

Parental Influence on Children's Talent Development: A Case Study With Three Chinese American Families

Echo H. Wu
Hong Kong Institute of Education

This paper explores the influence of parenting beliefs and practices on children's talent development through a specific perspective of several Chinese American families with gifted children. In-depth interviews were employed to collect data from the parents, and research questions focused on the daily practice of parenting and parents' beliefs concerning how to nurture high achievement among children. Findings of this study include evidence of a sense of responsibility for parenting, a high level of confidence over their children's future, and a mixed strategy of parenting that combines traditional Chinese parental expectations with an adopted Western notion of respect for a child's own decision making.

Research indicates that there are a variety of issues, such as giftedness or innate ability, intrapersonal components, and various environmental factors, that may influence children's talent development. Parenting is considered to be one of the most influential factors, especially in early childhood, as it is thought to contribute directly to the talented performance of children. According to research (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1993; Freeman, 2001; Rubin & Chung, 2006; VanTassel-Baska & Olszewski-Kubilius, 1989), parents and other significant family members play pivotal roles in the development of gifted and talented children, not only in nurturing the academic performance of children but also in facilitating their social-emotional development (Feldman, 1999; Gross, 2004; Gross & Vliet, 2005; Moon, 2003; Nugent, 2005; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2002).

Echo H. Wu is Assistant Professor in Early Childhood Department at the Hong Kong Institute of Education.

Journal for the Education of the Gifted. Vol. 32, No. 1, 2008, pp. 100–129. Copyright ©2008 Prufrock Press Inc., <http://www.prufrock.com>

Literature on cultural matters in education has provided the premise that different cultures present different tools, habits, and assumptions that significantly influence human thoughts and behavior (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). Thus, people from different cultural backgrounds may hold different beliefs about, and perceptions of, the role of parents and families, as well as different ideas about giftedness (Wu, 2006). In Asian countries, particularly in a Chinese context, innate ability is regarded as being less influential than factors like effort (Wu, 2005). Although self-effort and environmental factors have been paid much attention, it seems that in Western societies the importance of innate ability has been dominant and has influenced parents and others in their perceptions of learning and achieving (Wu, 2006). Such a focus on effort and hard work might be a unique feature among Chinese American people, as compared to general American parents who might pay more attention to the importance of innate ability. One would assume that Chinese parents who have lived in the U.S. for many years may combine their Chinese traditional beliefs and practices with what is valued in the American culture.

There is an abundance of research on culture and parenting styles and their influences on children's academic outcomes, in and out of the U.S. (Chan & Moore, 2006; Dandy & Nettelbeck, 2002a; Glasgow, Dornbusch, Troyer, Steinberg, & Ritter, 1997; Leung, Lau, & Lam, 1998; Rubin & Chung, 2006; Stewart, Bond, Abdullah, & Ma, 2000; Wu et al., 2002). There has been little research, however, that has specifically focused on the beliefs and practices of parents of gifted Chinese American students. This is remarkable given the fact that some proportion of the high percentage of Asian American students in gifted programs in U.S. schools are Chinese (Kitano & DiJiosia, 2000; Plucker, 1996). Most of the existing studies have focused on Caucasian children and their families (Moon, Jurich, & Feldhusen, 1998), or on parenting related to Asian American children in general (Leung et al., 1998; Rubin & Chung, 2006).

This study investigates the otherwise largely unexamined area of parenting of gifted Chinese American students. The paper begins with a summary review of some major themes from traditional Chinese philosophy on learning and achieving and traditional views of the relationship between Chinese parenting styles and children's out-

comes. Data from in-depth interviews collected from three Chinese American families are then presented with evidence of daily parenting practices. This is followed by an analysis of several major themes that emerged from the conversations. Implications will be discussed at the end of the paper.

The Influence of Confucianism on Chinese Parenting

The rich, and in many ways unique, civilization of China, which developed through more than two thousand years of eventful history, owes more to the impress of Confucius's personality and teaching than to any other single factor. (Smith, 1973, p. 9)

Throughout its history, China has been deeply influenced by Confucian philosophy and practices, not the least in its theories of learning and achieving. One might well expect this influence to appear in the parenting beliefs and practices of ethnic Chinese living in the U.S. and elsewhere today. For more than 2.5 millennia, Confucius (551–479 BC) has occupied a supreme place as the Great and Revered Teacher of the Chinese people. One of his key teachings was that of “Ren,” a word that conveys the notion of “a lifelong striving for any human being to become the most genuine, sincere, and humane person he or she can become” (Li, 2003, p. 146). To Confucius, “the goal for the individual is the development of personality until the ideal of a perfect man, a true gentleman, a sage is reached” (Smith, 1973, p. 60). According to Confucian philosophy, success is less the result of the individual's innate ability than it is of the individual's single-minded effort and consistent practice (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). Indeed, Chinese people closely associate educational achievement or personal success with effort and hard work, with differences in ability mattering less than developing one's potential to the fullest extent (Wu, 2005). This belief is a consistent theme of Confucius' two books, *The Analects* and *The Mean*, and finds myriad parallels in Chinese sayings and literature wherever the topics are success and achievement. These wise sayings, or proverbs, uniformly underscoring the importance of effort and hard work,

come from different dynasties and different parts of the country and have been standards conveyed through primers and textbooks for the young in almost every family in China for generations.

