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Changing Worlds, Changing Classrooms: Satellite Children and their Teachers in the Transnational Era

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Cover Page Footnote

End note

¹The “Herstory Writers Workshop” started in March 1966. Its approach to mentorship is to make caring central, “allowing those with little formal education to work with complex notions of narrative structure...To bring unheard voices, both near and far, into the public arena; to transform lived experiences into written memoirs, powerful enough to change hearts, minds, and policy.”

About the Authors

Ming-Hsuan Wu, PhD, is Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Adelphi University in New York. Her work examines how both students and teachers from diverse backgrounds navigate the official and hidden curricular spaces of urban schools. In particular, she seeks to understand teachers’ agentive roles in positively impacting immigrant students’ academic and social lives as well as young people’s agentive roles in contesting dominant discourses on diversity. Her current scholarship focuses on translanguaging practices in heritage Mandarin classrooms in the US and the experiences of Asian American English teachers in Taiwan.

Sonna Opstad, PhD, has taught graduate students in TESOL and Bilingual Education in New York for 11 years. Her research interests include all aspects of multilingual development, with a focus on the connection between language, identity, and the social/emotional wellbeing of bi/multilinguals. The potential of bi/multiliteracy and translanguaging as tools to assist students in negotiating an identity of strength in US classrooms is an area of particular interest. She has served as Chair of the NABE Research & Evaluation Interest Section, Co-chair of the NABE Research Institute, and currently serves on the advisory board of the NABE Research and Evaluation Interest Section. Her work has been published in the *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*.

Changing Worlds, Changing Classrooms: Satellite Children and their Teachers in the Transnational Era

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The challenges for immigrants in the US and Canada include the difficulties of making a living while raising their children. Due to the high cost of living and childcare in cities, along with the realities of low paying jobs and long working hours among many working-class immigrants, growing numbers of families send their infant children to their countries of origin to be raised by relatives for a few years. When the children reach school age, they are returned to their parents in the US. Prior research has focused on immigrant parents' decision-making rationale and their reports of adjustments that children went through. Informed by a critical theoretical framework and culturally sustaining pedagogy, this paper investigates elementary school teachers' understandings of the transnational experiences of their Chinese "satellite children." Interview data from a qualitative study at an East Coast urban school serving a growing Chinese community, where this transnational practice is the norm, reveal challenges and opportunities that the return of these children presents for their parents, their teachers, and for the children themselves. We argue that a culturally sustaining approach is critically needed to better serve this community and student population.

Keywords: satellite babies, transnational children, culturally sustaining pedagogy, teacher education, cultural adjustment, emotional adjustment, bilingual education

The challenges for many new immigrants in the US and Canada include the difficulties of making a living while raising their children. Therefore, growing numbers of immigrant families, especially those living in big cities, send their infant children to their countries of origin to be raised by relatives until the youngsters reach school age. This decision is often made based on several factors, including the intergenerational childcare tradition, the desire to preserve their language and culture with their children, and/or the realities of low pay jobs with long working hours (Kwong et al.,

2009; Lee & Brann, 2015; Wong 2015). The children then return to their parents (in the US or Canada) when they are old enough to attend school.

Social psychologists Bohr and Tse (2009), who coined the term “satellite babies” to refer to children “who shuttle between continents” (p. 267), argue that the traditional Western parenting paradigm with its focus on nuclear families containing mother-child dyads cannot fully explain the immigrant parents’ decision to send young children away, and they stress the need for more research on this issue.

As the number of students with this transnational experience grows in New York City public schools, the children’s experiences have also started to receive media attention. Bernstein’s article in *The New York Times* (2009) reported that these learners experience difficulty with emotional, linguistic, and social adjustment upon returning, and their parents and teachers also have difficulty addressing the children’s unique needs. Research, however, has so far focused mostly on explorations of immigrant parents’ decision-making rationale. We still know very little about how this transnational practice actually impacts the lives of immigrant families as the children start schooling in a new context. Even less data is available regarding how teachers understand the practice, and more importantly, how their understanding might impact their effectiveness in attending to the needs of these students and their families.

This exploratory study investigates how the elementary teachers of these “satellite babies” understand their bicultural, bilingual, and transnational experiences. Through an analysis of the perceptions of a group of teachers who currently work with transnational students, we take a first step in critically examining the challenges and opportunities that the return of these children presents for their parents, their teachers, and for the children themselves. It is our hope that this study will provide the basis for more in-depth research leading to informed discussions about how to better serve students with similar transnational and immigration experiences and how current teacher education programs can better prepare in-service and pre-service teachers to address these issues in their schools.

Background

Transnational Families in Metropolitan Cities

The practice of immigrant parents sending children to their country of origin to be raised by relatives is documented among a variety of cultural groups, including Chinese communities in Toronto and New York City (Bohr & Tse, 2009; Wong, 2015) as well as some Latino and Caribbean communities in which recent immigrants reside (Glasgow & Ghouse-Sheese, 1995; Smith et al., 2004). For the Chinese families, the decision to send their infants to China is often made even before the babies are born and is carefully planned.

To better understand parents’ rationales for sending their small children to their families in China, Bohr and Tse (2009) interviewed Chinese parents living in Toronto who had been considering this option. Though this population largely had middle class status in China, they were struggling to regain their socio-economic level in the Diaspora. Parents cited the expense of raising children in a metropolitan city like Toronto as a major determining factor in considering the alternative option. Immigrant

parents who are still at the beginning stages of developing their careers in a new country did not have the money or the time to fully devote to their young children. Sending their offspring to China to be cared for by someone they trust is viewed as a viable alternative, especially given that intergenerational childcare is a common practice in China. In fact, many of the interviewees in the study mentioned that they were brought up by their grandparents.

