Abstract

Claims of the importance of having positive perceptions and expectations of students with learning disabilities (LD) have been repeatedly made over recent years. This article aims to raise awareness of the importance of attributional beliefs in relation to the educational outcomes of students with LD in United States and China. American and Chinese trainee teachers who were at the end of their training were surveyed with vignettes and Likert-scale questions to ascertain their responses to students with and without LD. Overall, the findings suggest that Chinese trainee teachers’ attributional pattern is more positive than that of their American counterparts. Implications and recommendations for research and practice are also presented.

Keywords
Learning Disability, Ethnic, American Disability

Students with learning disabilities (LD) have drawn great concerns from teachers and schools over recent years (Crockett, Filippi, & Morgan, 2012; Raymond, 2004). Despite an ongoing debate of a universal definition of LD, it is commonly believed that students with LD manifest deficits in psychological processes, such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, and/or arithmetic abilities, despite the absence of conditions primarily caused by other disabilities, such as intellectual disability or disadvantaged environments (e.g., low economic status; Kirk, 1963; Raymond, 2004; Skues & Cunningham, 2011). Due to dis- parities in sampling and diagnostic tools and criteria adopted, prevalence rates of children with LD can range from 5% to >30% (Blumberg, 2012; Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002; L. Liu, 2000; Schieve et al., 2012).

The inclusion of LD in the educational field started in the United States, dating back to the 1970s (Raymond, 2004). Since then, LD have become a major category of special educational needs and services in schools and other educational contexts. Current policies in the United States mandate that inclusive education schools provide children with LD with high-quality and research-based instruction and interventions, in collaboration with professionals and experts (Hardy & Woodcock, 2014). To date, students with LD form a large group of students in inclusive classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).
The movement of including students with LD in inclusive education in the United States has been influential in Australia over the years. Unlike the United States, Australia has yet to develop a nationwide definition of LD or a nationwide supportive program for students with LD. All states and territories have established their own categorical approaches and programs. Only the Northern Territory has categorized LD as requiring specific support programs. Other states, such as Queensland, Tasmania, and South Australia, may acknowledge the term learning disability but categorize LD as only a general learning difficulty and so provide the students with basic support. Furthermore, some states (e.g., New South Wales) do not make a distinction between LD and other learning difficulties (Hardy & Woodcock, 2014). The term learning difficulties is a broad concept that refers to students who have experienced academic or learning difficulties for varied causes, including low intelligence and environmental disadvantages (L. Graham & Bailey, 2007; Westwood, 2004). As a result, teachers’ and schools’ understandings about LD may be misguided, and student needs may be overlooked (Skues & Cunningham, 2011).

**Attribution Theory**

It is believed an individual seeks to understand attributions (or causes) that explain why an event occurred (Schuster, Forsterling, & Weiner, 1989), such as “Why I failed a test” or “Why I gained a promotion.” Heider (1958) proposed that when people ascribe an event, they follow two kinds of attributions: personal (internal) and environmental (external). For instance, an office worker ascribes her recent promotion mainly to hard work (a personal attribution), whereas her colleagues believe it is due to luck (an environmental cause). Inspired by Heider’s attribution theory, attributional theorists have extended the research into varied disciplines. In the educational arena, Weiner’s (1979, 1985, 1986) attribution theory of motivation has made a significant influence, particularly with regard to individuals’ perceptions and behaviors in academic-related events (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Tollefson, 2000; G.-Y. Zhou, 2006). Weiner (1979, 1985, 1986) proposed that attributions imposed by an individual to explain academic success and failure have three dimensions—locus of causality, stability, and controllability. Locus of causality differentiates a cause internal or external to the individual. The four most responsive causes for academic success and failure are ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. Ability and effort are internal, whereas task difficulty and luck are external. Stability distinguishes whether a cause is stable or not. Ability is commonly believed as a stable cause, as a person’s ability is maintained over time. In contrast, effort and luck are unstable. Controllability determines whether a cause can be controlled or not. Effort is considered to be under one’s control, whereas the other three causes are often perceived as uncontrollable. Based on this three-dimensional analysis, a cause can be located into one of eight traits—that is, two kinds of locus of causality (internal or external) by two kinds of stability (stable or unstable) by two kinds of controllability (controllable or uncontrollable). For example, a student who passed a reading test may ascribe the success to the aptitude in comprehension (ability) that is an internal, stable, and uncontrollable cause.