Some empirical and theoretical research (Chang, 1980; He & Chan, 1996; Lee, 1996) has provided evidence of the important influence of Confucian philosophy on Chinese thinking. He and Chan interviewed 50 Chinese professors and doctoral supervisors in China. The findings showed that the respondents believed that non-intellectual factors, such as effort, motivation, and volition, were the most important prerequisites for talented performance.

Many cross-cultural studies have found a bifurcation in the views of nature (i.e., success/failure due to innate ability) and nurture (i.e., success/failure due to effort) toward learning and achieving between the Asian and the Western. For example, a qualitative study revealed that Asian students tend to attribute success to effort and failure to lack of effort, while Westerners tend to attribute success and failure to ability and lack of ability, respectively (Watkins, 1996). Another study showed that success is more often attributed to ability in the U.S. while it is attributed to hard work in Asia (Stevenson, Lee, & Stigler, 1986). The cross-nationally calibrated IQ tests in this study show that Asian students have a much more rigorous curriculum, work at a faster pace, and study far more at school and at home. Gardner (1995) made the following comment:

Genetics, heredity, and measured intelligence play no role here. East Asian students learn more and score better on just about every kind of measure because they attend school for more days, work harder in school and at home after school, and have better-prepared teachers and more deeply engaged parents who encourage and coach them each day and night. Put succinctly, Americans believe (like Herrnstein and Murray) that if you do not do well, it is because they lack talent or ability; Asians believe it is because they do not work hard enough. (p. 31)

What has been explicitly indicated here is in accordance with the results of other studies demonstrating differences between the Asian and Western perspectives on learning and achieving.

A large cross-cultural project (Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1996) conducted with children in elementary schools and kindergartens that examined academic achievement and motivation among Chinese students combined various methods, including achievement and cognitive tests, interviews with parents and teachers, and classroom observations. More than 20,000 students were included in this 12-year study. The findings provide evidence to support the widespread belief in the Confucian value that education is playing a critical role in people's lives, especially in terms of providing the chance for a better living.

In the U.S., home environment and parental encouragement, along with the drive to save a family's "face," are all major issues that affect Asian American students' achievement (Braxton, 1999). The high academic achievement of Asian Americans is frequently related to their cultural influences, and it seems that talented performance is a result of the interaction among immigration selectivity, higher than average levels of premigration and postmigration socioeconomic status, as well as ethnic social structures (Zhou & Kim, 2006).

Research on Chinese Parenting

Traditional Chinese thinking may have a pivotal role in determining the specific characteristics of Chinese parenting. According to this tradition, parents should be good role models for their children, parents should be involved in their child's education, achievement is preponderantly the result of effort rather than innate ability, and high motivation and perseverance are very important in learning.

Research studies conducted both in and outside of China have examined the above issues through various lenses. For instance, results of a qualitative study (Chi, 2003) with parents interviewed in a rural village in China showed that the parents of high-achieving children were more involved in their children's education and were more knowledgeable about their children's school performance. A meta-analysis of research literature on parental involvement and children's academic achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001) showed a strong relationship between parents' expectations and students' educational performance. A study of gifted secondary school students in Hong Kong (Chan, 2005) found that the students themselves

perceived family cohesion and parental expectations as consistently important predictors of their academic achievement. A study of primary school students and their parents in Mainland China (He, Shi, & Luo, 2006) showed that parents of gifted children had significantly higher scores than parents of nongifted children on three parenting dimensions: educational values, efficacy for their children, and parent-child interaction.

A considerable number of studies of parenting beliefs and behavior have been carried out with overseas Chinese. Those people who migrate to other parts of the world tend to retain much of their Chinese cultural influence and way of life (Bond, 1986). They are noted for having a strong identification with the culture of their place of origin, and there is a great degree of cultural homogeneity among Chinese people (Lai & Ishiyama, 2004). A study of immigrant Chinese parents in Canada (Lai & Ishiyama, 2004) showed that many expressed the desire to be involved in their children's education, and they often regard education as the route to their children's success in the future. Similarly, two studies in Australia have shown parents from Asian backgrounds have higher academic standards and higher aspirations for their children's education, compared with Anglo-Saxon Australian parents. Another quantitative study (Dandy & Nettelbeck, 2002b) involved a survey of 239 Australian parents from Chinese, Vietnamese, and Anglo-Saxon cultural backgrounds. The results of this study suggest that parental expectation and support are important factors in facilitating children's academic achievement. A study of immigrant Chinese parents in Australia (Tse, 2005) revealed that many parents have high expectations of their children's performance at school, and Chinese Australian students try very hard to meet their parents' expectations. Phillipson (2006) confirmed that Chinese children work hard to achieve high performance to fulfill parents' and families' expectations.

