Teachers' ethnotheories of the 'ideal student' in five western cultures

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This paper explores teachers' ethnotheories of the 'ideal student' in five western societies: Italy, The Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and the US Quantitative and qualitative methods are used to derive culture-specific profiles of the 'ideal student' as described by kindergarten and primary school teachers in semi-structured interviews (sample n's = 12 to 21). Discriminant function analysis shows that teachers' descriptor profiles can be correctly assigned to their own cultural group in up to 94% of all cases. Qualitative analysis of the interviews suggests both shared themes (e.g. motivation, independence) and culturally specific understandings of their meaning and significance. Contrary to the prevalent focus on cognitive qualities emphasized by western educational assessment practices, teachers in all the samples talked more about the importance of social intelligence and self-regulation for success in school.

In almost all corners of today's world, children from about the age of six years onward are supposed to attend school. If one also takes into account the globalization of early childhood education, young children everywhere are leaving home each day to spend the majority of their most active time in settings designed to educate them—that is, to inculcate cognitive skills such as literacy and numeracy, considered essential for competency as members of their own societies. But that is not all—children may also attend school in order to 'learn to be members of a group' (Kitayama & Duffy, 2004, p. ?), to practice competing with peers (Whiting & Edwards, 1988), and to be inculcated with reliable work habits necessary for the maintenance of industrial and post-industrial societies (Perry, 2006). It is thus not surprising that although 'school'

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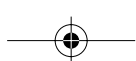
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might appear to be a straightforward concept, there is in fact wide variation across cultures in what children are really supposed to be learning there, beyond a few basic skills.

Examination of the cross-cultural evidence suggests that even presumably universal concepts such as 'intelligence', which lie at the core of what schooling is all about, vary widely across different societies. On the one hand, anthropologists have long argued that in principle, people of all cultures have essentially the same repertoire of abilities and talents, despite their many different expressions. In contrast, some psychologists have argued for the cultural specificity of intelligence as demonstrated in the cross-cultural application of tasks or tests. As Wang *et al.*, (2004) state,

> We suggest that there are no such things as invariant, core competencies universal to every human child. Instead, cognitive competence is relevant to specific cultures, to the social and physical contexts in which the child participates in organized activities, and to the cultural and societal demands as perceived by the child him—or herself. (p. 227)

Strong contrasts have been found between the US emphasis on analytical intelligence and other (especially non-western) cultures' recognition that the intelligent child has more than just good cognitive skills. In general, studies in other cultures have identified social and interpersonal aspects of intelligence. For example, Serpell's research on children's development and schooling among the Chewa people of Zambia (Serpell, 1993) has highlighted the local importance of several culturally valued traits related to intelligence. He quotes a Chewa colleague:

> What leads us to call a person *wanzelu* [intelligent]? Among the A-Chewa a child with *nzelu* is a child who is clever (*-chenjela*), trustworthy (*-khulupilika*), who listens, understands, and obeys (*-mvela*), who is prompt (*-changu*), and who cooperates (*-mvana ndi anzake*) (Serpell, 1993, p. 32)

Harkness and Super (1992) found a similar pattern in a Kipsigis community of western Kenya. They asked adult members of the community to make similarity judgements on triads of 12 words and phrases that were locally judged to be common in describing children. When the results were subjected to multidimensional scaling, the terms for 'intelligent', 'talkative', 'clever', 'smart', and 'brave' were contrasted with 'polite', 'entertaining' (as in a child who can talk nicely with visitors), and a cluster of terms describing the culturally valued obedient, respectful, honest child who is good-hearted and responsible. This contrast indicates that the Kipsigis study participants differentiated between cognitive quickness on one hand and mature, responsible and cooperative behaviour on the other. Interestingly, the central term for 'intelligent', *ng' om*, is also a developmentally related concept, used only for children, who are recognized as *ng' om* when they are old enough to be relied on, for example to be sent on an errand and come back without getting distracted or forgetting the purpose on the way. The Kipsigis participants also recognized a special kind of intelligence described as being 'intelligent in school', with the clear implication that a child might be intelligent at school without being smart at home (a concept that may be familiar to some American parents!). Harkness and Super contrasted the Kipsigis ideas about children's qualities with American parents' free descriptions of their
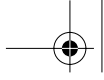
young children, which often centred round evidence of intelligence as a purely cognitive construct. These parents also mentioned other personal qualities that might support the child's rapid cognitive development—especially independence and self-reliance.

The largest amount of research on cultural concepts of intelligence has focused on comparisons between Asian societies and the US or Canada. As with the African research, social and interpersonal dimensions of intelligence emerge as important in Asian conceptualizations; but the actual content, and therefore the contrast, is distinctive. A core aspect of the Asian profile relates to an attitude towards learning—a 'heart and mind for wanting to learn' (Li, 2001, p. ?)—which is also part of an interpersonal relationship with the mother and, later, teachers. As Shapiro and Azuma describe this (2004):

> In children's early years, Japanese parents therefore tend to be oriented primarily toward instilling the socioemotional prerequisites of competence rather than on knowledge or skills as such. In particular, Japanese mothers tend to focus on cultivating interpersonal receptivity and an engaged, devoted attitude in the child. Such a mind-set is viewed as the foundation of later learning in that it encourages children to open up to the thinking of others, thereby enhancing their educability. (p. 193)

