walking through the atrium of the new school building, I was struck by the atmosphere and spectacle generated by the interactions and activities occurring within the space. I was interested in how different this was to my experience of the same space during the week when inhabited by the mainstream school. My research will focus on how the Chinese complementary school creates a positive environment in which students come to learn and study. Moreover through this case-study analysis I will show how a space is created within the school for the mutually beneficial intersection of community and learning processes, with the aim of contributing to debates around the sociocultural and pedagogical aspects of complementary schools.

### Critical Contexts

Priest argues that 'community workers should not only *work* with communities but should *create* them through joint action' (2010, p. 21). This is an important function of complementary schools. A number of researchers have pointed to the role played by complementary schools in the production (and reproduction) of culture and creation of community, both generally and in respect to Chinese schools specifically. Prokopiou & Cline (2010, p. 78) argue that 'community schools act to foster a purposeful cultural closeness between students and their minority communities'. Wei & Wu (2010, p. 33) point to the 'strong cultural flavour' of Chinese complementary schools in Britain. While Francis et al (2010, pp. 88-89) deduce that 'Chinese schools provide a valued space in which the imagined community can be tangibly experienced, hence facilitating discourses of community and belonging', I aim to explore how the conditions are created for the 'tangible experience of community' and discuss what that tangible experience looks like.

Whilst researchers have tended to reach similar conclusions with respect to the important cultural role of complementary schools, their focus differs. Prokopiou & Cline (2010), for instance, interrogate how students' identity formation within complementary schools relates to and affects their wider self-image within British society. They show that such schools provide a forum in which students can express their heritage, and improve self-efficacy and confidence to operate in British society in which they are minority citizens. They argue that community schools 'can play a crucial role in helping ethnic minority young people's negotiation of their multiple identities across various sociocultural contexts' (p. 83). They look at the comparison between a Pakistani and Greek community school and argue that schools are defined by the unique context of the communities they serve. They call for research to 'explore the distinctive features of the ethos of each community school and trace the roots of that ethos in the position of the community in the wider society' (p. 83). Tangentially this investigation also explores how the ethos of the school becomes manifest in its practices.

Wei & Wu (2010), on the other hand, investigate the problematic nature of the reproduction of traditional Chinese cultural values, as propagated by teachers and organisers, within Chinese complementary schools. They show how teachers and organisers can seek to transfer cultural values through their language pedagogy, identifying this as a 'socialisational teaching' (p. 34) process and the reproduction of cultural ideology. They point out that such a static or nostalgic approach to culture is particularly at odds with the contemporary realities of rapid development and societal transformation in China and also the experiences of their students, living in multicultural Britain. However, while the school that is the subject of this study practises certain traditions (such as traditional dance), it is not particularly driven by a traditionalistic ideology. In fact, as I will go on to show, 'socialisation' happens in quite a different way, where students learn about positive social behaviours in

a communal setting and can build psychological links between these positive behaviours and the process of learning.

Francis et al (2010) conducted interview-based research on students' experiences in Chinese complementary schools, focusing on identity formation. They note that, while the schools looked at tended to have a 'cultural agenda' (p. 96), this had minimal impact in how students imagined their Chinese identity. They show that while the functional aspect of learning the Chinese language was particularly important to students in terms of personal development, strengthening their Chinese identity and inter-generational communication, the *experience* of participating in the schools (rather than just the acquisition of language) was also a motivating factor. The experiences highlighted included the value attached to such schools as offering 'sanctuary from the pervasive minoritisation and exoticisation that the pupils experience in wider society (Creese et al, 2006)' (p. 96), as providing a forum for socialising with their peers and simply 'being with other Chinese' (p. 96). In my own research I investigate what it might mean to participants, being part of a larger learning and cultural event, and how this impacts on their experiences of learning, community and culture.

### **Multimodality**

Jewitt (2009, p. 1) states:

Put simply, multimodality approaches representation, communication and interaction as something more than language ... The starting point for multimodality is to extend the social interpretation of language and its meanings to the whole range of representational and communicational modes or semiotic resources for making meaning that are employed in a culture – such as image, writing, gesture, gaze, speech, posture.