The literature on parenting styles and practices raises the issues of so-called authoritative versus authoritarian parenting styles. The well-known parenting style typology of Baumrind (1971) identified three different patterns, or styles, of parenting, namely authoritarian (e.g., demand, control), authoritative (e.g., warmth, acceptance), and permissive parenting. Although Chinese parenting has commonly been described as more "authoritarian" or "controlling," this presumption

has been challenged by researchers who suggest that the notions of authoritarian and authoritative parenting do not reflect the Chinese cultural aspect of child rearing (Chao, 1994; Liu & Yussen, 2005), and Baumrind's parenting typology does not capture the key features of Chinese parenting (Leung, 2005). Researchers argue that relationships between parenting styles and students' academic achievement may differ from one culture to another and therefore may not be generalizable (Chao & Sue, 1996; Leung et al., 1998). Thus, it is understandable that the authoritarian parenting style, which is viewed negatively in Western cultures, has more positive effects and implications in traditional Chinese culture in which authoritarian parenting is perceived as a loving and concerned parenting style (Silverstein, 2000).

Generally speaking, the major themes derived from the literature concerning Chinese parenting include the emphasis on hard work and effort rather than on innate ability, the importance of parents' involvement in children's learning, and high expectations and academic standards for children. Although it is evident that Chinese people believe parental influence can make a big difference in their children's talent development, there are many questions to be answered. For example, what are the beliefs and attitudes of Chinese American parents toward their children's learning and achieving? What are the specific characteristics that these Chinese parents may have in their parenting practices in the U.S.? What is the role of parenting in their children's high achievement at school? And, what implications, if any, can be drawn in order that parents can more effectively foster giftedness and nurture talented performance? With the purpose of exploring the above questions, a qualitative study was conducted with parents from three families. The distinctive themes that emerged from the literature were used as a theoretical framework to guide the process of data collection as well as data analysis.

Research Design

Most of the studies conducted in the parenting area with Chinese American parents have used quantitative, variable-oriented approaches, have sought or focused on either some presumed causal relationship between parenting and children's achievement or on

the characteristic variables of parenting styles or patterns, and have sought determination and generalization from their findings. This study took a qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the beliefs and practices of certain Chinese American families with gifted and talented children. In addition to the aim of a fuller understanding of the phenomenon under study, this study also sought possible extrapolation to or illumination of similar situations (Hoepfl, 1997).

In-depth interviews were selected as the primary data collection method because the more open format allows researchers to flexibly follow up on informants' feelings and ideas, to probe responses, and to pursue unexpected or promising lines of inquiry (Bell, 1999). Qualitative research employs a naturalistic or interpretive paradigm that seeks to understand a phenomenon in specific, real-world settings where "the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest" (Patton, 2002, p. 39). Such studies can help researchers understand how participants explain a phenomenon in a particular context within which the participants function, as well as the impact of this context on their function (Maxwell, 2005). In the case of this study, the qualitative approach was suitable and helpful in understanding the functions of parenting of some Chinese families within an American context.

In order to determine the accuracy and credibility of the research findings, methods for establishing trustworthiness will be presented. Following Patton (2002), this study uses three methods to underwrite dependability and trustworthiness. First, I employed triangulation, specifically data triangulation (e.g., audiotapes and field notes), member checking, and theory triangulation (e.g., culture and discipline). Second, I am credentialed as a Chinese and a parent, I am a specialist trainer in gifted education, and I have connections with the participants and experience with the American context. Third, method, data, and findings are all analyzed with reference to contexts (Patton, 2002), rather than conclusion shopping, and with scrupulousness in following the evidence and adopting explanations that fit best.

The research questions are based on themes that arose from the literature, and each question was designed with reference to specific issues in the research. The interviews were conducted over the period of a month. After the first interview, questions were slightly adjusted

or added in order to obtain more information in the following interviews. After the transcription of the interviews, all participants (except one who had become ill) were contacted with some follow-up questions and a copy of the field notes, in Chinese, to review and to provide feedback.

Method

Participants

The participants were five parents of Chinese American families who had been in the U.S. for more than 5 years, had children in a gifted and talented program or who were excelling in specific areas, and were accessible to me as a researcher. Three families were chosen from a university town where I had been living and studying. It was a convenience sample, and the families were deemed to be typical Chinese American families in the university town; they may not generally reflect Chinese American parents in the U.S. Although there might be individual differences in terms of parenting beliefs and practices, it was assumed that interviewing other Chinese American parents in the town might yield similar outcomes.

