

Rethinking Parent Involvement During the Transition to First Grade: A Focus on Asian American Families

Susan R. Sy

Abstract

Asian American parents' involvement practices challenge the traditional definition of parent involvement (participation in school activities). In this paper, I argue that research and practices focusing only on this narrow definition of parent involvement may not be culturally sensitive approaches to supporting the home-school connection. The existing literature addressing Asian American parent involvement suggests that indirect practices at home, such as structuring the child's time, are more common among Asian American parents and more consistent with Asian cultural values. I analyze how this type of involvement during the early school years may be particularly helpful in facilitating continuity during children's transition to first grade.

Key Words: parent involvement, academic achievement, developmental transitions, Asian American, early education, continuity

Introduction

Asian American parents present a challenge to the traditional definition of parent involvement often used by educators and researchers in the United States. More specifically, Asian American parents typically do not become as involved in direct contact with their child's school as do parents of other ethnic backgrounds (Chao, 1996; 2000; Huntsinger, Jose, Larson, Krieg,

& Shaligram, 2000; Huntsinger, Jose, Liaw, & Ching, 1997; Mordkowitz & Ginsburg, 1987; Schneider & Lee, 1990; Shoho, 1994), yet Asian American children, on average, have higher reading and mathematics achievement in kindergarten and first grade (Denton & West, 2002; West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken, 2000). Most research on parent involvement during the early school transition years has focused on parent-school contact (e.g., parents' participation in school events, activities, and organizations; Culp, Hubbs-Tait, & Culp, 2000; Griffith, 1996; Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999; Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2000), generally showing a positive relationship between involvement and children's early achievement. Asian American parents' involvement strategies, however, typically include more indirect practices at home that may help facilitate continuity in children's early educational environments and, in turn, their long-term academic success.

In this paper, I suggest that the narrow definition of parent involvement as parent-school contact fails to account for the multiple ways in which parents may become involved in children's early schooling and the ways in which culture and ethnicity shape parents' involvement practices during the transition to first grade. Although there have been some calls for a broader understanding of parent involvement (Bempechat, 1998; Christenson, 2004; Jackson & Remillard, 2005), the majority of empirical research addressing the statistical relationship between parent involvement and children's outcomes during the early school years has focused on parent-school contact. Given the recent shift in the national agenda away from parents' and teachers' shared responsibility for children's learning outcomes, coupled with greater emphasis on accountability and early high-stakes testing (Christenson, 2004), it is a critical time for researchers to highlight the multiple ways in which parents can facilitate continuity in children's early schooling.

I first discuss Asian American parent involvement practices during the early school years, followed by an analysis of how these practices facilitate continuity during children's early school transition. Finally, I suggest directions for future research. The purpose of this analysis is to provide a broader understanding of how parents may become involved in their child's transition to first grade and how ethnicity and cultural values shape these involvement practices.

Asian American Parent Involvement

The indirect involvement strategies of Asian American parents appear to be shaped by two Asian cultural values: respect for authority and value for education. The traditional Asian cultural value of respect for authority has been examined in several Asian groups, including Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and

Vietnamese (Hirschman & Wong, 1986; Hofstede, 2001; Hwa-Froelich & Westby, 2003; Wu, 2001). This cultural value may explain Asian American parents' tendency to become involved at home in indirect ways rather than at school in more direct ways. Researchers have found that parents from many Asian cultures tend to endorse a clear separation of parent and teacher responsibilities and to recognize teachers as the educational authority figures. This has been demonstrated in work with Southeast Asian groups (Collignon, Men, & Tan, 2001; Morrow, 1989) such as Cambodian (García Coll et al., 2002; Smith-Hefner, 1999) and Vietnamese (Hwa-Froelich & Westby, 2003), and East Asian groups such as Chinese (Chan & Lee, 2004) and Japanese (Shoho, 1994). Parents holding such cultural values may be less likely than other parents to volunteer in their child's classroom or participate in other school activities or decision-making groups. Asian American parents who hold these values may consider it inappropriate or disrespectful to participate in the school environment, which is where the teacher has primary responsibility for children's learning.