I refer to this canon of research, as I am interested in how participants' experience of the complementary school is impacted by the range of sensory and modal interactions occurring around them, providing a context for their own experiences. In this respect I am moving away from a linguistic focus, concentrating instead on a wider social, experiential and representational reading of the complementary school.

In their chapter 'Investigating the Intersection of Multilingualism and Multimodality in Turkish and Gujarati Literacy Classes', Lytra et al (2010) looked at how, within the complementary school classroom, teachers and students employ a range of semiotic resources in multimodal interactions. They show that multilingual learning and literacy when seen as 'social practice situated culturally and historically in time and space rather than as neutral set of skills to be acquired' can be looked at as a 'complex web of the participants' semiotic resources' that create an 'ensemble' (p. 20).

In their chapter, Lytra et al (2010, p. 22) cite:

Bernstein's (2000) distinction between an official 'vertical discourse' and a local 'horizontal discourse'. As Luk (2008) explains, 'while "vertical discourse" takes the form of a coherent, explicit and systematically principled structure, "horizontal discourse" entails a set of strategies which are local, segmentally organised, context specific and dependent' (p. 157) and represents the users' everyday lived experiences.' (p. 127)

Their chapter examines the 'vertical discourses' where teachers and students combine multilingual and multimodal resources in an hierarchical class setting. My investigation presents a counterpoint, targeting the 'horizontal discourse'. I will 'zoom out' from the classroom, to observe the ensemble of interactions taking place in the situated space of the communal area of the school. It is here that we see the congregational aspect of the school, the formation of community and the intersection of representations shared, experienced and acted out by students, parents, teachers and organisers.

I will describe and analyse in detail the school day as it unfolds in the main congregational space of the school. Pantazi (2010, p. 120) writes of a:

notion of culture ... which stresses the role of participation as a route to understanding. In this sense, culture does not reside only in objects and representations, but also in the bodily processes of perception by which those representations come into being. Culture can be found 'in human practices, situated in peoples involvement' as people 'live culturally' rather than live in cultures' (Moll, 2000, p. 258). Thus ... forms such as dance, theatre or music are seen as the embodiment of a culture and a form through which it can be understood.

I seek to show that, as Pantazi argues of dance, theatre and music, the very participation in the school and its ritual re-enactment is the embodiment of a culture. To do this I will look at the multimodal interactions and representations that take place. Jewitt (2010, p. 26) states of multimodal discourse:

There is a need to ask questions of and through detailed description. For instance, to ask what kinds of discourses are being articulated in a context and why, and what is the social function of the representations being described. For example, to ask how the multimodal design of the English classroom shapes what school English is, what texts are included in English and how does this shape what it might mean to be a student in that classroom, and so on.

In this sense, through close analysis of the human communicative practices that take place in complementary schools, we can ask questions about what is a complementary school, how is it experienced and what does it mean to participate.

## Methodology

My research of the Chinese complementary school took place over three visits. On my first visit I observed a lesson for Level 1 students (5-6 years) in Cantonese and interviewed the current and previous head teachers. Following this initial visit, I developed my research focus. In my second visit to the school I made a detailed observation of the activities and human actions and interactions taking place in the principal communal space used by the complementary school. This observation constitutes the central body of my research. In my analysis of these descriptive vignettes I will draw upon multimodal discourse as a way of interpreting my observations. As a non-speaker of Chinese, moving away from linguistics was important and multimodality provides a framework to do so without compromising the research aims. It is important to note that while most research in this field has tended to concentrate on learner (e.g. Prokopiou & Cline, 2010), educator (e.g. Wu & Wei, 2010) and parent (e.g. Chen, 2007) as distinct foci, I am focused on the whole community and the phenomenological aspects of congregation within the school setting.