Within this socio-economic-cultural context, the practice of sending newborns to relatives back home is considered to work to the best benefit of both the parents and the children. The immigrant parents can have the time and money to establish their legalized status in the host country, and the children can obtain better care and attention from their beloved relatives. In addition, some of the parents in Bohr and Tse's study (2009) noted that cultural and linguistic immersion was an additional benefit for their Canadian-born children, who they felt would not have adequate exposure to acquire Chinese languages and associated cultural backgrounds in Canada.

Wong's study (2015) with working class Chinese immigrant mothers in New York City revealed that, like the middle-class parents in Bohr and Tse's study, the decision to send their newborns back to China was made out of necessity; but to a greater degree, they felt they had no choice. These women came to New York City because based on the tradition of *Fengsu* they are expected to leave their hometowns to earn more money for their families. Many came from Fujian province with limited formal education and limited English proficiency. Coupled with their often-undocumented immigration status, they typically must take low-paying jobs with long working hours. Wong noted that the prevalent practice of sending newborns to China is particularly common in Fujianese Chinese communities in New York City, and it is intricately related to additional financial factors, such as huge migration debts, the expense of living in the city, and lack of affordable childcare. Few could afford housing with sufficient space for themselves and their children.

Both Bohr and Tse's (2009) and Wong's (2015) studies relied on parents' narratives to understand the reasoning behind this parenting choice, but little is known about how this choice impacts the lives of parents, children, and their teachers once the children return for public schools in their countries of birth. As the number of satellite children receiving social services is growing in New York City, the media have begun to look at the adjustment experienced by these children when they return to the US. Newspaper articles in the New York Times (Berstein, 2009), China Daily Asia (Xiao, 2016), Voices of New York (Huang, 2016) and a documentary by Jenny Schwietzer (2016) have brought public attention to this phenomenon. According to these reports, the children have experienced repeated disrupted attachment to their family members (first separation from their biological parents and then another separation from their caregivers in China), which has resulted in developmental problems and mental health issues, difficulty in establishing relationships with their biological parents and teachers, as well as more general difficulty in functioning at school.

In one of the few scholarly investigations of the adjustment of the children upon their return, Liu, Chen, Bohr, Wang, and Tronick (2017) interviewed Chinese parents living in the Boston metropolitan area who had sent their children to China as infants

and brought them back to the US to attend public school. The parents in their study identified the following difficulties faced by their returnee children: being confused about the situation in which they had to experience multiple relocations, missing their primary caregivers in China, adjusting to parents who had a different parenting style than their relatives in China, adjusting to new siblings whom they might not have met before, and adjusting to different food, language, and educational environments. While these interviews and the media reports introduce us to some of the challenges faced by satellite children, they do not provide a holistic picture of this group's experiences. An examination of teachers' views and narratives can add important insight into the issue, as the teachers are adults who spend significant time with the children on a daily basis (in some cases more time than the parents are able to) and are also directly impacted by working with the children who have experienced this transnational cultural practice.

Theoretical Framework

Building upon Ladson-Billings' (1995) work on culturally responsive teaching, Paris and Alim (2014) advocate for a culturally sustaining pedagogy that critically addresses issues of culture, equity, and justice in order to democratize schools. This framework echoes the issues raised in the work of Pennycook (2001) and others in that it emphasizes the importance of recognizing the dynamic aspect of culture and the changing cultural practices that evolve in response to changing social and demographic conditions, such as those that prompted the transnational practice involved in our study.

The conceptualization of childhood has been found to be among the culture-specific and ever-changing constructs that illustrate Pennycook's focus. Boyden (2015) challenges the scope of western notions of childhood, noting that children in other countries and in contexts of poverty are viewed very differently. James and Prout (2015) likewise affirm that concepts of childhood are neither static nor universal. Indeed, Stephens (1995) underscores the crucial nature of how childhood is conceptualized and urges research addressing this and other related variables.

As Bohr and Tse (2009) note, the practice of sending infants to China to be raised by relatives until the children are of school age cannot be understood in the traditional western middle-class view. Exploring the teachers' perceptions of this cultural practice, along with their views regarding the children's needs and resources, is an essential step in developing an understanding of how to create culturally responsive, resource-oriented classroom experiences that will benefit these children and their teachers.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy involves combating the deficit views of cultural differences, which are based on the presumption of the superiority of white, middle-class perspectives (Paris, 2012, 2017). This framework is therefore especially relevant to research that explores and responds to the varying perspectives that educators might hold on the linguistic, cultural, and educational realities of US public schools.

Additionally, the study draws on the funds of knowledge concept (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) also described as "asset-based" teaching (Paris, 2017; Paris & Alim, 2017), which highlights the knowledge and resources that families employ in their daily lives, practices which are often unknown and untapped in formal education

settings. González, Moll, and Amanti (2005) maintain that educators must become informed about these potential resources in order to provide responsive, effective instruction.

These theoretical frameworks reject the notion of the superiority of white middle class culture and practices. They emphasize the importance of recognizing and understanding the diverse family and cultural practices that are part of the students' lives in order for these resources to be put to use in creating a classroom pedagogy that can challenge the limitations of an assumed universal perspective, which does not take into account the complex intersectionality of subcultures, socio-economic status, educational background, language varieties, and ethnic identities.

As documented in Wang's (2018) interviews with adults who had been satellite babies, their perceptions were in part influenced by the two competing cultural models of parenting they experienced: the American model and that of their Chinese family members. The intensive model of American parenting, which stresses the presence of the mother, conflicts with the Chinese practices of multiple caregivers and with the possibility of large geographic distances between parents and children. The resulting interpretation among Wang's participants was often that the Chinese practices and those of their families were inferior. As culturally sustaining pedagogy specifically counters the deficit perspectives perpetuated by notions of white middle class superiority, it offers a particularly relevant lens for understanding the transnational experience and practice that our project sets out to examine.