Findings from a recent study on Vietnamese American parents (Hwa-Froelich & Westby, 2003) suggest that schools that actively promote or even require parent-school contact may directly counter underlying beliefs and values of Asian American families. More specifically, these authors used a qualitative approach to examine Vietnamese American parents' general parenting beliefs and attitudes about early education, including beliefs about parent involvement. Parents believed that their main role in helping their children succeed in school was to make their children study at home by planning children's time for them and reminding them to do their schoolwork. Vietnamese American parents did not mention parent-school contact voluntarily, and when this was suggested as a possibility by the interviewers, parents indicated confusion regarding why the child's teacher wanted this type of involvement and how it would be helpful.

Asian American parents' lower parent-school contact rates do not suggest they hold a lower value for education. In fact, ample research has shown that Asian American parents highly value education as a means for upward mobility and success. As with the cultural value of respect for authority, the value of education has been demonstrated in studies examining several different Asian American groups at once (Goyette & Xie, 1999; Schneider et al., 1994; Sue & Okazaki, 1990), as well as studies examining specific Asian American sub-groups, including Vietnamese Americans (Cheung & Nguyen, 2001), Korean Americans (Choi, Bempechat, & Ginsburg, 1994), and Chinese Americans (Wu, 2001). The cultural value of prioritizing educational endeavors over personal or social endeavors may shape parents' involvement practices at home. In

their attempt to instill the value for education in their children, Asian American parents limit the amount of time their children engage in non-school-related activities (Schneider & Lee, 1990; Yao, 1985) and require their children to spend a certain amount of time each day on schoolwork (Schneider & Lee). Asian American parents thus indirectly communicate to their children that education and academics come first.

Largely because of their respect for authority and value for education, Asian American parents are more likely to participate in what Chao (2000) has termed *structural involvement*, rather than the more often examined *managerial involvement*. Managerial involvement includes direct hands-on parental practices (e.g., directly teaching or tutoring children, participating in school activities and events), while structural involvement includes indirect parental practices (e.g., providing additional academic practice opportunities such as workbooks, exerting control over when and with whom to play and when and where to do homework), which shape the child's home environment to be conducive to learning. Although both Asian American and European American parents engage in both types of involvement, Asian American parents tend to be higher in structural involvement, while European Americans tend to be higher in managerial involvement (Chao, 2000; Choi et al., 1994). When Asian American parents do engage in managerial involvement, it tends to be at home through teaching their children basic academic skills (Huntsinger et al., 2000).

Asian American and European American¹ parents differ in how they provide structure at home for their children. Asian American parents are more likely to limit their children's playtime with friends and time watching television, as these activities detract from the time they may participate in academic-related activities (Choi et al., 1994; Yao, 1985). Also, Asian American parents often plan out of school events or enroll their children in out of school classes that involve academic, school-related activities (e.g., music, art, language, mathematics), rather than activities that typically are not school related and do not require persistence at an academic or cognitive task, such as shopping or going to the movies (Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993; Schneider & Lee, 1990). Thus, Asian American parents are helping their young children learn basic academic skills as well as how to structure their time and maintain focus on a cognitive task. These indirect involvement practices represent an important aspect of how Asian American parents can effectively prepare their children to enter the more structured environment of the first grade classroom.

The Transition to First Grade

First grade classrooms typically are more structured and academically focused than are kindergarten classrooms. Although much of the research on the transition to school focuses on children's transition into kindergarten, the transition to first grade may be equally important in children's early school experiences, yet has received relatively little attention (Entwistle & Alexander, 1998; Vecchiotti, 2003). In most cases, the purpose of kindergarten is to prepare children for first grade, and despite the fact that these two environments may have similar settings (i.e., the same elementary school building), there are several clear distinctions between the environments in terms of the demands and kinds of stimulation children experience. For example, Vecchiotti explains that the transition to first grade requires children to move from a child-centered, relatively informal academic program (although more academically focused than preschool) to a teacher-centered, formal academic curriculum. More specifically, she suggests that kindergarten children "typically have circle time, dramatic play, and learning centers (e.g., blocks, science, free writing), but in first grade children often have individual desks, subject periods, and more paper-pencil work" (p. 10). In other words, the increasingly structured environment children experience during the transition to first grade often requires children to work individually and to focus on a task for longer periods of time. Thus, Asian American parents' structural involvement at home may help their children succeed academically during this early school transition by providing an environment that is consistent with first grade, which may be particularly important when the kindergarten classroom is not as structured or academically focused.