Each of the families had two children ranging in ages from 2 to 18 years old. This study focused on the approach to parenting the first child in each family. This was because the second child was often much younger and consequently provided a more limited history for study, while the first child in each family was a high achiever at school and/or had demonstrated various talents. Of the three high-achieving children, two are girls and one is a boy. They were all enrolled in different county schools (one had recently graduated from high school), and all identified as gifted and participated in advanced classes or enrichment programs in their schools. I made contact with the families either at church or through friends. Consent forms were obtained, and a rigorous Institutional Review Board (IRB) process was conducted before the commencement of the study (IRB is a committee established to review and approve research involving human

subjects). None of the children are involved directly in this study. All of the names used are pseudonyms.

Procedures and Sites

All of the interviews were conducted in Chinese (Mandarin), the mother tongue of all the participants as well as the researcher. With the permission of the participants, all interviews were audiotaped, and field notes were taken during the conversation. These field notes were detailed and condensed written records that contained subtitles or key words of the conversations; the interviewees' tones, facial expressions, or body language; laughter, hesitation, or other gestures; as well as brief explanations of surroundings and contexts.

The participants were asked to complete a form about their demographic information and to answer several open-ended questions about their children (see Appendix A). The interviews were semistructured, led by broad probing questions, and supplemented with follow-up questions. The follow-up questions differed from one interviewee to another depending on the direction of the conversation. A list of questions was prepared in advance (see Appendix B).

The participants were contacted by phone to arrange the schedule for interviews. The preliminary plan of this study was to interview each parent individually. Jane's father could not participate because he was working in another city; Qiang's parents were interviewed together; and Mary's parents and Jane's mother were interviewed individually. Thus, there were a total of four interviews with five participants: two fathers and three mothers. The first interview was conducted with Jane's mother at the researcher's home, and it lasted 2 hours. This interview yielded a great deal of information and was helpful in adjusting the interview protocol.

The second interview was with Qiang's parents. We met in their house on a weekend, and the interview lasted 90 minutes. The third interview was with Mary's mother. The interview took place in an outdoor garden during a lunchtime break, and it took about 2 hours. The fourth and final interview was with Mary's father Nan in his Chinese grocery store. It was a weekday morning, which was regarded by Nan as the "quietest" time during the week. The interview ranged over 3 hours but half of this time was taken up with clients or phone calls.

In retrospect, the first and the third interviews were the most productive. The two girls' mothers were not at work, and the interviews took place in comfortable, relaxing environment free of interference or distractions. The second and the fourth interviews came with a few distractions, and the three interviewees were not always fully engaged in the interviews. However, further conversations with Hong and Nan on the phone and in the church provided some additional information. The interviewees were aware of the continuance of the data collection process.

Data Analysis

The data analysis employed methods of the qualitative approach, specifically a strategy recommended by Maxwell (2005) in which data collection and analysis were handled as two interacting steps of research. That is, data analysis followed the interview immediately and continued throughout the entire research project. This strategy allowed for revision and improvement of questions for subsequent interviews and for making data analysis at the later stage more efficient.

I transcribed the text verbatim and then translated it into English. Interview data were triangulated with the informal follow-up conversations. The data were then examined using open coding, a process for identifying themes and concepts, and then they were examined by using selective coding, a process for integrating and refining categories generated from open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Given that the purpose of this project was to explore the parenting beliefs and practices of the Chinese American families, the interview questions and the analysis of the data were guided by the theoretical framework that emerged from the literature, which focused mainly on three aspects: (a) concepts and beliefs about giftedness and talented performance; (b) family environment and parental involvement; and (c) parenting strategies and daily practice.

Results

The interviews reported in this study produced a wealth of material as to the beliefs and practices of the participants concerning parent-

ing. The findings presented here, however, are only representative of this abundance and detail and address only the most distinctive themes and categories.

Case 1

Jane was an 8-year-old girl who had been living with her parents in the U.S. since she was 3 years old. Although she did not understand any English when she first came here, she had learned to read and write in English quickly and well. In third grade, she was tested and accepted by the only homogeneous/pull-out gifted class in the school district. She excelled especially in reading and writing. She was a quiet and mature little girl who enjoyed playing with children older than her. Her father was previously a research assistant in a medical laboratory in a university hospital who then became a researcher for a medical company and moved with his daughter to another town. Jane's mother, Xian, was a homemaker until 1 year ago, when she became a part-time nursing student. She lived by herself in the university town during the weekdays and, on weekends, drove 2 hours to the city where her husband and Jane lived. Only the mother Xian was interviewed.

Interview With Xian. Jane's mother, Xian, was 38 years old. She had come to the U.S. at age 33 with her husband Yu and daughter Jane. Her second child, a 3-year-old girl, was living with her grandparents in China. Xian was an energetic and proactive lady who seemed very familiar with her daughter's school and teachers and was well-informed about the life of the town. Xian was the one who primarily took care of Jane, especially her academic progress.