Research Context and Method

The study took place in a K-5 public school program in New York City which has a transitional bilingual program that enrolls about 1,700 students. Nearly 97% of its students are of Chinese heritage. The school is located near one of the local Chinatowns, with Chinese-owned grocery stores, bakeries, restaurants, and afterschool centers. The demographics of the Chinese communities in this Chinatown, and of this school, are predominantly Fujianese from the Fujian province. Thus, it is important to note that many of the children who participate in the bilingual program speak neither English nor Mandarin but rather speak the Fujianese variety of Chinese or Cantonese, neither of which is mutually intelligible with Mandarin (Cai, 2020; Cai & Ebsworth, 2016, 2017). Therefore, the two languages that are used in the bilingual program are not theirs, except to the limited degree that they may have been exposed to Mandarin, the official Chinese language of wider communication. (In the school, translators for parents in all three Chinese languages are available on demand.)

One of the researchers, Dr. Wu, is fluent in Fujianese (also known as Southern Min) as well as Mandarin and spent one day a week at the school observing teaching and learning and offering translation help at parent-teacher conferences over the course of seven months. During this time, several in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with six teachers, all of whom are familiar with the term "satellite babies" and have direct experience working with students who were satellite babies. Interviews probed teachers' experiences working with students who had been sent to China to spend their preschool years, discussing how the teachers' lives are impacted by this unique cultural practice. Thus, taking a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013;

Creswell & Poth, 2018), we seek an understanding of the teachers' perspectives regarding the lived experiences of these children. Informed by a resource perspective to cultural practices among students' communities, we also deliberately asked teachers to reflect on these transnational students and parents' experiences in relation to their own upbringing and educational experiences. An understanding of the teachers' perspectives regarding the lived experiences of these children and parents will assist us in exploring ways that schools and teacher education programs can better serve this population in culturally sustaining rather than assimilative ways. Participants' profile information and interview highlights are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Information by Teacher (Pseudonyms were chosen by the participants)

Julie	Anais	Rebecca	Miriam	Hanna	Ms. Lin
5 years at the school	2 nd year at the school	At least 2 years	5 and ½ years as a sub and 5 years fulltime teaching	ENL Teacher – several years	At least 2 years
Special Ed Class 5 th grade 12:1:1	ICT Class 5 th grade – 27 students: 15 Gen Ed and 12 Special Ed 7 ENL and 4 former ENL	Special Ed Class – 2 3 rd graders and 9 4 th graders 12:1:1	Co-teaches 5 th grade ICT with Anais	Class of 31 4 th grade ENL students or recently exited ENL	1 st grade bilingual
European heritage, born in the US	European heritage, born in the US	Chinese heritage, born in the US	From Trinidad	From Hungary	From China

With two exceptions, all participants were interviewed at least twice. The remaining two participants were interviewed for over an hour each time. (The variability was due to the complex lives of the teachers whose available time for this project was inconsistent.) Interview questions were semi-structured (Seidman, 2013), allowing for broad and open-ended exploration, providing participants opportunities to reflect on their experiences with the Chinese students and communicate their thoughts in detail. More specific questions, emerging from the dialogue and on-going analysis, both during and after each interview, were used to probe and clarify the information provided (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Ely, 1991). In this way, the research was guided by those who have knowledge of the experience (the teachers), and not limited by a set of predetermined questions (see a list of sample participant interview questions in Appendix 1). As noted, the cumulative length of the interviews varied according to each participant's comfort level and time commitments (from one to two hours cumulatively). This study is a result of a total of 12 interviews, which account for more

than five hours and 15 minutes of interviews and informal conversations with the teachers. The total number of interviews and the amount of time spent interviewing each participant also reflected the time required for sufficiency and redundancy of the information.

All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Both authors then analyzed the transcriptions through an iterative process of open coding, initial memos, focused coding, and integrative memos (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). Both authors went through multiple data analyses and met in person, as well as virtually, to discuss possible codes, categories, and themes. Triangulation of interpretation included the input of a bilingual expert, a professor in the area of graduate language teacher education. The intent was not to make a universal claim at any stage of data analysis, but to understand the various ways that participants in the study talked about and made sense of the transnational practice among their Chinese students and their parents.

Researchers' Positionality

As teacher educators who have taught graduate education courses for in-service teachers in New York City, we, Dr. Wu and Dr. Opstad, have frequently heard teachers express their concern about working with the students who had been sent to the parents' countries of origin in their early years. Dr. Wu was the instructor for two graduate-level courses that some of the participants took as part of their coursework for their certification in TESOL. During class, the topic of satellite babies was introduced, and it triggered much discussion. As someone from a community with strong kinship and intergenerational childcare practice, Dr. Wu found herself in the delicate position, during these discussions, of defending the transnational Chinese families, who had made the decisions to send their young children away. The classroom discussions eventually led us to undertake the research of satellite students, with a focus on delving into teacher perception/understanding of satellite students through teacher interviews at this K-5 school.

To reduce the potential influence of the professor-student relationship on interview responses, most interviews were conducted by Dr. Opstad, who was not directly teaching any of the participants. Given Dr. Opstad's European heritage and Caucasian features, the teachers were more likely to perceive her as someone outside of the Chinese community, not familiar with this cultural phenomenon. Therefore, the teachers took on the role of an expert informing the interviewer about their experiences. Dr. Wu's Taiwanese heritage and cultural background proved an essential asset in interpreting the interview data, providing insight into Chinese culture that was crucial to a thorough and accurate analysis.