This cultural belief relates to Asian ideas about the importance of innate ability versus effort for success in school. Stevenson and Lee (1990) found that American parents believed school achievement had more to do with a child's ability than Asian parents did, whereas Asian parents tended to stress more the effort the child has put into school work. These differences are further related to parents' ideas about how best to foster children's motivation to succeed. Chao (1996) examined parents' beliefs about children's school success in Chinese–American and European–American mothers. Whereas the European–American mothers emphasized that learning should be fun and exciting, Chinese mothers stressed that learning and school involve great effort. As research by Parmar *et al*. (2004) has shown, Asian parents also emphasize the importance of academic learning in the pre-school years, and their patterns of participation in activities with their children reflect these ideas (Parmar *et al*., in press). The contrast between Asian and American ideas about qualities of an 'intelligent' person is further demonstrated by Azuma and Kashiwagi's (1987) study of Japanese college students and their mothers, replicating earlier work by Sternberg and his associates with American respondents (Sternberg *et al*., 1981). When they asked the participants to rate an 'intelligent person' they knew using a previously elicited list of descriptors, the terms related to cognitive competence were rated most highly. However, factor analysis of the responses produced two groupings of interpersonal qualities which together accounted for 64% of the total variance. The first, Social Competence, included qualities such as sociability, humour, and leadership; the second, Receptive Social Competence, included sympathy, social modesty, and the ability to take other people's perspective. This picture presented a strong contrast to Sternberg's US sample, in which intellectual competence was the dominant construct. Okagaki and Sternberg (1993) demonstrated that parents' concepts of intelligence also differ across cultural groups within the US. They found that
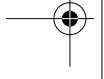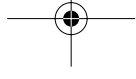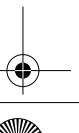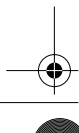
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Anglo-American parents see cognitive attributes, including problem-solving skills, verbal skills, and creative ability as more important than non-cognitive attributes (such as motivation, social skills, and practical school skills) in defining intelligence. Conversely, parents from other cultural groups (such as Asian- and Hispanic-American) indicated that non-cognitive characteristics are as important or more important than cognitive characteristics, but differed among themselves on the level of importance of non-cognitive attributes.

Although cross-cultural differences in ideas about intelligence and competence have been widely observed, there is less recognition of cultural variability among western middle-class societies. The notion of the 'western mind', although popular, may hinder the perception of differences in ideas and practices in Europe and the US. Harkness *et al.* (2000), for example, found that American and Dutch parents differed in the ways that they described their young children, with the American parents much more frequently mentioning intelligence, in contrast to the Dutch parents' emphasis on social qualities. Even ideas about independence and dependence—equally mentioned by parents in both groups—were found to differ significantly between the two cultural groups. Whereas the Dutch parents described dependent behaviour by their young children as innate and normal for children that age, the American parents worried about their children's dependent behaviour and wondered whether it was caused by stress in the environment. Ironically, the Dutch parents also found independent behaviour non-problematic, in contrast to the American parents who viewed it as a struggle for both the child and themselves. Edwards and Gandini (1995) also found cultural differences in a comparative study of developmental expectations (or 'developmental timetables') of middle-class Italian and American parents and pre-school teachers. Using the Developmental Expectations Question-naire (DEQ) developed by an international team of researchers (Hess *et al.*, 1980), they compared expectations in several domains: emotional maturity, compliance, politeness, independence, school-related skills, social skills with peers, and verbal assertiveness. The Italian parents had fairly early expectations for children's develop-ment, but the American parents had even earlier ones, especially with regard to social skills with peers and verbal assertiveness. Interestingly, the teachers were closer to each other than were the parents, which the authors suggest may be due to an international culture of education.

In summary, there is good evidence of cross-cultural variability in ideas about intelligence and competence, even within the western world. Understanding the nature of this variability is important not only for enhancing cross-cultural communi-cation among education professionals from different western societies, but also for recognizing alternative perspectives on what constitutes successful development and how teachers can help children achieve it in the context of school. In this paper, we focus on teachers' cultural ideas, or ethnotheories, about the 'ideal student' in loca-tions within five western societies: Italy, The Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and the US. The data are drawn from a larger study, the International Study of Parents, Chil-dren, and Schools (ISPCS), which also includes samples in Sweden and Australia. In all study sites, families participating in the study were broadly middle-class. Study

samples were chosen in order to capture possible cultural or geographic dimensions of difference—for example, northern versus southern Europe, eastern versus western, and British heritage versus continental. The inclusion of Poland, from this perspective, makes sense given that country's Roman Catholic tradition and its historically close ties with western European societies.   5

Methods

Data presented in this study were drawn from a larger project, the International Study of Parents, Children, and Schools. Kindergarten and primary school teachers in each   10
cultural community were interviewed about their beliefs and practices related to children's development and learning in school, including their concepts of the 'ideal student'. These semi-structured interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed in the original language, in order to capture important cultural concepts and preserve the richness of expression. Working collaboratively, the present authors then constructed   15
a list of descriptive words and phrases that captured the range of distinct qualities or behaviours; in all but a few cases, these could be put in English for a common referent. Using text analysis software (generally NVivo), the descriptors were coded while preserving their context of occurrence in the interview texts. In the summer of 2001, the researchers met in Uppsala, Sweden, for the Tenth European Conference   20
on Developmental Psychology to consider their own data in relation to the other sites. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis and discussion, the researchers arrived at thematic titles to capture the distinctive aspects of each cultural profile. As a final step, some descriptors were grouped into larger categories in order to facilitate both quantitative analysis and interpretability. This collaborative, iterative process has   25
characterized many aspects of the ISPCS (Harkness *et al.*, 2006).

 At all sites, teachers were initially contacted through school systems, referred either by school directors or by other teachers who participated in the study. Teachers' background varied within each group, with Spanish and US teachers being more homogeneous in educational attainment but having relatively larger   30
variability in age and teaching experience compared to teachers in Italian and Dutch samples. Across sites, the average ages and teaching experiences were comparable. Whereas all Spanish and US teachers had completed a college education, the majority of teachers in the other groups had an educational level equivalent to high school or post-secondary teacher training institute. To help   35
capture cultural ideas of students corresponding to the ages of the children in the larger study, we recruited teachers who taught at different grade levels in elementary school as well as in kindergarten/preschool.

 The Italian sample consisted of 20 teachers, all of whom were employed in public schools in the city of Padua in northern Italy. Ten of the teachers taught at the   40
preschool level and the other half taught in elementary schools. Fifteen percent of them had a college degree and the rest had a high school diploma. On average, these teachers were 42 years old (ranged 31–48 years) and had taught 20 years (ranged 10–26 years). Teachers were recruited through the council office for education in the Padua. Those

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who were willing to participate at the initial contact were called later to schedule interviews either at their homes or schools.