She offered this comment on giftedness: "I believe every child is gifted. I don't think Jane is much smarter than other kids, but we try to help her develop good learning habits and get her interested in things." Before Jane and her father moved to another city, Xian would spend some time with Jane every day doing extracurricular exercises such as writing brief essays; going to painting, swimming, or ballet classes; or arranging social activities for Jane and for herself. As a third grader, Jane had developed good reading habits. Sometimes she would read for 2 hours before being asked by her parents to go

outside and play. Xian explained the development of Jane's learning habits, which were greatly influenced by a peer and by encouragement from parents:

The first year when we came here, Jane didn't want to learn to speak English, and she didn't want to read. We were quite worried. Then I found there was another Chinese girl in her class, and the little girl loved reading. I got to know the mother, and we arranged activities for the two girls. Jane was very much stimulated by her new friend, and she started to read books and did exercises and reading games we bought for her. After a year or so, she had no problem in reading and was even better than her classmates.

As with many Chinese parents, Xian used reinforcement strategies to encourage Jane on her reading and writing and for behaving well. Xian said, "At first I would reward her with stickers or points, but then Jane asked for money! She preferred to save the coins or nickels and then buy herself a nice present."

When asked about the influence of American culture on her parenting, she said:

Many Chinese friends pay much attention to their children's math. But I think since we're living in the U.S., English reading and writing are also very important . . . I noticed that American parents don't care much about their kids' school reports. I wish I could be like that. . . . I try to communicate with her as if she's an adult; at first this was quite difficult because all Chinese parents treat their child as a child. Ha ha . . .

Although Xian had put a lot of time and energy into Jane's education, she believed that what she was doing could not even compete with many other Chinese families. "Lots of Chinese parents give too many things for their kids to do. I guess the American parents are better at this point." But she explained, "It's my responsibility. It's the parents' responsibility." She said that parents needed to do their best for the children. "We provide her what we can, and we can see she's nice to others and knows to do right things most of the time. So we don't worry about her future too much. I believe she will do well."

Case 2

Qiang, 12, was born in the U.S. 1 year after his parents moved from China. Qiang was in the advanced eighth-grade classes at school and played “First Violin” in the city’s Youth Orchestra. He was a happy, confident boy who described himself as a “book lover.” He was a striker for his school soccer team and played soccer on the weekends in different locations. Qiang’s father, Bao, was a faculty member in the university, but he was on long-term sick leave at the time he was interviewed. Qiang’s mother, Hong, was working in the university and their second son had just turned 2 years old. She was very busy taking care of her sick husband and two sons while working full time. Both parents from Qiang’s family were interviewed.

Interview With Bao and Hong. Qiang’s parents Bao and Hong came to the U.S. after living in Sweden for 2 years. They had been in the university town since 1 year before Qiang was born. They went to a Chinese church with their two children every Sunday, and Qiang had been serving in the church as one of the musicians who would accompany the songs in worship. Hong, the mother, was 41, and Bao, the father, was 45; both of them were working full time until Bao was diagnosed with cancer several months prior to the interview. Busy as she was, Hong still volunteered to cook for the church luncheon during the interview.

Hong and Bao both mentioned several times the importance of nurturing self-control and independent learning in Qiang. Probably due to the fact that they both were busy, Bao was sick, and the younger son needed much attention, they set up rules with Qiang and taught him to be independent and mature. They required Qiang to follow a daily routine for studying and other activities. Two evenings each week, Hong drove her son to violin lessons and to rehearsal in Youth Orchestra. She also drove him to soccer games or practice twice a week. On other days, she reported, “Qiang knows he needs to practice violin for half an hour every day before he starts to do anything else.”

When explaining his beliefs on parenting and expectations for Qiang, Bao said:

I don’t think my son is gifted, but we’re confident that he has his own advantages. He has the passion in music and soccer,

so we provide him the chance to do those things. He's got some good habits now, although it was difficult at first . . . We do not expect him to be very successful—being a good person is indeed successful! That's why we took him to the church. He learned a lot there on how to become a good man. Actually we, as parents, are also learning from the church.

Normally, Chinese American people are not Christians before they leave China, but church has had a certain influence on Qiang's family. For instance, despite Bao's cancer, he and his family appeared calm and peaceful.

Hong mentioned her opinions of the difference between American and Chinese parenting styles,

Parenting instructions are surely different between Chinese and American people. Americans probably are more encouraging, and Chinese parents are more criticizing. Qiang was born in the U.S., and he's certainly growing up in more of an American way. But we still try to keep those fine Chinese traditions in our family and want him to understand and even accept the precious Chinese culture.

Although they were not worried about Qiang's academic and non-academic achievement, Hong and Bao were both concerned that Qiang might not have enough opportunities to be with his peers or to make more good friends. Bao said, "He was quite happy by himself sometimes, but it's very important to have some good friendship." He admitted that involving Qiang in various activities was a way to help him develop social skills.