Findings

Analysis of the interviews with the teacher participants revealed challenges encountered by each group (i.e., children, parents, and teachers), potential misunderstandings, differences, commonalities, and strengths connected to the transnational practice experienced by their students. We present and discuss challenges identified by the teachers, suggesting cultural and contextual issues that may be involved. The perceived commonalities and differences between the teachers'

childhoods and cultural backgrounds and those of the students are explored in order to gain a better understanding of the teachers' perspectives. We provide a glimpse of the challenges faced by the parents, as perceived by the teachers, and explore the ways that cultural expectations influence how parents and teachers view their roles. Finally, we present the strengths the teachers have observed among the satellite children in their classrooms.

Understanding Satellite Children's Lives through the Words of Their Teachers

Earlier studies and media coverage have highlighted the social-emotional and cultural-linguistic adjustments that the students need to go through when they return to NYC. Our interviews with the teachers revealed that the adjustments the children experience are more complex than depicted in the earlier literature.

First of all, many children are not fully reunited with their parents when they return to NYC. Not only is it common for parents to work long hours, but it is also typical for one or both of their parents to work outside of New York State. Thus, the children do not necessarily have regular contact with their parents. Many are taken care of by relatives, such as aunts, uncles, or grandparents, who may travel back and forth between the US and China. Other children might stay at a night care center, facilities that are part of an underground sub-culture known to this community but perhaps not recognized by the authorities. It is well-known and well-appreciated in the school community that a night care center takes care of children whose parents work in states such as Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Utah, Arizona, Texas, or Florida. Students who stay at the night care center typically see their parents once a week at most. Below, the ENL teacher, Hanna, explained this unique transnational experience of the satellite students the school serves:

It's not the parents usually who raise them...there is no constant reminder of how to do things and what to do... There's a lot of people involved in their- you know, how they are raised. It's not consistent; it's not just a grandma or a mother and a father; there are multiple people involved. So you might say something to mom, the next day the father might show up and not know anything about what kind of conversation you had with the mom. So that's something we've been experiencing.

Julie, one of the fifth-grade teachers, discussed how lack of adult interaction at home impacts students' social skills:

... Even daily conversations like: Good morning, how are you? They don't really even talk to each other like that in Chinese. You find also that they don't talk to their parents at home. They don't see their parents... most of them, they wake up and get ready for school themselves. They're at the after-school program until 6:00, their parents come home from work around 10:00. So, there's very limited interaction with parents.

Rebecca, the fourth-grade teacher, commented that the children needed guidance in daily routines, such as not wearing the same clothing every day, something she attributed to the parents having to work so much and not being there to be sure the children learned those conventions.

Anais, a fifth-grade teacher, also emphasized that a focus on social/emotional type of education is something that needs to be addressed with the children because of the realities of their family situation:

...even more so than other demographics, because at home they're not getting that instruction for whatever reasons. And it's not because they're Chinese. It's because they are not having the interaction and the guidance from their families for whatever reasons - the long hours and working out of state and being separated from them.

As Hanna noted, many of the students go home at the end of the day without adults to ask them questions like, "What was going on? What did you learn? What are you doing? How can I help you? What do you need?" As noted by Liu et al. (2017), limitations on time to spend with the children, initially a factor in the decision to send children to China, also becomes a factor in the children's adjustment process upon returning to the US.

Hanna shared with us a moment when one of her students was not able to express herself using the right words due to perceived limits on her vocabulary:

Like one of the girls - I was wearing the colonial outfit and it was like fluffy and big and then this girl looks at me and she goes, "Oh you look so fat in that." From her tone and expression, Hanna concluded, "She didn't mean to say fat."

Hanna believed the student had only one word to express herself, which is inappropriate from the western cultural perspective, but she had no choice because that was the language she had available to her.

Hanna also noted her satellite students did not know how to handle a situation when they couldn't eat what was served in the cafeteria:

They bring up their lunch and you see what they're eating and you're like, "Oh, you're only eating certain things, you're not eating anything with cheese or milk" because they have lactose intolerance.... Every day they leave the cheese sandwich there and they will never touch. "Oh, well why won't you eat that?" "We can't eat cheese" 'Okay, why don't you eat the vegetables, why don't you ask for something else?' And this is the conversation. Like in the lunchroom you don't have to accept that one thing they give you, you could take a different option.

However, we argue that the skills that the teachers refer to not only require linguistic knowledge but also cultural knowledge. Dr. Wu grew up in a cultural background similar to the students and it is common for someone to offer what Americans would view as offensive comments on someone else's body shape (e.g., big, fat), and asking for something else on the table as a child is a rare practice and is often discouraged in many Chinese families. In fact, attitudes toward body shape vary across cultures, and in Chinese culture, women's bodies are often subject to public commentary. James (2018) reflected on her own experience growing up as a bi-racial, bigger-sized girl in Singapore, noting that her Chinese relatives often called her out on her weight and size at family reunions. Such acts were often understood as caring to the children, who were believed to lack attention to their body and health. However, during

her stay in China, she realized that bodies, especially women's bodies, are essentially public space, where everyone, including strangers have something to say about it. In making sense of her experience, James includes comments from psychologists such as Dr. Lisa Kiang, whose work focuses on identity and culture, suggesting that the value of collectivism or relatedness appears to give some people the permission to comment on others' lives, including age, salaries, body shape, marital status, etc., (see <https://psychology.wfu.edu/about-the-department/faculty-and-staff/lisa-kiang/>).

In terms of table etiquette, Chinese children oftentimes are expected to take whatever they are offered and not to ask for something else, unless they had eaten all of what they had been given. As a result, while what the teachers described might be related to lack of parent-child interaction at home, it might also be related to different cultural practice or parenting style. Table manners are heavily loaded with cultural meanings and mediated by material artifacts. Linguistic anthropologists have shown that children oftentimes are socialized into communicative expectations, symbolic, moral, and emotional meanings associated with food and eating at mealtimes (Ochs & Shohet, 2006). In either case, it suggests an additional adjustment that the satellite children need to make when attending schools in the US with very different social interactional norms. Following culturally sustaining research, this also suggests the importance of recognizing the dynamic aspect of culture when working with students from diverse backgrounds.