In the Netherlands 12 (9 elementary school and 3 kindergarten) teachers were recruited from primary schools in the town of 'Bloemenheim', located in the eastern part of the country between Leiden and The Hague. Two (17%) of the teachers had received a college degree; the others had post-secondary teacher training degrees. These teachers had a mean age of 41 (range = 30–56) and had taught, on average, 19 years (range = 6–37) by the time of interview.

The 16 Polish teachers were recruited from public elementary schools in suburban areas of the city of Warsaw. Fifteen of the teachers were currently teaching first grade and three were teaching kindergarten-aged children. The majority of them were trained in special vocational schools for teachers. These teachers were on average 40-years-old and had 15 years of teaching experience.

In Spain, 20 teachers, 10 preschool and 10 elementary school teachers, participated in the study. Teachers were recruited from nine public and two private schools in the city of Seville (in southern Spain). Teachers' mean age was 45 years (range = 25–59 years). All teachers had a post-secondary teacher training or university education and an average of 20 years of teaching experience (range = 1–37 years). Interviews of Spanish teachers were all conducted at the schools.

In the US, teachers were recruited from two different states, Pennsylvania (n = 17) and Connecticut (n = 4). Among these 21 teachers, 19 taught grades 1–6 and three taught kindergarten. All teachers had a minimum of a college degree. These teachers had a mean age of 42 years (range = 24–57) and a teaching experience of 16 years (range = 2–35).

At all sites, locally appropriate procedures were followed in order to ensure informed and voluntary participation. Teachers were interviewed by researchers in the local teams, usually at their school but occasionally in their home. A typical interview lasted 30–40 minutes. All interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Transcripts of interviews were then coded by researchers who were fluent in the language in which they were conducted.

Results

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were used in order to examine similarities and differences in the ways that teachers from the five cultural samples described the 'ideal student'. First, the frequency of the inductively derived categories of descriptors was calculated as percentages of teachers who used each category (regardless of how extensively), and the results were compared. Second, using the table of descriptor frequencies as a guide, we examined the interviews to see how the indicated categories were used in discourse, and particularly how they related to other descriptors.

Table 1 presents the descriptors used by at least 24% of the teachers in each sample. In order to evaluate the degree of distinctiveness among the five cultural patterns of describing the ideal child, we computed a canonical discriminant analysis, using the 'nearest-neighbour' method of estimating non-parametric densities (SAS

Table 1. Qualities of the 'ideal student' mentioned by at least 25% of teachers

Italy (n=20)	Netherlands (n=12)	Poland (n=16)	Spain (n=20)	U.S. (N=21)
Vivace/lively (80%)	Social skills (67%)	Well-balanced (56%)	Social skills (45%)	Motivated (67%)
Creative (40%)	*Vivace*/lively (67%)	Curious (56%)	Motivated (30%)	Comfortable with self (38%)
Autonomous (35%)	Happy (67%)	Intelligent (56%)	Focused (25%)	Happy (38%)
Social skills (35%)	Focused (58%)	Motivated (50%)	Intelligent (25%)	Active learner (29%)
Reflective (30%)	Autonomous (42%)	Social skills (38%)		Cooperative (29%)
Attentive (30%)	Attentive (42%)	Well-behaved (38%)		Intelligent (29%)
Risk-taker (25%)	Motivated (33%)	Active learner (31%)		Autonomous (24%)
Active learner (25%)	Comfortable with self (25%)	Extrovert (31%)		Well-balanced (24%)
Persevering (25%)	Intelligent (25%)	Organized (31%)		
	Well-behaved (25%)	Persevering (31%)		
	Calm (25%)	Active (25%)		
		Comfortable with self (25%)		
		Focused (25%)		
		Cooperative (25%)		
		Good values (25%)		

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Institute, 2002–2004). In this procedure, a mathematical algorithm is constructed to distinguish among the groups of teachers, based on their pattern of use of 21 descriptors (nearly identical to the Table 1 listing). Overall, this analysis was able to classify successfully 88% of the cases, a highly significant result (Lambda = 0.044, $F(84, 251.29) = 3.61$, $p < .0001$). All Spanish cases were correctly classified by the algorithm, as well as nearly all the Dutch and Italian cases. Over three quarters of the Polish and US teachers were correctly classified. One Polish teacher was misclassified as US, but all the other errors consisted of assigning a non-Spanish teacher to the Spanish profile. This result appears to be an artefact, due to the distinctive Spanish pattern of providing relatively few descriptors (discussed further below). The 11 teachers who were misclassified as Spanish provided a small number of descriptors (generally less than 4). In 9 of these 11 cases, the weighted figure for the correct assignment was a very close second to the Spanish result. Recalculation of the discriminant function using only those teachers offering a minimum of 4 descriptors increases the prediction rate to 94% (of 63 cases), and eliminates the Spanish bias in the errors.

Thus, it appears that there is a fairly consistent profile of descriptors for the 'ideal student' as described by teachers in each cultural sample. Examination of the individual interviews from each cultural sample, informed by the profiles of descriptor frequencies, suggests ways that the teachers thought about the importance of these qualities, how they related them to each other, and what practices they used to encourage the development of successful students. Table 1 presents the list of descriptors, in descending order, that were used by at least one quarter of the teachers in each sample.

Italy: the 'creative scientist'

Italian teachers' descriptions of the 'ideal student' were multifaceted and included qualities relating to a number of different domains. However, many teachers emphasized children's personal and social characteristics in terms of autonomy and independence, creativity, good social skills, and motivation for learning. A particularly valued aspect of children's personality was liveliness (*vivacità*) as related to both intellectual and behavioural dimensions; indeed, many teachers expressed their preference for those children with a curious and enthusiastic attitude towards learning:

> A child who is good at school should be intuitive, intellectually lively and interested in many things, but most of all very curious…a child who always asks 'why', but also gives her personal contributions to the others through an active participation in school activities…a child who may be more lively, exuberant, but also capable of involving and stimulating the other children.

For these teachers, having excellent grades was not essential to be considered a good student; rather, divergent thinking was viewed as a central characteristic because it allows children to cope successfully with all situations in life. Divergent thinking involves creativity, intuition, and critical thinking:

> A good student should be autonomous in thinking, be able to make connections between her own life experiences and the work done at school, to create links with many other aspects. And then a child should be smart, attentive, and alert…there is one boy in our class, he always understands things first, it's a sort of intuition…. He may seem a bit chaotic at times, but I must say he's definitely the best, he's just brilliant.