Case 3

Mary, 18, lived in China for a year before joining her parents in the U.S. at age 4. Mary was an outstanding student and had been admitted to a prestigious university as an Echols Scholar. She was a straight-A student since junior high school, a brilliant writer, and a talented pianist who had achieved a high level of performance in playing piano. She was planning to become a doctor. Mary's father, Nan, had two master's degrees, but he decided to open a Chinese

grocery store in town and had been running the business for more than 10 years. Mary's mother, Hui, was a doctor in one of the most prestigious hospitals in China before she came to study and work in the local university hospital.

Interview With Hui. Hui, age 45, was a successful, accomplished female scholar who came to the U.S. 15 years ago when she was sponsored by the Chinese government. She was very articulate, confident, and full of warmth. She had two daughters, the second of whom was 12 years old. I was left with the impression that Hui paid much attention to her children. She attributed her parenting style to her own mother whom she regarded as the best mom—a funny, encouraging, brave, and ambitious person.

In regard to giftedness and talented performance, she commented,

I think some kids have higher abilities than others when they are born, for example, in the areas of math, chess, music, or memory. But to me that's not really important. I believe nurturing and developing talent and potential are more important. . . . The process of nurturing includes giving them a chance. You need to provide various opportunities for kids to try different things, otherwise you would not know whether they are interested in or good at one thing.

Because of her own experience, Hui had very strong opinions about training and practice. She believed they were very important, especially when a child was too young to understand what was good for him or her. She reported:

When Mary was little, she couldn't understand why the other kids didn't have to play piano every day. Sometimes I had to force her to practice. Mary is now so grateful for me to keep her learning piano. She has numerous comments from her peers saying that they are very regretful that their parents didn't insist them to play an instrument when they were young!

Hui brought her children to church, where Mary found the best place to make friends and to grow up into a kind and responsible young lady.

Although Hui had a mind full of traditional Chinese beliefs, after living in the U.S. for a long time, she was obviously comfortable combining Chinese tradition with the modern American environment.

Although I would be happy to see my children have good grades, like other Chinese parents, scores are not the number one thing for me to look at. I think their social-emotional health is more important. I encourage them to make lots of friends, which Mary really does very well . . . I provide them opportunities, but also give them flexibility and freedom. I quite appreciate some American parents' parenting style—they want their children to be happy, and that's very important to me too. I want my children to have happy lives in the future.

Interview With Nan. Nan came to the U.S. to join his wife even though he had a prestigious job in the Chinese government before he left Beijing. He earned two master's degrees in the U.S. and Canada and was well-known in town because everyone went to his store for Chinese groceries. The first thing he mentioned in the interview was, "I feel guilty about my children because I'm too busy to pay much attention to them!" Nan has a great memory, which was inherited by Mary. Similar to Hong, he did not think Mary was truly gifted. "She does very well in almost all the school subjects, but she doesn't really specialize in anything."

Nan believed parents needed to help children find their areas of interest, provide them with a healthy, optimal family environment, and give them guidance as well as confidence. He made similar comments to his wife about nurturance:

I think it's very rare that a child would prefer study to play. We need to nurture them, to help them realize what is important for them. Sometimes you even have to force them, for instance, to play piano, or to do some other things good for them. I think it's worthy to do so, since interest and passion can all be nurtured and developed through proper parenting instructions.

Nan thought it was important for parents to spend time with children, to be their friends, and to have good communication with

them, qualities he regarded as lacking in himself. However, like his wife, Nan was confident in his daughters' future. He felt, as parents, he and his wife were doing the right things for their children, and, as long as the children were listening and understanding, they would have a bright future. He pointed out the importance of being patient and of keeping children motivated and disciplined. "I think parenting is like molding a piece of clay. The child is raw clay, and parents need to be very careful and patient in making it a good statue."

Nan was determined that his children would learn Chinese well, understand Chinese culture and tradition, and keep the essence and pride of being Chinese. However, he also accepted the fact that his daughters had been influenced in many ways by American culture, attitudes, and life styles. "Probably influenced by those superstars or the society, our second daughter claims that one of her dreams was to marry a rich man!" He mentioned that it was unfair to say that only Chinese culture was best, and he admitted that Chinese people needed to learn from Americans to be kind and charitable, "to do volunteer jobs, or to serve the public and to help people. That's what Chinese lack."

Analysis

Among the many issues that the parents reported, some were constantly mentioned or emphasized by all interviewees. For instance, all of the parents paid great attention to their children's academic performance, but they did not care much about the children's innate abilities, nor were they worried about their children's future achievement. They were confident that their children could be talented in the future as long as they themselves were good parents. These participants believed it was the responsibility of all parents to encourage high achievement and to help their children fulfill their potential to the highest level.