In my final visit to the school I undertook interviews with participants. Clearly, using observation as a central part of my research methodology raises questions of subjectivity, namely, how can I as an outsider elucidate what it means to participate in the school? Jewitt (2010, p. 26) points out that 'a criticism sometimes made of multimodality is that it can seem rather impressionistic in its analysis. How do you know that this gesture means this or this image means that?' I have tried to ameliorate these conflicts and pitfalls by supplementing my observational analysis with interviews to get first-hand interpretations and insights from participants. To augment my observational and interview-based research I examine the structure and organisation of the school and its umbrella charity, a Chinese association. This provides a context in that it explores some of the wider sociocultural factors that affect how the school operates and how it is experienced. This analysis provides an introduction and a backdrop to the principal body of my research.

## The Context of the School Organisation and Community

The Chinese Association, that is the umbrella organisation for the complementary school, aims to help and support people of Chinese origin to integrate into British society. It provides a variety of services to the Chinese community, including a youth club, home care services for elderly and vulnerable people, and training and employment assistance. The organisation has been running a Chinese school for over 27 years and has received awards and recognition for the quality of its service. The school gives classes, in both Cantonese and Mandarin, to over 200 students, from playgroup to adults, from Level 1 through to Level 8 (GCSE). The school charges £100 per academic year and runs on Saturdays between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. The Association fundraises to subsidise the school by hosting cultural events.

Research on Chinese community schools has pointed to the dispersed character of the Chinese community in Britain (Wu & Wei, 2010; Francis et al, 2010), described as a 'minority of minorities' (Francis et al, 2010, p. 89). This is also true of the case-study school, where families attend from a wide catchment area and often from outside the borough in which the school is based. This contrasts with the fact that the host school has an intake of approximately 85% Bangladeshi heritage students predominantly living near to the school. Families attending the Chinese school come from a variety of socioeconomic and professional backgrounds.

### **Physical and Temporal Contexts**

The Chinese complementary school inhabits the ground floor of one of the six large atria of the recently rebuilt host school, adjacent to the main entrance foyer, and lessons take place in classrooms spread around the building on the first and second floors. On the ground floor are tables and chairs in a space that during the week is used as one of two dining halls. All the classrooms face in towards the atrium, many without a separation wall between the atrium and the teaching space and balconies run around and face into the atrium on all sides. Space and physical objects are modes and important to my research focus. I am interested in the duality of how the space is transformed by the activities happening within it, affecting our perception, and how the physical environment structures the process of meaning-making and construction of the complementary school community, framing participants as social actors.

Time is also a contextual factor to consider and plays a key part in my theoretical reading of the school. For example, the school day is set within the context of its weekly recurrence. This differentiates it from the mainstream school, which could be seen as a routine activity, whereas the complementary school might be seen more in terms of an event or ritual activity. The passage of time through the school day defines the ritual event. I will put an emphasis on the chronology of the day, dividing the analysis of my field notes into three periods: arrival at the school, participation in the event and dispersal after the event.

#### *Vignette 1: arrival at the school*

At 9.30 a.m. Teacher A is setting up triangular paper signs, with a number, a class code and a Chinese character, on the tables on the ground floor of the atrium.

The first parents arrive with their children at 9.35 a.m. The parents engage in conversation with Teacher A at a small table he has set up with piles of papers, registers and forms; he hands them each a brightly coloured form.

By 9.40 a.m. a number of small groups of parents, grandparents and children are spread out around the room having quiet conversations

amongst themselves. The voice of Teacher A is loudest and echoes in the large space; his manner is that of an administrator, polite and engaging but businesslike.

By 9.45 a.m. two more teachers and the head teacher have arrived, as has the lady that runs the tuck shop, who begins to set out her brightly coloured assortment of drinks, sweets and snacks.

By 9.50 a.m. Teachers B and C are circulating the room, which is steadily filling up with families. They are spending time without hurrying around, engaging parents and children in friendly and familiar conversation. They are displaying positive and engaging body language and smiling broadly; they talk to parents and students about work but in a relaxed manner. Teacher A and the head teacher administer from the arrivals desk, greeting families as they arrive.