Although skills such as attention, persistence, and intelligence were seen as contributing to a child's success in school, for our participants the profile of the 'ideal student' is marked by a general positive attitude towards knowledge. Social skills are also part of this profile, since teachers highly appreciated those children who were able to engage their classmates, share ideas and collaborate during group activities:

> I think that a good student should be sociable, a positive leader…and be curious about life, about things, without complaining or annoying other children. A positive leader knows how to build relationships, how to collaborate and help other children, and therefore becomes a point of reference for the whole class. These children know when it is time to listen, to speak, or propose new ideas…They are tolerant, respectful, and aware of their own limits.

Italian teachers used several practices to encourage these qualities in their students. In general, the most frequently reported strategies included providing a secure base, establishing a supportive and nurturant relationship, stimulating children's curiosity through age-appropriate activities and/or materials, and teaching to become autonomous in personal agency as well as critical thinking. A teacher explained: 'Group activities are useful to engage children's attention and to foster their sense of responsibility with respect to a certain task because they learn to respect conversational turns, and everyone is treated the same way'; another said that 'a teacher should provide continuity, observe and listen to the children's needs, be affectionate and accepting…otherwise they don't develop a sense of trust and feel insecure'. Interestingly, many teachers thought that children have their own potential; hence, the teacher's major role is to help the child unfold their talents and abilities through providing an adequate learning environment, without putting any pressure on him/her:

> I think that each child has something special, and it's nice to see that children know each other's characteristics very well…in my everyday work I try to support these aptitudes by proposing a variety of activities, but at the same time I treat all children the same way because otherwise some will feel left out…and most of all it's important to respect their times and needs.

The Netherlands: the 'cheerful diplomat'

A remarkably consistent cultural model of the 'ideal student' emerges from the interviews of Dutch teachers from kindergarten through early and middle primary school. First and foremost, these teachers agreed that the ideal student is happy, stable, well-regulated, and 'comfortable in his skin'. Children with these qualities, as teachers commented, 'come to school with pleasure', get along well with others, and tend to have an easy time learning new things:

> I'm thinking of a child who is balanced, stable, often joyful. She comes to school with pleasure, because school is also easy, so everything goes easily. She has good contact with the other students and with me – yes, everything goes well for that child. There's seldom any problem! Very positive.

Such children, according to the Dutch teachers, should not just be followers—they should be independent, even a bit naughty at times:

> Very spontaneous, a child that is open to new things. A child that can nicely work independently. That's an ideal picture, a child who does what you say, but is also spontaneous. Also brings his own contribution. A happy child, who picks things up easily. Children who are not afraid of failing.

> It comes back to a child who sits nicely in her skin. Who is spontaneous, natural, dares to try new things. From that base, a child is busy learning all day. Things to discover – it goes almost by itself.

Being independent (literally, self-reliant), a quality mentioned more by the Dutch teachers than by the teachers in any of the other samples, was considered important for individual development as well as being an asset in the classroom. Children who were independent, who could 'go their own way' or even occasionally 'say no', were also self-regulated in relation to learning. One teacher summed up these qualities as a seamless web of related characteristics:

> Concentration, paying attention and working independently. And certainly cheerfulness, joyfulness. Sitting comfortably in one's skin. Getting along easily with people. Feeling at home in school. Respectful in dealing with others, adults as well as children…. The more they know their own place, the more successful it is. What I also find important, is that a child is creative, not in the sense of being artistic, but in doing new things. Knowing how to be daring, taking pleasure in making something ones own. Getting involved in new things. Those are children who aren't too dependent on you, who don't always ask directions to follow the familiar road, but go their own way.

Classroom practices used by the Dutch teachers were consistent with their focus on positive mood, self-regulation and being calm and focused. 'Circle time', a popular way to begin the morning, was described as an opportunity for children to unload whatever excitement or concerns they might have brought from home in order to re-focus their attention on school activities. Teachers also described using their own social skills to influence the emotional climate of the classroom, whether through the occasional joke to lighten a lesson or through individual attention to students. Individual help for a student who was having difficulty with a subject such as mathematics was seen as important for building self-confidence and thus motivation to learn more. Breaking down a task into parts that could more readily be mastered was a strategy described as part of a more general orientation to making learning easy and therefore enjoyable. Some teachers also commented that they felt they were working against the increasingly distracting influences of children's lives outside of school. As one teacher said:

> I think that motivation is a very important aspect. If a child doesn't have the desire, then he may be ever so intelligent, but it still doesn't go well. Intellect is certainly very

important, you have to be able to understand, but you also have to be motivated, to want to do something well, be diligent. That is very important. And being able to concentrate well. Many children can't do that any more. We have the impression that that is going backwards, concentration, that it is declining nowadays. So many distractions, and children have hectic lives. So many impressions, television, everything. Children belong to three clubs, watch television every day, lots of information, lots of impressions. I think that's why concentration is declining. Maybe children have more problems than they used to in earlier times. Life has become more complicated, I think.

Poland: the 'socialist entrepreneur'

For teachers in Poland and across Eastern Europe, the year 1989 was a turning point. The political collapse of the Soviet block entailed substantial changes in the educational context teachers had been involved in. Prior to that time, the social position of teachers was generally high, marked by hierarchy-based practices in dealing with students, who for their part were given little space to express their individuality and personal freedom. In Poland, the following decade of the 1990s was marked by several educational reforms—some of them uncompleted—often leaving teachers with misconceptions about new expectations. Moreover, they were authorized to choose among different curricula. For many, this was more a part of the problem than an answer to the challenges they were facing. Especially for teachers who had started their professional careers before 1989, the growing demands of parents often coupled with decreased subordination of many students discouraged some teachers from taking advantage of the new opportunities. Last but not least, remuneration of teachers in public schools fell consistently below the national average and was substantially lower than incomes of teachers of the proliferating private educational sector. As polls showed (Banach, 2002), almost half of all teachers were afraid of losing their jobs as a result of the reforms as well as the overall decline in Poland's student population.