There is, of course, variation in children's kindergarten attendance, the type of kindergarten program children attend, and the degree to which these programs provide continuity with both the first grade classroom and the child's home environment.² Perhaps most importantly, full-day kindergarten programs may be more consistent with the first grade environment by exposing children to more advanced reading and math and by requiring children to spend more time focused on a particular activity (Walston & West, 2004). When children are in kindergartens that are less continuous with first grade, the home environment may become particularly important for providing that continuity. Regardless of the type of kindergarten children attend, parents are most likely to be the main agents of socialization that follow children throughout their formal schooling, therefore being an optimal source for facilitating continuity during the transition to first grade.

Variation in parent involvement and the importance of continuity during the transition may best be understood by taking an ecological approach. The ecological model indicates that the transition to first grade may be influenced by multiple factors (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Ecological theory highlights the interrelations among multiple contexts and individuals (e.g., families, peers, teachers, schools, communities, cultures, etc.) that can influence children's ability to negotiate the new demands of the formal school environment, which, in turn, can have important consequences for children's subsequent achievement and adjustment throughout the rest of their formal education and beyond (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1997; Pianta, Kraft-Sayre, Rimm-Kaufman, Gercke, & Higgins, 2001; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Individuals are influenced by the settings in which they live (microsystem), the connection between these settings (mesosystem), the larger social, political, and economic conditions (exosystem), and the attitudes and ideologies of the culture to which they belong (macrosystem). The multiple levels of the ecological model influence the degree to which children experience a harmonious transition into formal schooling, which, in turn, can have a substantial impact on their future development. The parents' macrosystem (cultural values and beliefs), as previously discussed, is one important influence that shapes their involvement practices, and, in turn, children's experiences during the transition to first grade. Children's mesosystem influences (i.e., connection between the kindergarten classroom, first grade classroom, and home environment), may be particularly relevant for understanding their experiences of continuity across contexts.

Continuity During the Transition

The concept of continuity in development most often refers to internal continuity (e.g., gradual changes in personality characteristics, cognitive ability, social skills, etc.; see Caspi & Roberts, 1999), but because the present analysis focuses on continuity across contexts (home, kindergarten, and first grade), greater emphasis is placed on external continuity. External continuity involves the degree to which the structure and expectations of one environment prepare children for the structure and expectations of the next environment (Mayfield, 2003; Rutter, 1996; Sugarman, 2001). Several researchers have pointed to the discontinuity between home and school expectations and support for learning as important factors in children's low school performance (Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996; Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998; Swap, 1993). External continuity may be experienced when the nature of the required tasks and the overall organization of the pre-transition environment prepare children for

the tasks and organization of the post-transition environment. Thus, children whose kindergarten classroom or home environment is highly structured and academically focused should experience greater external continuity during the transition to first grade. External continuity also may be evidenced when the child's skills and abilities developed in one environment match those that are needed to be successful in the new environment. In the case of the transition to first grade, external continuity would be evidenced if the kindergarten and home environments have helped the child develop the skills she or he will need in first grade. As previously mentioned, the move from kindergarten to first grade often is marked by increased structure, time-on-task, academically focused tasks, and independent work. Thus, children with strong basic academic skills, as well as skills such as cognitive self-control (i.e., the ability to focus on and persist at a task) and more general self-regulation are likely to function better in the first grade environment than are children whose development of these skills lags behind (Arnold et al., 1999; McLelland, Morrison, & Holmes, 2000; Normandeau & Guay, 1998).