Accordingly, the most distinctive themes that emerged from the data include (a) a high level of confidence for their children's future, which is closely related to the parents' beliefs about giftedness and talented performance; (b) a sense of responsibility to be a good parent, which is relevant to the emphasis on parental involvement and

high expectations for children; and (c) a mixed parenting strategy of daily practices that combine Chinese and American culture.

A High Level of Confidence

Parents in the three families, especially those of Mary and Qiang, tended to have confidence in their children's future and talent development. It seemed that the more a parent was involved in the children's learning process, the higher the confidence level of the parent about the child's future. Interestingly, such confidence was not based on the level of their children's giftedness, or nature, but on the level of their achievement, or nurture.

The concepts of giftedness and talent development may have directly facilitated the confidence level of these parents. For instance, Xian's beliefs about the distinctions between giftedness and talented performance reveal the value she places on nurturing a child's potential. "Giftedness is out of my control, but talent is what can be assured if I am a good parent. Talent can be nurtured and developed, but giftedness might be wasted and turn out to be useless," Jane's mother said confidently. She and her husband believed that every child has certain areas of advantage or giftedness, but such giftedness is not as important as having a family who can support and nurture the child's potential properly.

The other parents believed that the process of learning, or the nurturance of talent, was more important than the nature of a child's innate ability. This might have led to the fact that most of them were surprisingly confident about their children's school achievement and future. These parents believed that as long as they were involved actively in their children's learning process and they tried to be "good parents," their children's futures were more controllable, and the children would have more hope and possibility of achieving at higher levels.

Another explanation about the confidence of the parents may be related to these Chinese American parents' own background. All of the parents, including Jane's mother Xian, had high educational qualifications. They or their spouses had been capable enough to come to the U.S. to work or study, and they survived in a highly competitive university setting. This fact in itself might have provided a certain

level of confidence, not only about their own lives or careers, but also naturally, about their children's future. As mentioned in the literature review, Chinese students' exceptional high performance may be a result of the interaction between immigration selectivity and their higher than average socioeconomic status (Zhou & Kim, 2006).

A Sense of Responsibility

It was uniformly expressed by all the parents that it is the parents' responsibility to make sure their children have proper opportunities and a supportive environment in which to develop their talents and fulfill their potential. Even though both Bao and Nan, the two fathers interviewed, blamed themselves for not being able to spend much time with their children, they were grateful that their wives took good care of the children and the families.

A common stereotype of Chinese parents is that they are "pushy" and "controlling." However, such a stereotype has indeed been challenged by researchers who suggest that this notion reflects a Western view of parenting. Chinese parents believe—and have been acculturated to believe—that they have the primary responsibility or accountability for their children's school achievement, either academic or nonacademic. The more responsible and supportive they are, the higher the possibility of their children obtaining high achievement. This echoes a major idea of Confucian philosophy and *San Zi Jing* (Wisdom of Three Words), one of the most important literary works in Chinese history: Namely, that if a child is not achieving, it is probably the parents' fault.

According to the interviews, all parents considered themselves as being concerned about their children's education rather than pushy or controlling. They believed their children's achievement might well be reflective of the extent to which the parents gave support. Particularly, they held the traditional beliefs that effort and hard work were vital to achieve high performance, and, because young children did not have the judgment and instinct to put effort into learning, it was the parents' inescapable responsibility to encourage and direct children in order to nurture their talents.

For these parents, parenting responsibility involves participation and commitment to their children's study and afterschool activities.

For instance, Jane's parents took turns driving the daughter to ballet and swimming lessons, both of which Jane enjoyed very much; Qiang's mother spent a few evenings accompanying her son to violin lessons or soccer practice and games; Mary's mother put much effort into communicating with her daughter. All these were regarded as a responsibility of parenting and were accepted by the parents as natural duties.

A Combination of Chinese and American Parenting

All of the parents expressed their opinions about the difference between Chinese and American cultures. Although Qiang's parents had been living in the U.S. for many years, they believed that their parenting beliefs and practices were still deeply influenced by Chinese traditions. Qiang's parents considered themselves to be parenting in a "Chinese way"; nevertheless, they admitted that American culture might have had some effect on their lifestyles and even ways of thinking. This was especially the case when they were dealing with their son Qiang, who was born and grew up in the U.S. and who has taken on aspects of American culture. Similarly, although Mary's parents believed they communicated with their two daughters in a Chinese way, the girls' beliefs and behavior were, to some extent, more American than Chinese; the girls always had close friends and classmates around and might well be influenced by their American peers.

In contrast to China, America is a place with a variety of cultures, especially in a university town where students and scholars come from all over the world. It is unrealistic for these parents to rigidly adhere to their traditional culture without adopting, at least at certain points, the culture around them or adjusting their ideas or behaviors, particularly in the way they maintain relationships with children growing up in a different country. Younger generations are quick to settle in and accept the new environment. If parents cannot accept this point, it may lead to misunderstanding between the children and parents, and, even worse, it may hinder the further development of their children's giftedness and talent.