Among the teachers who participated in our study in the late 1990s, two opposing models of expectations towards students can be distinguished. One is embedded in the previous collectivistic and strictly social hierarchy-based treatment of the children; the other, emerging model is oriented to encouraging independence, curiosity, and proactive learning. The latter approach perceives the ideal student—as stated by one of our interviewees—as a child who 'will be open-minded and courageous in his or her activities. Formerly it was emphasized that the student had to be well-behaved, concerned for others, and silent—which would make the child become a loser in the current world'. Another teacher representing the same general concept of the ideal student stated: 'She ought to be open to anything occurring around her'. In the most extreme version of this model, a third teacher identified behavioural compliance with external expectations as a substantial developmental barrier for the child.

The teachers who supported this newly emerging model dominate in the interviewed group, but they were working in relatively wealthy and liberal suburbs of the capital city of Warsaw. A small minority (three) of the teachers in the sample expressed views rooted in the collectivistic past—a model that is probably still more

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prevalent around the country. One such teacher described the ideal student as follows:

> [The ideal student] is a compliant child who reacts to my voice. He must know when to be focused and calm, and when he is allowed to play. Today, children do not have a sense respect in front of teachers – neither the teacher nor what she says is regarded as 'holy' any more.

To describe the most desirable student, these teachers tended to use descriptor categories related to good behaviour in the classroom, such as well-behaved, cooperative, and having good values. These teachers tended to complain more than others about 'bad times', and often cited official reports on the generally increasing misbehaviour of students in recent years.

Despite their differences in emphasis, both the more traditional and the more progressive teachers seemed to agree on the importance of harmony in behaviour and emotional functioning, represented by the term 'well-balanced' in the Polish teachers' descriptions. The idea of being 'balanced' was contrasted with over-reactiveness, which in their opinion underlay a range of social and academic problems the students faced at school. A first grade teacher expressed her concern:

> There are more and more over-reactive kids. It disturbs much. I have a boy in my class who is incredibly intelligent, just academically a good student. But he would achieve even much more if he could manage himself. He explodes even during quiet reading, he is unable keep himself under control. However there are also kids who are inhibited, calm, being afraid even to raise a hand.

This teacher explained how she tried to help them become more autonomous and self-regulated: 'You must mobilize them by diverse encouragements and praising'. Nevertheless, she and other teachers in the Polish sample seemed to believe that it is foremost the responsibility of the child's family to prepare it in terms of inner balance. Being balanced was perceived to produce proper self-confidence. On the other hand, *very* strongly self-assured students could show problematic behaviour in the classroom. As one teacher commented, 'Such exaggerated behaviour is a nuisance for the teacher and disturbs the relations with other children'. The same teacher thought one should gently moderate such behavioural tendencies without suppressing them too much. Most teachers thought they should not allow individual students' independence and strivings to undermine group cohesion.

Especially for the more progressive teachers, the idea of the active learner, who is not only intelligent but also curious and motivated, figured importantly in descriptions of the ideal student. As one teacher stated: 'The [ideal] child is engulfed by the subject matter. She wants to learn by herself, not because of pressure from her mother'. Being curious or open to spontaneously learn from the environment appeared more important than just intelligence alone: 'The child needs to be authentically curious about the world around, in order to independently strive for knowledge which will enable him to deal with future obstacles of various sorts as motivators'.

Often teachers tended to attribute motivational problems at school, and lack of curiosity, to TV watching and other passive activities while the children were at home.

'These terrible times' were mentioned frequently to account for much of the unwillingness of students to read school books. Thus, the Polish teachers differed among themselves in terms of their relative emphasis on the importance of intelligence or motivation for success in school, but they all agreed that inner balance was essential.

The teachers referred to experiential learning, based on the personal experience of the student, as a fundamental basis for lasting knowledge. Especially with first grade students, teachers tended in their classroom practices to organize experiences such as working with hands, touching or moving up and down the classroom. The new emphasis on experiential learning is probably best symbolized in Polish classrooms by the fairly common presence of a classroom carpet which serves as a space to be together and learn. This sitting and playing together with kids at the same physical level is a relatively new practice in this part of the world. Twenty years ago most of teachers would have felt feel denigrated by such 'childish' behaviour!

As regards social skills—a bit surprisingly—teachers tended to value group cooperativeness in their practices more than might have been predicted from their descriptions of ideal qualities in students. In particular, they strongly emphasized the need for team work, for example by splitting tasks and assigning them to smaller groups. Probably team work and social cooperation are so obvious nowadays that they are not so often mentioned when characteristics of the desirable students are considered. The theme of parental responsibility also came up in teachers' talk about promoting such behaviour.

Spain: the 'sociable academic'

Spain, like Poland, has undergone a fundamental social transition resulting from the political change from the authoritarian regime of Franco to a democratic government. In parallel with this, there has been a reaction within the educational profession against the more traditional model of school in which the focus was on obedience, effort, and memorization to a new focus on motivating the student, learning through discovery, play, and work in groups. In this new model, the role of the teacher is first and foremost to motivate the students by organizing activities for them, and facilitating the transition from home to school. At the present time in Spanish society, there is a debate between the two models, with some people feeling that certain traditional values should continue to be important: effort, discipline, and following rules.

These two models are both expressed in the ways that the Spanish teachers chose to describe the 'ideal student'. The traditional approach is well expressed by a second-grade teacher:

> Children should acquire good habits in school such as cleanliness, order, and spending time on both work and play. The best students in my class are calm, they don't get out of their chair every other minute, they are responsible and finish their work and pick up their materials. They like school and they are obedient. These are children who work very well, they like to work and they relate well to the other children.

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The new focus on motivation and interest is captured by the frequency of 'motivated', along with related cognitive qualities of being 'focused' and 'intelligent' in teachers' descriptions. Interestingly, in contrast to the Italian emphasis on creative intelligence, none of the Spanish teachers described the ideal student as independent, a divergent thinker, or lively. The traditionally valued qualities are also in evidence here in the descriptions of the ideal student as organized, persevering, responsible, and well-behaved—important qualities as they reflect the child's ability to self-regulate. Teachers who favoured the newer, more student-centred approach also tended to mention some of the same qualities as their more traditional colleagues:

> They should be responsible, good workers, happy, intelligent, and express themselves well. Children who do well in school are well-balanced; they like school; they are alert, intelligent and interested in learning. I try to impress upon them that they come to work— just like your mother makes dinner, you have to work—I want them to have good study habits. It's a matter of creating habits in class that help them to study, with a teacher who guides them.