While parent-school contact may be a major source of external continuity during the transition for European American children, there may be other sources of external continuity that allow for a successful transition for Asian American children. One skill that is particularly important for children to develop during the transition to first grade is cognitive self-control (Normandeau & Guay, 1998; Raver, 2002). First grade children typically encounter formal classroom worksheets and academic homework for the first time (Vecchiotti, 2003), requiring them to focus on the assignment while blocking out other competing demands for attention, such as their desire to play or watch television. Thus, children who are better able to regulate their cognitive processes may be less likely to become frustrated and "act out," or demonstrate problem behaviors, than their less cognitively mature classmates (Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999). In a short-term longitudinal study, Normandeau and Guay (1998) found that cognitive self-control toward school tasks reduced the negative effect of children's preschool aggressive behaviors on their subsequent first grade achievement. Cognitive self-control also is helpful in building relationships with other children and with teachers (Ladd et al.), thus facilitating further development of appropriate social skills. These social skills, in turn, may be related to later classroom behaviors (see Raver, 2002, for review), although a recent meta-analysis on the development of children's social/behavioral skills suggests a high degree of instability over time (La Paro & Pianta, 2000). Children's cognitive self-control may be more directly related to their academic success, not only during the transition to first grade but throughout their education (Alexander, Entwistle, & Dauber, 1993; Kurdek & Sinclair, 2000). Children who

can focus on a task are likely to better learn the academic skills and perform better on academic tests (Alexander et al.). Also, because education is a series of graded steps (Entwistle & Hayduk, 1988), getting off to a positive academic start early can set children on positive trajectories throughout the rest of their education. Thus, cognitive self-control not only is an important skill enabling children to perform the tasks of a student, but also may serve as a mediator for preschool behavior and elementary school achievement during the transition to formal schooling.

The structural involvement practices of Asian American parents may help their children develop cognitive self-control, thus providing the external continuity that may be lacking in their kindergarten to first grade transition. Limiting time watching television, providing extra workbooks, and specifying required time to do schoolwork may help children gradually learn how to focus on and persist at a task. With less time to develop these skills in kindergarten classrooms, particularly in half-day kindergartens, structural involvement at home can help facilitate the transition. Normandeau and Guay (1998) thus provide insight into the mechanisms by which parents' structural involvement may help children experience greater external continuity during the transition to first grade. These links, however, are theoretical, as there does not appear to be any literature directly examining children's cognitive self-control as a mediator of the relationship between structural involvement and children's behavioral and academic outcomes during the transition to first grade.

Other aspects of structural involvement, such as providing workbooks and extra homework or enrolling children in additional academic classes, help children master the basic academic skills they will need in first grade. This may be an important aspect of providing continuity for those children enrolled in half-day kindergartens who may not spend as much time on specific academic subjects at school (Walston & West, 2004). Finally, as previously mentioned, parents who use structural involvement to prioritize academics at home (e.g., by requiring children to complete school work before playing or watching television) may reinforce the value of education and doing well in school. Thus, children learn from an early age that time spent focused on academic work is valued more highly than time spent watching television or engaging in other non-academic tasks. This value is increasingly emphasized in first grade, as amount of free play time decreases and time on academic tasks increases.

Within-Group Variation

It may be inappropriate to assume that all Asian American parents will become involved in their children's early school experiences in the same way. Just as current research has highlighted variation among Asian American sub-

ethnic groups in children's academic performance (Blair & Qian, 1998), it is likely that within-group variation exists in parents' involvement practices. The majority of research on structural involvement has been conducted with Chinese American parents, and much less is known about the practices of parents from other Asian backgrounds. Recent research conducted with immigrant parents from Cambodia suggests that they do not show high levels of structural or managerial involvement when compared with Portuguese and Dominican American parents (García Coll et al., 2002). While this particular study did not compare Cambodian parents with other Asian American parents, the overall low scores on home structural involvement suggest that there may be variation among ethnic sub-groups of Asian American parents. However, structural involvement was defined as the existence of curfews and parents' rules about determining suitable playmates for their children, neither of which directly assessed parents' education-related structuring of the home environment.

South Asian parents also appear to demonstrate low levels of managerial involvement, but less is known about their structural involvement. Bhattacharya (2000) found that South Asian immigrant parents were eager to help their children at home, but expressed concern that their language skills and own educational experience would limit their ability to engage in the type of involvement requested by the school (direct help with homework). Perhaps if the school had suggested more indirect structuring of the home environment (time devoted to homework, providing a space for the child to focus on school work, etc.), the parents would have felt more comfortable and more effective in supporting their children's education.