As the room fills with more families, happy exchanges of greeting take place, students sit down beside their friends, parents who have just arrived go and stand or sit by other parents that are their friends. The students are talking in English while their parents are conversing in Chinese. Other students are sifting through their backpacks; some conversations are over the contents of the bags – workbooks and packed lunches. There is no announcement or instruction to the assembled group, by the teachers.

At 9.55 a.m. Teacher A looks at his watch and surveys the room, which is almost filled.

At 10 a.m. the room begins seamlessly to empty out as students go upstairs with their teachers; some parents also go upstairs. Noise levels begin to peak during this time, as some students scamper up the steel stairs. People now overlook the crowd as they walk around the balconies, while the congregation disperses.

(Adapted from field notes)

The period of arrival is a crucial element of the experience and ritual of participating in the complementary school. While a small number of parents and guardians drop off their sons and daughters, the vast majority stay for a while to socialise. Parents and students are at ease and communicate this through a variety of modes – posture, facial expression and conversational manner. However, there are also representations of preparation for learning as students and parents study workbooks and the students are exposed to parents conversing in Chinese. We see how the spatial mode intersects and affects these social practices – the fact that everybody is together in the same space, the layout of tables, the unique timbre of multiple voices and people moving within the space, all affect how this period of time is experienced by participants. During the period that the congregation disperses the theatricality of the congregation is enhanced as students overlook the scene and wave from the balcony.

We can see that organisation of this period has been structured in a way that facilitates these transformative social processes. The semiotic resource of the carefully handmade paper signs give structure and allows the community to assemble in an orderly way without the need for organisers to direct proceedings by speaking over the crowd. Intervention is with a light touch; families are greeted and if necessary orientated on arrival by organisers, while other teachers take time to interact in a very easygoing and informal way with parents and students, displaying this through their posture, facial expression and conversation. Particularly we can say that by simply allowing such a congregation to take place, rather than having a policy of parents dropping off students, we can see that the congregational ensemble that marks the beginning of the school day is an embodiment of the ethos of the school and builds physical and psychological associations between community and learning where every participant can feel included and valued.

*Vignette 2: participation in the event*

Between 10.05 a.m. and 10.50 a.m., students are having lessons in their classrooms. However there is clearly no requirement that adults must leave at this point. A group of women, some with very young children sit and talk animatedly, throughout this period. Adjacent to them, the tuck-shop lady continues to set up her stall. Some older parents and grandparents are spread around the room in small groups engaged in quiet conversations. Teacher A and the head teacher remain present doing administration and at 10.30a.m. Teacher A collects up the signs on tables.

At 10.35 a.m. the dance teacher arrives and engages in conversation with four older women, they look at and talk about the traditional fans the instructor takes from her bag and homemade food brought in Tupperware.

At 10.45 a.m. the dance class for parents and grandparents has started on a first floor balcony area overlooking the atrium. The traditional music and the teacher's voice now echo in the space: 'One, two, three, four'.

At 10.55 a.m. Teacher B brings the first class back down to the atrium; they walk quietly past the dance class on the balcony. They settle down to eat opposite where the group of mothers are still chatting animatedly. Soon the congregation is reforming as students make their way back downstairs into the space; again there is theatricality as the space is filled, with people moving around and overlooking and waving from the balcony.

During break the noise level increases, there are many conversations and lots of bustle. A number of younger students take out their energy racing up and down one side of the atrium, others play beneath and around tables. Some students are playing handheld

computer games or cards. The tuck shop is now busy and many packaged foods are brought out of backpacks and become the subject of gestures, conversations and sharing. While there are fewer adults than during the arrival period, there are nevertheless a significant number, some of which have been helping in lessons.

At 11.15 a.m. the dance class takes a break and by 11.25 a.m. the assembly in the atrium again begins to disperse up the stairs, around the balconies and into classrooms.

Between 11.35 a.m. and midday, the dance class continues and more parents arrive, joining groups of friends at tables. Again the music and the voice of the dance teacher echo in the space: 'Five, six, seven, eight'.