Qualities relating to sociability were the most frequently mentioned by the teachers, reflecting a shared cultural model which emphasizes the importance of the child's adaptation to school as an institution that represents society in general. In addition, however, the teachers placed great emphasis on the importance of the family as a determinant of the child s success in school, to the point that they sometimes talked more about the family than the child when asked to describe the 'ideal student. The following response is typical:

> Motivation is fundamental. Many children are not motivated because the family does not take an interest in academic education, and this is noticeable. But we should try to change this and get parents involved in their children's education. When parents' interest fails, things go badly.

It seems likely that the Spanish teachers' tendency to shift the focus of their answers about the 'ideal student' from the child to the family's role—and their own role as teachers—accounts for the relatively low frequency of descriptors in *any* category, when compared with the other samples.

Within the classroom, the Spanish teachers' focus on the importance of motivation for learning is clearly instantiated in children's activities, especially at the kindergarten level. The kindergarten teachers tried to be affectionate with, and close to, their students, and they organized attractive, playful activities for the children in an effort to awaken interest in school. Songs, stories, and games were frequent in the kindergarten classroom. The classroom space itself also reflected this effort to motivate the children: walls were decorated with pictures in attractive colours, or with work by the children. Often there were also plants and a 'class mascot'. In addition to this effort to help children love school and learning, kindergarten teachers also tried to teach some basic habits: to remain seated and quiet during some activities, relate nicely to other children, express oneself correctly, and so forth. In the first years of primary school the situation is somewhat different, and the teaching style tends to be somewhat more formal, activities

are less playful, and making an effort to learn becomes a requirement. As one second-grade teacher recounted:

> When they don't want to work, I say 'I'm so exhausted! Anyone who doesn't want to work can stand up for three minutes', or I go out of the classroom and say, 'I'm Señor Silence', and I come back into the classroom, and this affects them more than telling them to copy something one hundred times over.

US: the 'Wild West adventurer'

The American teachers' descriptions of an ideal child were similar to those of the European teachers in many ways. Like their European colleagues, the American teachers described children who came to school eager to learn, who got along well with other children as well as with the teacher, who were cooperative, helpful, well-balanced and happy. Regardless of their academic talents, such children were a pleasure to have in the classroom:

> I think the most important quality would be social skills. You know, being able to get along with their peers, be sensitive to differences, being an encouraging kind of friend and class-mate. Those qualities we just speak of as a child who's really comfortable with themselves. Any time that's present, even if they're not academically talented, they're going to be excellent learners. Or typically you would expect them to be excellent learners because all of those things are in place.

Despite these common themes, however, the American profile of the 'ideal child' in the classroom is distinctive in its emphasis on the importance of high motivation, the importance of effort, and a willingness to take risks. Motivation, as described by these teachers, often implied a sense of excitement, of engagement in a mutually satisfying process:

> I would rather have a student who likes to be engaged, who is enthusiastic… I like kids who like school and a lot of time that means they like to learn. And if they like to learn, we're going to get along great. We are going to have a ball.

As another teacher commented:

> They get excited about new information. One of the things as a teacher that really brings me pleasure is when we're learning things that Mike [a student] talked about. He's really gotten excited about after we finished the Wright Brothers. He's really all excited about hang gliding, he's bringing information about it and he's learning about it. That tells me that I've sparked a love of his. It's been a love of mine but this tells me that I'm doing something right and that this is exciting him.

The inculcation of a sense of excitement about new 'loves', was for this teacher a route to a more general motivation to make the effort to learn things that might not be as intrinsically interesting. As she continued:

> You see yourself as trying to expose them at this age to lots of different things and hope that you're able to make a spark. Just by reading aloud to them, showing them that you love that and getting excited. It may not be yours or what they're interested in, but at least it's an exposure. I think that if you show them you love books and that you love all these

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wonderful things out in the world that they're out there to learn and need to get the basics, then it helps them to understand. Okay, it's worth working hard for. And it's worth sitting here sometimes doing things that aren't necessarily a lot of fun.

Ultimately, as this teacher explained, this kind of effort is important for establishing positive self-esteem:

They'd much rather be out playing. I don't blame them—I would too. But, we're here so let's use the time and let's develop the self-discipline that it would take to finish this paper and to do it well and say, 'I'm proud of myself, I did it well'. As best I could.

The importance of self-esteem is reflected in the relatively high frequency with which the US teachers referred to the ideal student as an individual who is 'comfortable' with him- or herself. 'Confident' was the first word that one teacher used in describing the ideal student. Another teacher recounts what a 'wonderful, wonderful thing' it was when a quiet child volunteered to read a story to the entire class:

… she'll come up with this voice that, you know, I didn't realize was in her because she was so quiet before, but now she's feeling comfortable being able to participate and she feels good about herself, and when she had volunteered to read a story to the class, I thought that was a wonderful, wonderful thing for her to feel comfortable enough to do.

Being comfortable with oneself, feeling good about oneself, was seen by the US teachers as essential for 'taking risks'. As one teacher expressed it:

There are children that are organized, but there are children who are not organized, but yet those children take risks more and they will try something that they normally wouldn't try. They are willing to try anything, actually. That organized person might be tentative and not delve into things too quickly. I tend to like the children who try even if they're wrong. If they don't have the right answer, if they're not sure of themselves, they still try… I like kids to be able to develop the confidence to speak in front of people and not be afraid…

Several US teachers attributed students' lack of self-confidence, and thus reluctance to take risks, to lack of support from parents or excessive pressure to excel. One teacher who described the ideal child as 'willing to take risks' explained:

There are a lot of children…They close right down and it is very difficult for them to learn new skills. They just won't do it. They won't try it. They're so insecure… Their whole self-confidence isn't there. So I think I'm stressing more that mistakes are okay.