The concept of personal space is another aspect of cultural knowledge that some teachers identified as important to be taught to the satellite children. Teachers suspected that after living in a populated country during their early formative years, many students did not mind being close to one another or are used to a lot of people in a small place. Hanna talked about the need for her to ask for some personal space when her students get too close, "like touch, touch, touch" kind of close to her. She needed to teach her students the use of "excuse me" because the notion of personal space in China is very different from space conventions here in the US. She also noted that she experienced this type of adjustment herself as a new immigrant in the US. Her way was different from the US customs and also different from what the children were used to in China. She drew upon her own immigrant experience to help the children understand that these are things that vary from one culture to another. The middle-class cultural norms underpinning many US schools can be a source of confusion for children brought up in a different culture and social class. These teachers' narratives suggest that both class and culture mediate their satellite students' educational experiences in the US.

In addition to the socio-cultural-linguistic adjustments that students need to make, there are other important adjustments that they face upon returning to their families in New York City. Negotiating new relationships with their siblings and parents was often cited in the teachers' interviews as a challenge for the students. They might be meeting their siblings for the first time and have to share a room with them in a small apartment. Those who were sent away might have negative feelings toward siblings who were able to stay in the US. Reestablishing relationships with the parents is never easy for the satellite children. Earlier research has revealed that children often had difficulty adjusting to different discipline styles (Liu et al., 2017). Our teacher interview data revealed a more complex picture of the parent-child relationship. In

some cases, parents were not literate or had little formal education, and they had sacrificed so much that the economic aspect of the relationship is highlighted. The excerpt below describes the unique parent-child relationship among these Chinese immigrant families:

I've had kids say, "My mom says, when I turn such and such age, I owe her this much money, because she had to spend that on me." There's some transactional type things that are discussed with kids. I get the sense that there's pressure too, because a lot is at stake...whether they succeed or not in terms of their family stability. Or one boy said, "I can't do the Secret Santa. We are saving the money for a house" or "I got money for Chinese New Year, but it's for the house."

Along those same lines, several of the teachers commented on the pressure the children appeared to feel regarding grades. Some children would cry when the report cards came out, worried about their parents' reactions. Both parents and children know that test scores and grades will determine their admission to junior high. Orellana, Thorne, Chee, and Lam (2001) found a similar aspect to the relationships between the Korean "parachute kids" they studied and their parents, despite coming from a more affluent demographic than the Chinese satellite babies. These parachute kids are sent ahead of their families to the US, at great financial expense, with the hope that they will do well in school and qualify for admittance to a prestigious university, and ultimately obtain a professional degree. There was considerable pressure to achieve academically because of the investment and sacrifice the parents had made.

While many satellite children, as described by their teachers, had happy memories of their lives in China, memories that included caring grandparents, pets, living in a house with a yard, and playing with cousins, their new lives in NYC tend to be filled with financial insecurity, as evidenced by the fact that many of the parents need to work for long hours or work outside of New York State, all of which has a direct impact on their relationship with their parents and their emotional and academic development.

Teachers and Students: Searching for Common Ground

Our purpose in asking the teachers about their own childhoods was to provide context for the perspectives they shared regarding their satellite students' lives. Although the teachers came from a variety of cultural backgrounds and ethnicities, with three growing up in the US and three growing up outside the US (see Table 1), they were quite similar in their descriptions of how their childhoods compared to the experiences of the children. "Very different!" was the almost unanimous response. The teachers' childhoods were typified by lots of time with parents and family dinners. Their parents also spoke the language of the school and were directly involved in their education. The satellite children's parents work long hours, are unfamiliar with the ways of US schools, and often are not comfortable with English. All of these factors contribute to a lack of confidence and lack of opportunity to participate in school life as the teachers' parents had.

Initially, responses to questions regarding similarities and differences between their cultural backgrounds and that of the students focused on superficial aspects of culture, such as holidays. Julie expressed bewilderment that the children did not seem to understand St. Patrick's Day and noted that they did not seem to celebrate any

holidays, which in her view included a sit-down dinner with family. Another fifth-grade teacher, Miriam, was quite upset that one of the children would not be celebrating Thanksgiving at home, so she arranged a special Thanksgiving dinner in class for his benefit. As well-meaning as her actions were, they also reveal the assumption that the celebrations that were meaningful to her would hold the same importance for the children. However, Anais expressed her frustration with the superficial treatment of culture in the school:

I think it's really western-European centric. But I think that's across the board in the US. I think there are a lot more opportunities...like even though we're a bilingual Chinese school, I don't find that the kids get a chance to learn about their culture. I think they do in ways that are pretty superficial... Like Chinese New Year show, let's all dance! And we honor the culture because we do that.

When specifically prompted to consider similarities in values, teachers were able to identify some commonalities. Miriam mentioned her rural upbringing and recalled being able to connect with experiences the children had had prior to coming to the US. She also noted a similarity regarding childcare - in her culture, there was a resistance to going outside the family as well. Relatives, not daycares, provided childcare for parents who had to work. Anais commented on the similarity in the value of education, hard work and the importance of respect. As she put it, "You don't find that entitled attitude; I didn't have it and they don't have it." Hanna noted that she could identify with the adjustment the children experienced in coming to a new country. Although she was an adult when she came to the US, she could relate to the language and culture adjustment that students go through, and how confusing that can be. She recalled the differences in personal space and conversational style, for example, and found that these experiences helped her to understand what her students were experiencing.

On the other hand, Julie could not identify any similarities and immediately mentioned the fact that the parents did not speak English. She commented that the parents left the education of the children to the teachers, which was very different from her parents' views. She elaborated on her perceived educational differences, commenting that, "In China, they don't really have read-alouds and discuss books. It's very foreign to them." She further expressed her belief that the adults were free to abuse the children in China.