Although researchers have examined parent involvement in specific Asian American groups, including Cambodian Americans (García Coll et al., 2002), Chinese Americans (Huntsinger et al., 2000), Japanese Americans (Shoho, 1994), Vietnamese Americans (Hwa-Froelich & Westby, 2003), and South Indian Americans (Battacharya, 2000), parent involvement is defined and measured differently across these studies, and there does not appear to be any literature that directly compares the involvement practices across ethnic sub-groups of Asian American parents. Existing research does point to several potential factors that could influence variation among Asian American parents in their involvement practices, including their level of assimilation or acculturation to the dominant European American culture, language-speaking abilities, and socioeconomic status.

Asian American parents with a weaker connection to the education-related values of the Asian culture, combined with a stronger connection to dominant European American values, may be more likely to engage in parent-school contact. It is important to recognize that many parents may want to engage in

parent-school contact, but their lack of familiarity with the customs and values of American school systems or inability to communicate effectively with school staff and personnel may limit their ability to do so (Hwa-Froelich & Westby, 2003). In fact, Asian American parents who are more proficient in English are more likely to engage in managerial involvement (Garcia Coll et al., 2002; Huss-Kessler, 1997), and later generation Asian American parents, who themselves went through the United States educational system, feel more comfortable engaging in school events and interacting with teachers and school personnel (Shoho, 1994). Adler (2004) found that Hmong parents demonstrated high levels of managerial involvement in their children's elementary school, which was located in a district with a high percentage of Hmong residents, had a multicultural curriculum, developed a separate Parent-Teacher Organization specifically for Hmong parents, and employed several Hmong administrators, faculty, and staff. This study supports the idea that it is not solely the responsibility of Asian immigrant and Asian American parents to adapt to different cultural values, but that schools need to create welcoming and culturally sensitive environments that allow parents to feel comfortable participating in their child's education.

It is important to point out that research has not clearly established a positive link between parent-school contact and children's school adjustment or achievement during the transition to first grade for Asian American families. Issues of communication and assimilation have been considered a major barrier to parent-school contact for Asian Americans, but if parent-school contact does not significantly impact Asian American children's achievement and adjustment during the first grade transition, perhaps researchers and practitioners need to rethink how parents' language skills and assimilation influence parent involvement. Until research clearly has established a relationship between parent-school contact and children's success during the transition to first grade for Asian American families, we should use caution in suggesting that parent-school contact among Asian American parents needs to increase.

Another factor influencing within-group variability in Asian American parent involvement is socioeconomic status. Researchers have established a relationship between Asian immigrants' region of origin (e.g., East Asian, Southeast Asian) and socioeconomic status, with those from Southeast Asian countries (e.g., Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia) having access to fewer resources and living in higher rates of poverty than families from East Asian countries (e.g., Japan, Korea, China; Rumbaut, 1997). Because research also suggests that socioeconomic status influences whether or not parents participate in school activities or events (Beyer, 1995; Desimone, 1999; Lareau, 1987), there may be a difference in parent-school contact among ethnic sub-groups of Asian

American parents. Parents with limited financial resources who want to participate in school events may lack the necessary transportation, time off work, or child care for younger children to do so. In addition to parents' financial resources, their overall level of education (another indicator of socioeconomic status) could impact their involvement. It is possible that parents with lower levels of education may be less able to assist their children with homework. Although this would unlikely be a problem for children transitioning into first grade (as most first grade homework would be quite basic), it could become a problem as children enter higher grades. Instead, it may be more likely that lower levels of education among parents might contribute to their overall educational aspirations for their children. This could work in two ways. On one hand, parents lacking higher levels of education may not be able to appreciate the opportunities it offers and therefore may not see the point in their children getting a high level of education. On the other hand, parents lacking education may be even more likely to promote educational attainment among their children so that their children will not have to "suffer" in lower level jobs the way the parents themselves do.