She continued:

I think that comes from peer pressure and parent pressure, unfortunately. But I think parents have some unrealistic expectations as to what a seven-year-old or eight-year-old can do. You know, we forget that we have to learn everything. And, the first time we do something, it isn't right, but as we grow older we seem to forget that it took us a long time to be able to just walk up to someone and introduce ourselves… And I think that they [the children] don't want to leave [sic] the parent down. And I think sometimes we convey it to our children, even though we may not mean to. But they have a sense of that. Yeah, that they might make a mistake. 'Oh, Mom's going to be disappointed'.

It is noteworthy that 'taking risks' typically, as in these examples, involved public presentation of oneself, whether reading to the whole class or introducing oneself to

an unfamiliar person. The ability to present oneself confidently in public, to 'speak in front of people' was seen as essential to future success, for example in college. The US teachers talked about giving children practice in developing this skill by calling on them in class to respond to a question or comment on the subject at hand. They also talked about reassuring children, both individually and as a group, that 'it's okay to make mistakes', in an effort to help the children achieve the desired sense of being comfortable with themselves. Parents, in the views of some of these teachers, were largely to blame for children's lack of self-confidence, either because they did not praise the children enough at home or simply because they were not present due to work commitments. On the positive side, teachers talked about their efforts to find just the right match for a child's interest, in order to nurture a sense of excitement and adventure in learning—a type of motivation, teachers believed, that would translate into a commitment of effort to learn other, less interesting material as well. In this view, the student was implicitly seen as a young pioneer, heading westward for adventures in learning, with some hard climbs along the way.

Discussion

The profiles of the 'ideal student', according to the teachers we interviewed in five different western countries, capture both cultural models specific to each sample and themes that are evoked, sometimes in different ways, across all the groups. The Italian model emphasizes the importance of a lively, *vivace* personality together with a cluster of cognitive-affective characteristics related to creativity and divergent thinking and, equally important, social and emotional intelligence. Children who have these qualities, according to the Italian teachers, help create a positive emotional climate in the classroom as they enliven and inspire other students to enjoy the process of learning. These findings are consistent with a study by Axia and Weisner (2002), who report that the *vivace* child is positively valued by Italian parents. Emotional closeness is also considered a central aspect of the child's development, and is defined by the importance of establishing significant affective relationships with others—both inside and outside the family (Axia, Bonichini, & Moscardino, 2003). In this cultural context, a shy child constitutes a source of concern for parents because of the difficulties he or she may encounter in the construction of social relationships (Axia, 1999).

The Dutch model is somewhat similar to the Italian model in its emphasis on positive mood, although in this northern European version, there seems to be more focus on calmness, on feeling 'comfortable in one's skin'. For the Dutch teachers, such qualities were important in enabling the child to focus on learning in an almost effortless way, while also enjoying good relationships with both the other children and the teacher. Consistent with this finding, the Dutch psychologist Paul Leseman emphasizes the importance of the social environment of kindergarten classrooms, especially encouraging intersubjectivity and cooperation in child-initiated activities (Leseman *et al.*, 2000). He relates this to a sociocultural perspective, according to which mutual understanding and shared thinking are the foundation of learning and development. Research on Dutch parents' ethnotheories of the child has also found a cultural focus

on social qualities in parents' descriptions of their own children (Harkness *et al.*, 2000).

The Polish teachers' ideas were centred round changes in educational philosophy brought about by rapid socioeconomic and political change from an authoritarian communist regime to a new, more democratic society. This model can best be described as a dialectical struggle to find a balance between the traditional values of obedience and group cohesion, and the recognition that individual assertiveness is necessary for success in a capitalist society. Recent research in Poland suggests that this struggle is widely perceived. Slomczynski and Shabad (1997) studied attitudes and values related to social and economic changes in Poland, five years after the advent of systemic transformation. They found that among their sample of teachers, students, and parents, 'neither the cultural legacy of the past nor the emergent ideology of democratic capitalism holds sway' (p. 67), although the teachers tended to be most supportive of systemic change. However, a study by Czakon (2000) of teachers in the central region of Poland, away from large cities, found that they were often frustrated with their students, as expressed by the prevalence of negative over positive evaluations. These teachers strongly favoured obedience and industriousness; self-directedness, in contrast, was seen as of little value. These findings point to the importance of acknowledging intracultural differences when doing cross-cultural research.

Spanish teachers were facing a somewhat similar challenge in the context of the post-Franco era, followed by rapid economic development and greater integration with the rest of Europe. In the Spanish teachers' interviews, there seems to be the strongest expression of traditional values and practices of classroom management although there is also a new focus on helping students to become self-motivated. A previous study on a national sample of 800 parents and 800 teachers (Oliva & Palacios, 1997) found that both groups gave a great deal of importance to values related to social and personal development, whereas values related to autonomy were considered less important. We speculate that in the more collectivistic culture of Spain (see Kagitcibasi 1996), autonomy is not highly valued in children or adolescents; on the contrary, the maintenance of close relationships with parents is strongly supported and is in fact considered essential for healthy development. Nevertheless, there are intergroup differences both between parents and teachers, and among teachers themselves. In both groups, several studies carried out in Spain (Hidalgo, 1994; Palacios & Moreno, 1996; Oliva & Palacios 1997) have identified two cultural models of children's education and development: One more traditional, emphasizing obedience, order, and discipline, and the other, which we might consider more modern, that prioritizes creativity, initiative-taking, and individual development.

Finally, the US teachers' cultural model of the ideal student is also distinctive in the way that motivation, instigated by the teacher's efforts to create a state of excitement in learning, is related to self-esteem, effortful accomplishment, and future success on the public stage. These cultural images are widely portrayed in the media, as illustrated recently by films such as *Akeela and the Bee* in which a student or teacher attains fame and fortune through effortful pursuit of an apparently impossible goal.