Rebecca also emphasized the difference between her mother's direct involvement in her education and the very different level of participation that she saw with her students' parents, although she attributed this difference to the changing economic times. When Rebecca was a child, her mother was able to be a stay-at-home mom, an option that is not financially possible for the children's immigrant parents. Both Julie and Rebecca seemed to hold an unquestioned assumption/expectation that it was a parent's responsibility to help their children with homework, a view that is common in middle class environments in the US, but one that is by no means universal across cultures.

Similarly, teachers' perceptions of the parents' attitudes regarding their children's education varied considerably. Julie expressed the view that she had to "stay on top of the parents" and commented:

They feel like it's the teacher's job to do the bulk of the work with the kids, because they feel that, "Well, I don't speak English, so I can't help my child at home." If I went home with a bad report grade, they [my parents] felt it reflected on them, whereas these parents just feel like it's all the teacher's responsibility... I have kids who don't do homework and the parents will tell me, "He said he did it." But they're not actually checking.

On the other hand, Hanna described the parents as cooperative and willing to try to help at home. Anais and Miriam noted the emphasis the parents placed on school and the pressure they put on their children to get good grades. While the parents likely were not there to oversee homework, they communicated the value of education and hard work to their children. Anais interpreted the parent involvement this way:

Because of the language difference and the work schedules, it makes it hard for some of the parents to stay on top of what the kids are doing. They seem to know what's happening with math...but they rely on us and trust the education of the students to us.

What these teachers described about the Chinese parents is very similar to Li's (2002) study on home literacy among Chinese immigrant families in Canada. Li found out that the Chinese families in her study were distanced from their children's school lives, had little knowledge about how schools in Canada worked, and did not question or challenge teachers' authority due to their background in a Confucian society. While other aspects of Chinese home practices can be understood as beneficial in helping the students succeed at school (e.g., high expectations, parental sacrifice for their children's education), Li noted that parents' expectations, strategies, and investment in their children's education are also influenced by their social class, their educational backgrounds, and their level of English proficiency (2002, 2006).

Specifically, regarding the parents' decision to send their children to China to be raised by relatives, the teachers expressed varying levels of understanding:

Anais: Oh, I get the choice. I can't imagine trying to afford childcare with my middle-class salary, so I get it. And they might be better off than what they face here.

Miriam: So I understand them a little bit. Taking the child back to China and having the child live without a parent? That I don't understand. And it's okay for them. From what we've done at school, learning that it's okay. You hear people talking about how it's their culture. And it's okay.

Ms. Lin: Many parents, they need to make a living and... they don't have enough education on how to take care of babies – they are not educators and don't know the importance of forming the connection with the parents.

Rebecca: For me, it's hard to understand. Because I didn't grow up that way. I had my parents here.

Julie: I could not imagine seeing my child at 5 years old - that would be a really hard bond to form.... I don't know, I just feel like somehow there are other ways. Like you could get a nanny or... like I have kids in this class, they have siblings still in China. So, I feel that if you can make it work for one kid, then you can try and...you know that affects the child too – he's not going to see his sibling until

she's five. There are abandonment issues there too, I feel like. So, I can't relate to that, no.

These teachers' varying understandings of the Chinese transnational practice point out that this contested practice deserves more open discussions among teachers, particularly regarding their cultural biases and positioning. After all, how the teachers understand these differences might affect their ability to make culturally sustaining decisions when working with the Chinese parents and students. As Howard (1999, p. 106) keenly puts it, teachers need to adopt the stance that "their own personal appropriation of truth is merely one of many possibilities, not the only one."

While several teachers identified a need to address social skills and cultural conventions in US schools for their satellite students, they felt the Common Core did not allow time or space for them to do so. Below Anais spoke of the constraints she felt in teaching this student population social skills:

It's probably something K-2nd would focus more on, and of course you would do it throughout schooling, but because of Common Core and other demands, it's been very hard to address those social issues with the students in the younger grades, and as a result it just goes up and up. Sometimes I find that I don't take the time to correct certain things and discuss things. It's hard to juggle everything.

At a time when students need to take high-stake state tests starting in third grade, the academic demands for K-2nd graders are higher than decades ago. Under these educational circumstances, satellite children's social needs are not addressed in the lower grades, which seems to influence their social-emotional skills when they reach upper grades.

Speaking of the increased academic demands that place constraints on the flexibility the teachers have to focus on the whole child, Hanna commented on the value of informal times:

A lot of times the weirdest things, the most unexpected things come out of a lunch monitor thing [when teachers act as lunch monitors] where they come and help you and they are talking about their everyday life that you don't really get a chance to address during instructional time.

It seems that with such constraints, it's difficult for teachers of the transnational students to address their students' unique needs. Since the satellite students' lived experiences are very different from their teachers', some teachers in our study were not able to understand their students' experiences in the broader context of economic struggles among immigrant families. They may appreciate the economic difficulty but be limited by preconceived and culturally influenced notions of what is acceptable. We argue that a better understanding of the Chinese immigrant families' cultural practices and lived experiences will prepare teachers for the "unexpected things" and allow them to better serve this population. In addition, the unstructured encounters with satellite students are especially important as these encounters allow teachers to establish personal relationships with students and explore their varied ways of being.

The importance of these unstructured encounters and relationships is illustrated in another example below, provided by Hanna:

There is one girl in this class for example whose mom is not here. She comes in every morning, and she needs a one-minute hug. That's how the day starts. She's just hugging and hugging. I say, "How many hugs?" And she goes, "I need 2,000 hugs a day."