(Adapted from field notes)

During the period that students have their lessons we can see that the communal space remains occupied, meaning that when the first students return for their break, the space is not empty. Psychologically this must have an important affect on students, making the large open space less intimidating and parents that are socialising in a happy and relaxed manner providing a template for their behaviour when entering the space. These first students also walk past the dance class on their way down into the atrium, where the visible participation of elderly members transmits the notion that they are valued and important within the community. Equally, by allowing parents the opportunity to stay and socialise and providing elderly members with an opportunity to participate in a holistic practice such as dance, we can see that the school values all members of the community and provides a forum and an outlet in which they can participate throughout the school day. This sense of the school and learning being for families and community is clearly communicated to students through both spatial and gestural modes – the situation of the dance class and of socialising parents and the actions they perform.

During this time we see the ebb and flow of the event as the communal space is populated, then emptied, in a free-flowing way, again without any heavy-handed interventions from organisers. The self-organising nature of this ebb and flow is more relaxed than if it was being organised by didactic communication from a single source, such as the loudspeaker or a bell, modes which are used to organise time during the week in the same space. The amelioration of stress is vital and redefines preconceptions of what school is and can be, when we compare these practices to the mainstream sector. While the space is filled we can see that there are fewer restrictions placed on students – they can play computer games, they are free to eat sweets, they duck and dive under tables and run around on the sidelines without reprimand. Some spend the time with their parents while others will spend it with their peers. All of these factors again build associations between the nourishing practices of socialising and community enjoyment and the nourishment of learning, where

one element does not take precedence, but rather co-inhabit the same psychological space.

*Vignette 3: dispersal after the event*

For a full hour between midday when the first classes finish and 1 p.m., the congregation gradually disperses. Similarly to the arrival period, there are some parents that pick up their children and leave soon after; however, a significant number stay. Again families share food, while some students are playing games and in other instances we see parents, students and teachers are talking through work that has been done in textbooks. I am drawn to a number of people of differing ages, who are simply surveying the interactions going on around them.

(Adapted from field notes)

The period that marks the end of the school day reinforces the sense that participants are here for more than learning language and the notion that the school performs a function beyond the transmission of knowledge. For approximately an hour, a large element of the congregation remains to participate in acts of socialising, sharing and recreation. The school is a hub and a forum for families to be removed from the isolation of the family home to engage in the lives of other families, share experiences and experience the atmosphere of community. Learning is seen to be a holistic venture; rather than being imposed from above and decontextualised from our social lives outside of school, it can be generated through a social forum, within which people of all ages are valued and can come together, learn and be motivated by one another.

### **Interviews**

Interviews with participants tended to corroborate my own interpretation as an outsider looking in and provided some additional insights about the experiences of participants and what they valued about the school. Nearly all the interviewees put the learning of language as a principal reason for attending the school. For example, the student I interviewed talked about how getting a GCSE in Cantonese would be beneficial to her future. However, she also identified being able to meet up and socialise with friends as being an important reason she enjoyed coming to the school. All agreed that importance could be attached to the relaxed community atmosphere, which they felt was beneficial to students' learning and that the school was an important forum for parents and grandparents.

Below is an excerpt from an interview with a parent of an eight-year-old student at the school, who is involved in assisting in lessons with the playgroup. It provides an insight into how coming to the school was not a chore, but rather something to look forward to for the whole family:

I: Is it important that parents and grandparents are involved in the school?

R: I think so because if you are coming with them and you are involved with the teaching and things, I think they are more interested to learn, because oh ... 'my mum is coming or my grandma is coming, its where we all come to learn' ... I think it makes it more enjoyable.

I: Everyone being together?

R: Yes.

I: And do you think it affects how they behave, and are they happier learning?

R: I think so yes. Because I sent all of my four daughters to this school, the older one also brings my grandson, they will say 'Oh today is Saturday we need to go' you know ... 'Oh it's Saturday we go to the Chinese school', they feel happy.