The factors contributing to within-group variation often are seen as barriers to parent involvement when the traditional definition of parent involvement—parents' participation in school events and activities—is used. It may be that researchers and practitioners need to think of language, assimilation, and SES not as barriers, but rather as parameters that are important for understanding how Asian American parents help children make the transition to first grade. Furthermore, if the way in which parents become involved is consistent with their cultural beliefs and values, it is more likely to be effective than if parents do not understand why it is important or how to meet the requests of the school to become involved (Bhattacharya, 2000; Hwa-Froelich & Westby, 2003; Lee & Manning, 2001). Compounding this problem is a lack of adequate cultural and linguistic resources in schools to make all Asian American parents feel welcome.

Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

Very little research has examined Asian American parent involvement practices (including factors affecting within-group variation), the relationship between structural involvement and children's outcomes, and the mechanisms by which parent involvement of any kind can provide greater continuity during the transition to first grade. Studies that have directly examined Asian American parents' involvement have highlighted structural involvement as an important way in which parents prepare their children for first grade.

There may be several reasons for the lack of research on Asian American parent involvement in early education, including a lack of large-scale national studies including Asian American young children. The National Center for Education Studies (NCES) recently has conducted large-scale data collection on children's early education, following children from kindergarten through third grade. This study, the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), includes an oversampling of Asian American children and parents and includes several variables addressing parent involvement, which should lead to more research on Asian American parent involvement during the transition to school. Primarily because of the existence of a large-scale national study on middle school and high school children, the National Education Longitudinal Study: 1988 (Ingels, Abraham, Karr, Spencer, & Frankel, 1990), there is more literature on Asian American parent involvement for older children. However, because recent research has shown that Asian Americans are even less likely to participate in managerial involvement when their children are older (Leong, Chao, & Hardin, 2000), findings on Asian American parent involvement in high school may not be relevant for understanding earlier involvement during the transition to school.

Prior studies that have considered ethnic or racial background typically have compared levels of parent-school contact between ethnic minority and majority groups, assuming the majority group as the baseline comparison. Much of this research illustrates that European American parents become more involved than do ethnic minority parents (e.g., Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Taken together with the findings that parent involvement in European American families positively predicts children's achievement and adjustment, this research often leads to the conclusion that something must be done to increase the parent-school involvement levels of ethnic minority parents. However, ecological theory suggests that a more appropriate and useful approach to understanding families and children involves consideration of the cultural norms and values originating from the family's ethnic background (Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1996; Feng & Cartledge, 1996; Wong & Rowley, 2001). It may not be the case that parent-school contact helps Asian American children do well in school. There is a clear need for research that directly examines the cultural factors that shape parents' involvement practices and the mechanisms by which different involvement strategies influence children's early school success. Qualitative studies that involve interviewing Asian American parents and/or observing their home environment could shed light on the variety of ways in which Asian American parents become involved, especially with respect to structural involvement. Such an approach also would allow greater understanding of how cultural values shape involvement practices.

Examining parent involvement in cultural context is one avenue for broadening the traditional perspective on how parents become involved in their children's early education, and what types of parent involvement are important for continuity in children's early school transitions. It appears that Asian American parents are highly concerned with preparing their child to take on the student role in terms of learning how to self-regulate (both cognitively and emotionally) and focus on and persist at tasks. They may do this by helping their children structure their out of school time to focus on school-related work and by providing opportunities to practice self-regulation skills by assigning additional schoolwork at home. The transition to school involves an increased demand for these skills, all of which are useful as children become students. Whether or not Asian American parents' involvement practices include direct teaching of academic skills or participation in school activities, their emphasis on developing other important skills (e.g., cognitive self-control) may prepare children to deal with the previously described external demands and environmental shifts they will encounter during the transition to school. However, it is not necessarily the case that researchers and educators should emphasize parents' use of structural involvement to all families. First, very little research has examined the statistical relationship between structural involvement in the home and children's academic achievement and social/behavioral skills during the transition. Until this research is available, making recommendations to increase structural involvement among *all* parents is unwarranted. Nonetheless, educators and other school practitioners should consider recommending structural involvement on an individual basis to the parents of children who are struggling with the transition to school, particularly if managerial involvement does not seem to be a practical or culturally sensitive option.