Another student she taught the year before comes every day just to check in with her. It doesn't have to be a long conversation – it might be just a question and a response – but there is a need to make that connection. As the consistent adult presence in the children's lives, the teachers are in a unique position to fill this need. Although the concern often expressed in the literature is that transnational children will be at risk for difficulties in forming attachments, the teachers in this study did not find that to be true of their students. Instead of resisting human connection, they seemed to pursue it.

We would like to end this section with a quote from Hanna, who has provided us with many important insights to the lives of satellite students and parents:

Every single student is different. Some students seek attention by being a little bit annoying. Because they know that if they do that, we'll address it, "Please don't do that, come talk to me." And that's what they want because they don't get that attention at home.

While we focus on the common elements in the satellite children's lives, we want to highlight that every student is different and responds to the transnational experience differently. The commonality they all share is the need to connect and be understood. It is thus especially important for the teachers to go beyond what they already know, or think they know, about their satellite children to build the personal relationships that will benefit both the children and the teachers.

Understanding Parents' Lives through the Eyes of the Teachers

Interviews with the teachers documented the difficulties of separation from family members, reuniting with family members, and adjusting to the living conditions of their urban environment. The parents endure all those challenges while trying to earn a living and navigate a new language and culture. They further encounter the often-puzzling responsibility of raising a bicultural child.

The parents have made enormous sacrifices to try to provide a better life for their families. However, as Hanna observed, "The parents work really, really hard and they work long hours to make sure they have everything for the children, but that also takes away from the time they could spend with them." According to the teacher interviews, parents tend to compensate for their absence from their children's day to day lives with material things (the latest technology, visits to nail salons, even cash).

The parents are often conflicted about how to discipline their children and will ask the teachers for advice. Parents will say, "They'll listen to you." The children are accustomed to the discipline style of the grandparents or other relatives who were caring for the children in China. The change in the caretaker and authority figure, coupled with the need to renew the parent-child relationship, contributes to the

discipline difficulties for the parents. Children can interpret any correction as lack of love, and parents can be reluctant to set or enforce limits. Anais commented:

You get the sense that the kids do not - sometimes do not respect the authority of the parents... I think it's being overwhelmed: care of other siblings and other demands in their life. Just like I get overwhelmed and don't address certain social issues that arise in the class. I think it's the same thing for them. And in some cases, it's- they have a child who is an American. And it's dealing with: Their child is bicultural or multicultural. And it's that sense of being brought up in this culture, is different too, and they may not understand that. I think that's part of it.

Below Rebecca's advice illustrated her presumption of a common cultural upbringing and parental practice. She appeared to assume that what her mother taught her would be the same as what her students' parents would say to their children, and that the parents had experienced this as well in their own childhoods:

Just think about what your parents taught you. Just do the exact same thing. That's what I'm doing with your child. Whatever my mom taught me, whatever my teachers taught me, I'm doing it too. I'm showing the same thing to your child. Just think about what your parents taught you. Just do the exact same thing.

The problem is further complicated when the children have experienced home language loss. Parents do not realize how quickly that can happen, and at parent-teacher conferences, the teachers find out that the parents are having serious communication difficulties with their children. Anais recounted:

We have instances at P/T conferences, where we find out that the parents can't communicate with the children. Even though it's a bilingual school, that the kids have lost enough of the Chinese that they can't communicate. Yes. And we've had kids with serious discipline issues at home because they're not able to [communicate].

While it is a bilingual school, it is a transitional bilingual program, with the emphasis on English. Further, for some of the students, the variety of Chinese used in the program is not the variety they know. And with parents working such long hours, the children do not receive sufficient exposure to avoid home language loss.

Conflicting expectations regarding the roles of teachers, parents, and the school itself in educating the children, contributed to the parents' challenges. In some of the interviews, there appeared to be an assumption that it was the parents' responsibility to learn to navigate the school system, rather than the school's responsibility to be responsive to the needs of the students and families. Both Julie and Rebecca expressed this view, suggesting that the parents take time from their jobs to do this. Rebecca was sympathetic regarding the financial difficulties the parents had, but she seemed to assume that this was their responsibility as parents, and that they had the option to take time off from work:

...our school holds PTA meetings where they invite the parents to come in, but these parents just don't, because they are always working. And they don't find

out about the information about testing and about what they need to do to get into a good junior high school... But if parents did make time and they took time off from work - like I know that it's hard to take one day off, because then you lose a day's work, but honestly, I think it's worth it in the end. If the parents knew what the school system was.

Clearly, discipline is an issue for many families due to inconsistent childcare in the families. Parents' lack of knowledge of the US school system and limited English proficiency (in some cases, Chinese literacy) also pose substantial challenges for them in working with the school to advance their children's educational experiences. These narratives seem to suggest that socioeconomic status along with culture, parents' English proficiency or their familiarity with mainstream schooling all come to shape the Chinese parents' involvement at school.

Children's Strengths

Despite the challenges documented in prior research and media reports, the teachers in our study were able to identify strengths among these children who have been back and forth between two countries: They are good at technology; they have some bilingual ability that the school can potentially build upon; they show a desire to learn and willingness to work hard; and they have developed resilience. For instance, Anais talked about how her Chinese students seemed to be able to handle disappointment better than the students of other backgrounds, suggesting that students' resilience might be a result of their transnational experiences. She explained:

Maybe it's their relationship with disappointment to some extent, like it doesn't disappoint them as much as it would for other children. They can let it roll, like, 'oh the party is not happening this week,' and they would be like, 'all right'".

Other teachers also commented that many of their Chinese students treat one another as family members and help each other learn in class. While some students have experienced language loss, others continue to socialize in Chinese during lunchtime or offer Chinese-English translation help to students who struggle to understand the teachers' instruction. The majority of the teachers' narratives focused on the challenges that their students face, and some teachers needed specific probing to provide accounts of their students' strengths. We argue that these accounts offer us important information about how teachers might be encouraged to identify and build upon students' strengths in their teaching, which we will discuss in more detail in the next section.