Weiner’s theory (1979, 1986; Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1978) further demonstrates that the three-dimensional attributional analysis plays a key role in an individual’s emotional consequences, which in turn, guides his or her behavioral consequences. Specifically, stability is linked to feelings of helpfulness or helplessness and adjusts expectancy of future outcomes. Locus of causality relates to self-esteem. Ascribing academic success to internal causes is more
likely to increase feelings of competence, confidence, and pride than ascribing success to external causes. However, ascribing failure to internal causes can result in lower self-esteem and concerns with affects such as shame. These affects then determine whether this student will elicit actions to attain or withdraw a goal. Finally, controllability determines social emotions. Failure due to controllable causes by the student would generate guilt or shame. In regard to behavioral consequences, according to Weiner (1986), the student who believes in controllable causes (e.g., low effort) is less likely to give up than one who ascribes the consequences to uncontrollable causes (e.g., low ability). However, if a teacher attributes the failure to a controllable cause, he or she may feel anger and blame the student, as the causes are subject to the student’s volitional control. Alternatively, if the behavior is perceived as an uncontrollable cause, the teacher may feel pity and offer extra help to the student.

Teachers’ Attributions in Western and Chinese Cultures
Teachers regularly seek to understand why their students encounter academic failures (Georgiou, Christou, Stavrinides, & Panaoura, 2002; Tollefson & Chen, 1988). Weiner’s theory thus addresses how a teacher interprets academic outcomes and predicts future success (Tollefson, 2000). Teachers can often base these interpretations on their prior knowledge and experiences, or from cues obtained from the student, such as previous performances, to pursue the reasons explaining the outcomes. Moreover, they are prone to ascribe to internal (students’ personal) causes (mostly ability and effort) rather than external causes (S. Graham, 1991; Major, Kaiser, & McCoy, 2003). By doing so, teachers do not blame themselves to account for the failure so that their self-esteem-related affects (e.g., pride, confidence) are protected.

Although ability and effort are both internal causes, the former is often perceived as uncontrollable and stable, whereas the latter is controllable and unstable. Thus, according to Weiner’s theory (1979, 1986; Weiner et al., 1978), if a student’s failure is ascribed to low ability, teachers may generate the feelings of sympathy and respond to that student with comfort or help. At the same time, the teacher may reduce the expectation of that student. If the failure is believed to be due to a lack of effort, teachers tend to feel frustrated and respond to the student with punitive actions but still hold the belief that the same student could succeed in the future. Teachers’ behaviors following a student’s failure are important cues to a student’s perception of the cause (Droe, 2013; S. Graham, 1991; J. Zhou & Urhahne, 2013). A student who receives sympathy and additional assistance from the teacher may perceive himself or herself as having low ability. This, in turn, may reduce the student’s self-esteem and goals for learning. Alternatively, a student blamed by the teacher may attribute the failure to laziness or interpret such an affect as high expectation from the teacher. In that case, the student’s motivation will not be harmed. Thus, attributional theorists (e.g., Droe, 2013; S. Graham & Barker, 1990; Weiner, 2001) stress the impact of teachers’ attributions on students. In particular, Weiner (2001) reminds teachers to be cautious when they ascribe academic failure to low ability, as it evokes “low personal regard, low expectancy of future success, and give rise to the aversive emotions of shame of humiliation” (p. 22).

An individual’s attribution is not stand-alone but is influenced by social variables such as culture, values, and religion (Weiner, 2001; Yan & Gaier, 1994). A few studies have examined the exploration of teachers’ attributional patterns to academic failures in different cultures or nations. For example, a cross-national study undertaken by Clark and Artiles (2000) compared
American teachers’ and Guatemalan teachers’ responses to failed students. The results showed that students’ effort expenditure had a greater impact on the affects and behaviors of American teachers, whereas ability had more influence on Guatemalan teachers. Clark and Artiles pointed out that Guatemalan teachers’ attributional style is influenced by Latin American culture, which stresses individual ability. American teachers, in contrast, are influenced by a culture that encourages individual effort. Similar to American teachers, American and British trainee teachers also tended to follow effort attribution when responding to failed students without LD (Woodcock & Vialle, 2010, 2011, 2016). Such an attributional pattern is termed by Jacobson, Lowery, and DuCette as “normal self-esteem attribution” (1986), which means that failures are ascribed to an external uncontrollable cause (e.g., bad luck) or an internal controllable cause (e.g., low effort). According to Weiner’s theory (1979), such an attributional pattern may have a positive influence on the students because teachers provide positive evaluative feedback to the failed students, which conveys the message that the failure is not a matter of inability and these students’ achievements can improve in the future.