The importance of stimulating interest and motivation is also widely recognized and implemented in teacher training. Joseph Renzulli, a leader in gifted and talented education, states that identification of gifted students can best be accomplished in the context of 'action behaviours', which he describes as

> the type of dynamic interactions that take place when a person becomes extremely interested in or excited about a particular topic, area of study, issue, idea, or event that takes place within the school or non-school environment. These interactions occur when students come into contact with or are influenced by persons, concepts, or particular pieces of knowledge. They create the powerful 'Aha's' that may become triggers for subsequent involvement. (Renzulli, 1999, p. 14)

Self-esteem is essential to sustaining this kind of goal-setting and sustained effort, and is widely assumed to be of central importance for children's successful development. Research by Harkness *et al.* (2000) found that American parents of young children, in comparison with Dutch parents, tended to describe their children more frequently as 'self-confident' and 'a leader' although the Dutch parents more often perceived their children as 'enterprising'. By a wide margin, the American parents also described their children more frequently as 'smart'—a condition of success in school and beyond.

Each of these cultural models of the ideal student, evidently, entails a unique set of connections among elements from a pool of ideas which are thereby transformed into local meaning systems. These ethnotheories are particularly evident in relation to four recurring themes:

Motivation was a theme mentioned by teachers in all five samples, but teachers differed in how they talked about creating motivation in students and why it was important. For the Italian teachers, motivation to learn was seen as an inherent quality of the child. Like their Italian counterparts, the Dutch teachers talked about motivation as an individual trait, but they also stressed the importance of creating a calm, comfortable environment in which children would naturally find it pleasant and easy to learn. For the Polish, Spanish, and US teachers, in contrast, motivation was seen as necessary in order to sustain the effort required for self-discipline and learning even when the process was not necessarily interesting in the immediate context.

Independence or autonomy was a quality mentioned by teachers in all samples except for the Spanish sample, but it seemed to mean slightly different things to teachers in each sample. For the Italian teachers, independence was mentioned as an aspect of creative, divergent thinking, whereas for the Dutch teachers, independence referred more to the ability to work on one's own without constantly turning to the teacher for help. The Polish teachers saw independence as a necessary quality for success in the new economy, although it needed to be limited in deference to the needs of the whole group in the classroom setting. Surprisingly, perhaps, the US teachers talked less about independence than did either the Italian or the Dutch teachers, and they were evidently concerned about maintaining an orderly classroom and dealing with disruptive students. The Spanish teachers did not mention independence at all, and instead talked specifically about the importance of obedience and respect as desirable qualities in students.

Self-regulation is perhaps the most general theme that pervades the interviews of teachers in all the samples. Teachers in all five cultural samples emphasized the importance of managing one's own behaviour and emotional state as a precondition for success in learning. There seemed to be a general consensus that intelligence is not enough to guarantee success in school, in the absence of self-regulation. This general theme, however, takes on a somewhat different character in each sample. For the Italian teachers, the *vivace* child is seen as the normative ideal, even if somewhat 'chaotic' as one teacher noted. Quite possibly, this same child might be seen as a bit out of control in the Dutch context, with its greater emphasis on being well-balanced and calm. For the Spanish and Polish teachers, regulation of the child's behaviour was presented more as a classroom management issue, even for young children. The US teachers' emphasis on the importance of positive self-evaluation, 'feeling comfortable' with oneself, was described as necessary for taking risks in trying new things and, particularly, for self-presentation in front of a group—a scenario barely mentioned by teachers in the other groups. Nevertheless, the US teachers were acutely aware of issues in classroom management.

Related to these differences in cultural themes, teachers also gave somewhat differing accounts of their classroom practices, with the Italian and Dutch teachers emphasizing the creation of a positive, even intimate emotional climate while the Spanish teachers emphasized learning good manners in the classroom. The US teachers talked about directly confronting students' fears and encouraging students to challenge themselves; in contrast, the Dutch teachers were more inclined to adapt their own demands to the comfort level of the child (e.g. a child who was afraid to go to the blackboard could show the teacher his answer at his desk). The Polish teachers, as we have noted, seemed to maintain classroom practices more expressive of traditional group cohesion, even while espousing the new individualistic qualities as developmental goals for children.

An unanticipated finding was the importance of family for teachers in all the samples. This was most evident in the Spanish sample, where teachers made it clear that support for academics by the child's family is the foundation for success in school. Teachers in the other samples talked critically about families too, however. The Dutch and Polish teachers typically worried that children were overloaded with too many distractions in their daily lives, while the US teachers were concerned about parents' overbearing expectations of their children or, on the other hand, lack of time to spend helping their children to develop the self-confidence to succeed.

Conclusions

As we noted at the beginning of this paper, children around the world go to school to learn much more than just the academic skills that occupy the formal curriculum. In post-industrial countries, school is the main site for learning how to be a competent member of society, and it is therefore a particularly valuable place in which to learn about the beliefs and values that shape the larger culture. The teachers in the present study all described ideas that are familiar in western theories of education, yet the

divergence among them suggests that even within this framework, there is plenty of room for the expression of particular cultural ideas and practices. One example of this was presented with startling simplicity when a Dutch teacher explained to the first author that 'circle time' is important because it helps children to learn how to listen to each other – in contrast to the familiar American idea that circle time's main function is to teach children to 'share' their own stories with others.

The teachers in the present study probably differed from their own formal theories of education, however, in the extent to which they talked about social, emotional, and self-regulatory skills. It is clear that such skills are what make a classroom 'work' for the teacher as well as the children, even though little attention is given to them in most teacher training programmes. In this sense, the formal curriculum of children's classrooms can be seen as a scaffold upon which to build related areas of competence rather than being an end in and of itself. The teachers in all our western samples talked about the importance of various kinds of competence such as responsibility, caring, social skills, and emotional intelligence in ways that evoke non-western ideas of intelligence. In particular, the teachers' attention to the importance of interpersonal relationships in the classroom seems consistent with non-western conceptualizations. Teachers in all five of our samples specifically stated that cognitive qualities are not enough for success in school. Thus, it appears that western educational theories of intelligence and education may be somewhat disconnected from actual ethnotheories and practices in the classroom, even in mainstream schools of the western world. Unfortunately, the current political emphasis on developing cognitive skills may undermine teachers' efforts to help students learn other kinds of competence that may be just as important in the wider world.

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Notes on contributors

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