When asked about the relaxed atmosphere, that was my impression of the school, she concurred that it is important:

R: Yes, if I feel I've got friends and I know them all I feel like coming. If you don't know them or you feel a bit stressed, you don't want to come ... Immediately in your mind you are coming, because it's a friendly school and you know the teachers, know all the parents ... [students] are not just coming for learning, they meet their friends and a lot of things.

Interestingly when asked about the importance of students having a shared ethnicity, she felt that this was not so important, countering the point made by Francis et al (2010) discussed earlier in this article:

R: It's less important. If anybody comes from any country, they will be happy and learning together.

However, for another participant, a teacher that first brought her daughter to the school 25 years ago, the school was important as a forum for adults to share their diverse knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture:

R: ... you can see a lot of children coming to learn Chinese and the parents are very cooperative, whatever we need to know about the culture, they always come and discuss with us. Because obviously China is a big place ... if you are from a different village, we have different ways of doing things, even food, the manner, a lot of things.

The woman that runs the tuck shop talked about her experiences 15 years ago, when arriving in the country for the first time with her seven-month-old daughter and feeling isolated by not knowing English. She identified becoming

involved in the mother and baby swimming classes, then run by the Chinese Association, as being a crucial first step in her assimilation to a new country.

R: I first came a long time ago when my daughter was just a few months old. Before in this school they used to have a swimming club. My neighbour said: 'why don't you come to swimming?' And I said: 'sorry but I don't know where it is and I don't speak English' and she said 'don't worry I will take you with me', then I go with her. Then after my daughter is a little bit bigger she started to go to Chinese class when she was five years old and now she is in Year 9.

Corroborating observations made by Blackledge & Creese (2010, p. 6) about 'translanguaging practices' in families that speak multiple languages, she also talked about her multilingual relationship with her daughter and interestingly, how this manifests as a mutually beneficial learning relationship:

R: I speak three [languages with my daughter]: Cantonese, English and Chaozhou. She still speaks English because I want to improve my English and I speak Cantonese with her so she can improve her Cantonese.

Finally a volunteer at the school who was in England to complete the final year of her undergraduate degree emphasised the importance of education and family to the Chinese community. She talked about the competitiveness of students at the school and also corroborated my view that the school did not concentrate particularly on teaching traditional culture as part of the language teaching, going against the research conducted by Wei & Wu (2010) discussed earlier. She talked about the importance of the school and the Chinese Association as a support network for her as a new arrival and for parents to share their experiences as expatriates. She agreed with me that the positive atmosphere of the school helped students to have a positive attitude to learning; insightfully, she emphasised how important this could be:

R: I think it helps their attitude, because attitude is the most important thing, if your attitude is good then everything will be easy. I think study is just a kind of skill to be practised, if you get used to that, if you find your own way to study, you will find it easier to study, just the more you practise, the better performance you get.

## **Conclusion**

I have explored how the intersection between the enactment of community and the act of learning within the complementary school setting might positively affect the learning experience for the learner. We can see that the pedagogy practised at the school is one defined by the practice of involving all members of the community in a weekly ritual that is congregational and participatory. There is a clear link between the school's practices and the ethos of the Chinese

Association that runs the school that's role is to provide a support network for the Chinese community. We have seen that this community tends to be geographically dispersed and therefore by creating a stress-free space for the congregation of families on a weekly basis the school is also a platform in which the community is nurtured and can flourish. I have sought to propose an understanding of the community school 'event' as a phenomenological, multisensory experience, an ensemble of multimodal conditions affected by spatial environment, time, sound and the rich visual aspect of families coming together. I believe there could be great pedagogical value in understanding these conditions and taking influence from them into the mainstream sector. Future research could test the impact of various practices in the mainstream sector that encourage families and communities to play a more active role in school education. I also believe teachers and leadership in mainstream schools should be thinking about how the amelioration of stress through environmental conditions could bring about healthier and better functioning attitudes to learning. Complementary schools may point the way towards how schools can transform education from what is too often an 'us versus them' scenario into a more collaborative and holistic process.

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Correspondence: [theocreber@hotmail.com](mailto:theocreber@hotmail.com)