Zhao, Wang, and Shen (2006) adapted Clark’s instrument and compared Chinese teachers and American teachers. Despite the finding that both groups resulted in an effort attributional pattern, ability was more influential in American teachers than Chinese teachers. In particular, ability did not influence Chinese teachers’ expectations of students’ future success, whereas low ability did affect American teachers’ expectations. This indicates that Chinese teachers are more effort driven. Zhao et al. state that such a difference is due to the concept of effort, which is highly valued by Chinese teachers. Indeed, Chinese culture views effort as the most important factor influencing academic achievements (Crittenden, 1996; Stevenson & Lee, 1996). Proverbs such as Bèn niǎo xiān fēi (A slow sparrow should make an early start) and Qīn nén bū zhuó (Practice makes perfect) are worship to people who put forth effort. Furthermore, as noted by Hong (2001), Chinese people believe that effort enhances ability to some extent. Thus, ability may be viewed as less stable and more controllable by Chinese teachers than by Western teachers.

Teachers’ Attribution to Students With LD
Western teachers often see LD as an internal, stable, and uncontrollable status (Clark, 1997). Holding such a belief may lead teachers to have low expectations and thus be sympathetic to students with LD. Clark (1997) developed an instrument that has eight vignettes about hypothetical boys who failed a typical exam. Clark then investigated general elementary teachers in America and found that teachers expected future failure from students with LD. Moreover, teachers showed less frustration, expressed more sympathy, and provided more rewards to students with LD compared with students without LD. Building on Clark’s study, Woodcock and Vialle investigated American elementary school (2011) and secondary school (2010) trainee teachers’ responses to students with LD and found similar conclusions. Trainee teachers in Australia are influenced by LD status when they consider the cause of academic failure. Moreover, they respond differently to students with LD than without. Similar findings are yielded from studies by Tollefson and Chen (1988) on K–12 teachers in America; Georgiou et al. (2002) on elementary teachers in Cyprus; and Vlachou, Eleftheriadou, and Metallidou (2014) on Greek general and special education teachers. Their responses to students with LD, as described by Weiner (1986), is the “norm to be kind,” meaning more sympathy, kinder feedback, and lower expectations are assigned to these students than those without LD. Such an attributional pattern can be perceived as negative because it may cause the “Golem effect,” meaning that
teachers’ low expectation can lower students’ expectations for themselves (Eccles & Wigfield, 1985).

These findings point to the conclusion that Western in-service teachers and trainee teachers can often hold a negative attributional pattern to students with LD. Students with LD, from their perspective, may then have less chance to achieve academically than students without LD. Therefore, students with LD deserve more sympathy and help from others. Again, as stressed by Weiner (2001), such a belief can be harmful to a student’s motivation and future performances. Compared with Western teachers, Chinese teachers are less affected by the status of LD. In a study that examined Chinese teachers’ beliefs to students with LD, Zhao, Zhang, Geng, and Shen (2005) adapted Clark’s instrument and investigated 333 elementary and secondary teachers from Hebei province (located in northern China; it surrounds the capital city, Beijing). Their findings indicate that LD had only a limited effect on Chinese teachers’ attributions and expectations. Furthermore, it does not have an impact on Chinese teachers’ behaviors. Chinese teachers, particularly elementary teachers, are easily influenced by students’ effort expenditure. In addition, the researchers pointed out that Chinese teachers may not view LD as stable but as having a developable status. A previous study by Woodcock and Jiang (2013) investigated 103 elementary and secondary teachers from Jiangsu province (located in eastern coastal China; it is the most developed area in mainland China) and yielded similar findings. Teachers show the least frustration and the most sympathy, give the most positive feedback, and have the highest expectation for those students who expend high effort. For students who expend low effort, teachers experience the greatest frustration, express the least sympathy, give less positive feedback, and have the lowest expectation of these students achieving success. In another study, Woodcock and Jiang (2012) surveyed 101 trainee teachers from the same province as the above study. The findings support the above-mentioned studies that LD have limited influence on (trainee) teachers’ judgments. By analogy, Chinese trainee teachers follow the effort attributional pattern. In particular, their frustration is primarily governed by students’ effort expenditure. This implies that Chinese trainee teachers believe that future failure can be avoided if students work hard enough. To sum up, Chinese in-service teachers and trainee teachers may perceive LD as an internal and unstable status. Students with LD, from their perspective, are not too different from their non-LD counterparts.

Although the review of literature suggests that Chinese trainee teachers adopt a distinct attributional pattern different from that of American trainee teachers, little research has been done to compare the groups in detail or to develop an insightful understanding of the differences. The purpose of the present study was to examine the extent to which Chinese trainee teachers differ from American trainee teachers in terms of their attributional patterns to students with and without LD. Specifically, the study investigated the feedback, frustration, sympathy, and future expectations elicited from both groups of trainee teachers when they respond to students with and without LD.
References


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