Parents' involvement at home is not a new concept, and even the idea of structural involvement has been addressed in the literature (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In fact, three general areas of non-school involvement have been conceptualized, including helping (e.g., assisting with homework), discussing (talking to child about school), and monitoring (limiting amount of time child watches television; Ho & Willms, 1996). Parental monitoring is most closely related to the idea of structural involvement. Although research has indicated that Asian American parents tend to engage in structural involvement, the literature has fallen short in making specific recommendations for parents about how to engage in this type of involvement. Most examples in the literature target parents of children in higher grades and are limited to suggestions such as "restricting television viewing" or, more generally, "supervising time use and behavior." These are good general guidelines, but there are more specific suggestions teachers can give parents for enhancing their indirect support at home.

First, parents can provide the physical space necessary to engage in schoolwork. Designating a specific area of the home as the “school work” area will ensure that children have the space needed to do school-related work and will emphasize the importance of education. Second, parents can make sure to prioritize school work by ensuring it is completed before children engage in other activities (e.g., playing with friends). More specifically, parents can set up daily quiet time in the home, when both parents and children are doing something educational. During this time, parents can read and/or be available to their children for help with homework. In addition to emphasizing the value of education, this daily focused time also will allow children to develop cognitive self-regulation, which I previously have indicated may be particularly important for children during the transition to school. Third, parents can limit the amount of time children may devote to non-educational television programs or other media entertainment that may detract from their cognitive and educational development. Instead, parents can promote educational programs (e.g., Sesame Street) or games. Finally, if financial resources are not an issue, parents can enroll their children in academically related out of school activities (e.g., music classes, art classes, language classes), as long as children are enthusiastically participating and not begrudging the experience.

Further ideas for structural involvement may be generated as researchers continue to examine home involvement practices, particularly among Asian American families. All of the suggestions presented above, if done with care (i.e., taking into consideration children’s interests), may help children develop excitement for learning as well as basic underlying skills, such as cognitive self-control, that will help them adjust to formal education.

The impact of the early school transition on children’s development may have long-term effects not only on achievement and adjustment, but on motivation, high school graduation, employment, and possibly even contributions to society in later life (Campbell & Ramey, 1995; Gallagher, 1991). It is therefore crucial that psychologists and educators understand the contributors to children’s achievement and adjustment during these important early years. The increasing number of ethnic minority children in a school system traditionally targeted for middle- and upper-middle-class European American families also calls for research on involvement practices of families from different cultural backgrounds. Such information would shed light on individual differences in children’s early achievement and adjustment and may provide additional avenues for early intervention.

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Endnotes

¹ I make several comparisons between Asian American and European American (i.e., non-Hispanic white) parents because European Americans are the dominant cultural group in the United States. As such, the majority of research has focused on this group and most educational institutions in the United States tend to be based on European American values. Thus, the purpose of this comparison is to highlight how a non-dominant cultural group's children are doing equally well, if not better, despite differences in parent involvement.

²With an increasing number of full-day kindergartens, researchers have begun comparing the experiences of children enrolled in full-day and half-day programs. Results from a nationally representative sample of kindergartens indicate that the percentage of time children spend in different instructional activities (e.g., teacher-directed whole class, small group, child-selected, etc.) is similar across programs (Walston & West, 2004). For instruction in specific academic subjects, however, children in full-day kindergarten classes spend more time during the day in these learning activities, probably because they have more time to do so, and are exposed to more advanced academic skills compared to children in half-day kindergarten classes. Although the purpose of this paper is to examine the role of parent involvement in the transition to first grade and not to argue for or against full-day kindergarten programs, emphasizing the variability in kindergarten experiences highlights individual variability in transition experiences.

Susan R. Sy is an assistant professor of psychology at California State University, Fullerton. Her research and teaching interests focus on cultural and family influences on children's educational transitions. Correspondence concerning this article may be directed to Susan R. Sy, Department of Psychology, California State University, Fullerton, 800 N. State College Rd., Fullerton, CA 92831.

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