Conclusions and Implications

Considering the unique experiences of the transnational students described here, we contend that a culturally sustaining pedagogy is critical to address their needs and build upon their strengths. Getting to know one's students is especially crucial to avoid some of the misconceptions that occur when the experiences of the teachers and students differ so markedly. Li's (2002) study of home literacy among immigrant Chinese families highlighted that the Canadian teachers and the Chinese parents' different understandings of literacy and its instruction has become a battle and a risk factor in the Chinese children's academic learning. In our study, teachers' comments

also revealed some cultural and social class biases and assumptions that might negatively impact their relationships with the students and families.

Furthermore, it is well established that the best academic outcomes for emergent bilingual learners are supported by a bilingual approach, in which the language the children know is used to access content and develop literacy (Cummins, 1992, 2001; Ebsworth, 2002; García & Kleifgen, 2018; Thomas and Collier, 2002, 2012). The minority language is included and recognized as a valuable resource, rather than as a problem to overcome. Elevating the status of the children's language in this way provides essential socio-emotional support, with more positive emotional outcomes for learners (Cummins, 2001, 2005; Toppelberg & Collins, 2010).

Unfortunately, the "bilingual program" in which the satellite babies were enrolled often did not meet their socio-linguistic needs. The Chinese language offered by the school was mutually unintelligible with the one they spoke, and the teachers did not always have access to knowledge about the particular cultures represented by the students.

Importantly, our study supports the importance of continued development of the appropriate Chinese language for these transnational students, both for the academic benefits and for the social/emotional support it can provide. As Buchholtz, Casillas, and Lee (2017, p. 44) argue, "...language is a crucial form of sustenance in its own right, providing the basis for young people's complex identities, as well as their social agency." Part of the reason for the parents' decision to send their children to China related to the development of language and culture. When the children experience loss of the home language after returning to the US, the communication between children and parents suffers, the sacrifice the family endured is no longer balanced by the benefit of acquiring the home language and culture, and the benefits of bilingualism are lost as well.

Since parents have limited time at home with their children, they are dependent on the schools to support the development of both languages. Cummins and Early (2011) describe the powerful impact of programs that involve students in the creation of identity texts, which make use of the children's language, culture, and experiences to develop literacy and confront the social realities of their lives. Incorporating technology into these projects would both channel the children's fascination with technology in a constructive way and address the logistical obstacles of parents working long hours and family members separated by distance. Technology then becomes a tool for social interaction and connection, rather than an impediment to it. Further, when parents' experiences and knowledge are incorporated into these identity text projects, through interviews, shared stories and experiences via technology (face-time, skype, video, audio, etc.), the school demonstrates that the families' cultures and knowledge are valued in the school. In order to provide an environment that is culturally sustaining, teachers and students need opportunities to explore cultural assumptions and the variety of ways that problems are addressed. Such explorations could allow them to recognize that there might be shared values underlying very different cultural practices.

Teacher preparation programs are crucial in bringing this about. The Professional Standards for Bilingual Educators (Nevárez La Torre, 2015, 2019) recently adopted by NYSABE stress the importance of teachers' knowledge regarding language varieties and associated subcultures. Cai (2020) demonstrates that thorough and enlightened language teacher education can result in greater understanding among language teachers, in particular those dealing with the umbrella of Chinese languages and varieties.

In a broader sense, courses and professional development activities can include projects in their coursework that enable pre-service or in-service teachers to investigate the ways immigrants have addressed the challenges of living in a new country, the reasons for economic inequality and ways to address it or identify and explain cultural misunderstandings that take place in the environments in which they live. Understanding the dynamic and adaptive aspect of culture would also be important in order to avoid simplistic interpretations that hamper the potential of culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017). Teachers could then engage the children in their classrooms with similar projects.

Documenting the stories of the teachers and students in the school offers another vehicle to understand and connect with one another, showing that each member of the school community has value. The "Herstory" project (<http://herstorywriters.org>)¹ is an example of how immigrants can share their stories and experiences to enlighten others as they develop their own literate skills. The school can then become a community of learners where teachers and students are valued and encouraged to collaborate together to reach their potential.

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End Note

¹The “Herstory Writers Workshop” started in March 1966. Its approach to mentorship is to make caring central, “allowing those with little formal education to work with complex notions of narrative structure...To bring unheard voices, both near and far, into the public arena; to transform lived experiences into written memoirs, powerful enough to change hearts, minds, and policy.” <https://www.herstorywriters.org/our-mission-philosophy>

Appendix

Teacher Interview Questions

Consistent with recommended practice in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Ely, 1991), interviews began with open-ended questions so that the responses would most accurately represent the participants' perceptions and experiences, and not limited by the interviewer's assumptions. Subsequent questions emerged from the dialogue and ongoing data analysis, allowing us to clarify our understandings of the information provided. At some point, all participants were asked about the strengths and challenges the satellite children faced, how their experiences and culture compared to the children's, how they understood the parents' decision to send the children to China as infants and then bring them back to the US for school. Questions included:

- Tell me about your class.
- Do you have lot of children who have the experience of being satellite babies – sent back to China as infants and returned to the US to start school? Is it readily apparent which children have experienced this?
- Do they talk much about their life in China? What kinds of things do they say?
- How well do you know their parents?
- What are some of the challenges the satellite children have?
- What are some of the strengths the satellite children have?
- Do you find there are adjustments you make for the satellite children?
- How does this teaching situation compare to your previous experiences?
- What were your experiences like growing up and/or as a parent yourself?
- Do you find cultural similarities between you and the children?
- How would you compare their values and your values?
- Can you identify with the parents' decision to send their children to China and then bring them back to the US for school?
- What recommendations do you have for teachers of satellite children?