Conclusion and Implications

Because this study is based on a small number of interviewees, the findings are tentative and must be tested for their generalizability. The study does provide some unique findings and also raises interesting questions for future studies.

The major findings focus on the parent's confidence and sense of responsibility, both of which have arisen from the persistent belief that talented performance can be achieved by anyone striving for it rather than only by gifted children. These notions can be inspiring to all parents in a Chinese context, and, indeed, they also may have appeal to many people from other countries and cultural backgrounds. The implication is parents with children who have average ability can be more optimistic and confident of their children's future, and they may have more control and influence than they think over their children's future.

Parenting beliefs and values are varied in different ethnic groups or in different countries, and children's high achievement is influenced in different ways by certain parenting beliefs and practices in different cultures. Although each culture may have its own value and advantages in terms of parenting styles and strategies, it will be a very interesting topic for researchers to find out in the future whether a combination or mixture of parenting strategies or patterns drawn from different cultures can provide more effective and efficient ways to nurture talented performance in children.

The questions for future studies include: What are the similarities and differences of parenting beliefs and practices between Chinese American parents and Chinese parents in Mainland China? What effect, if any, do the parents' own educational backgrounds have on their beliefs and practices? Is there any difference between fathers' and mothers' beliefs about their children's talent development?

One likely implication of this study is that traditional Chinese beliefs about parenting have been substantiated by the participant's parenting practices and their children's talent development. In return, the reality of their children's high achievement reassures Chinese parents that being more involved in their children's education and having higher expectations for their children can lead to a better chance for their children to succeed.

Considering the relationship between the high performance of Chinese students in and outside of China and the strong parental and familial support that these students normally receive, it may be worthwhile for researchers to conduct more comprehensive studies pertinent to various topics concerning parenting. These issues include the influence of optimal family environment, the role of hard work and effort, and the pattern and nature of effective or “good” parenting practices that might be adaptable and feasible to the general population in various cultural contexts.

In summary, although parents should provide the most optimal family environment, maintain appropriate expectations for their children, stimulate their children’s motivation, get involved by giving more time and effort to the education of their children, and pay more attention to the parent-teacher relationship, the ultimate goal for all parents, including those of the gifted and talented, is to provide children with a happy childhood.

We must define the meaning of happiness for individuals with great talent. Too often we operate under the impression that conventional conceptions of happiness are universal in their appeal. Imposing this value on individuals with a drive to excel or create makes their lives more difficult. (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Arnold, n.d., p. 9)

References

- Baumrind, D. (1971). Current patterns of parental authority. *Developmental Psychology, 4*, 1–103.
- Bell, J. (1999). *Doing your research project: A guide for first-time researchers in education and social science* (3rd ed.). Buckingham, PA: Open University Press.
- Bloom, B. S. (1985). Generalizations about talent development. In B. S. Bloom (Ed.), *Developing talent in young people* (pp. 507–549). New York: Ballantine.
- Bond, M. H. (1986). *The psychology of the Chinese people*. Hong Kong, China: Oxford University Press.

- Braxton, R. J. (1999). Culture, family and Chinese and Korean American student achievement: An examination of student factors that affect student outcomes. *College Student Journal*, 33, 250–256.
- Chan, D. W. (2005). Family environment and talent development of Chinese students in Hong Kong. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 49, 211–221.
- Chan, L. K., & Moore, P. J. (2006). Development of attributional beliefs and strategies knowledge in years 5–9: A longitudinal analysis. *Educational Psychology*, 26, 161–185.
- Chang, C. (1980). *Confucianism: A modern interpretation*. Taipei, Taiwan: China Academy.
- Chao, R. K. (1994). Beyond parental control and authoritarian parenting style: Understanding Chinese parenting through the cultural notion of training. *Child Development*, 65, 1111–1119.
- Chao, R. K., & Sue, S. (1996). Chinese parental influence and their children's success: A paradox in the literature on parenting styles. In S. Lau (Ed.), *Growing up the Chinese way: Chinese child and adolescent development* (pp. 93–120). Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press.
- Chen, C., Lee, S., & Stevenson, H. W. (1996). Academic achievement and motivation in Chinese students. In S. Lau (Ed.), *Growing up the Chinese way: Chinese child and adolescent development* (pp. 69–91). Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press.
- Chi, J. (2003). Parental explanations for children's educational attainment: Evidence from rural China. In M. Sun, H. Fu, & Y. He (Eds.), *Research studies in education, Vol. 1* (pp. 1–12). Hong Kong, China: Faculty of Education, the University of Hong Kong.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Csikszentmihalyi, I. S. (1993). Family influences on the development of giftedness. In G. R. Bock & K. Ackrill (Eds.), *The origins and development of high ability* (pp. 187–206). Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons.
- Dandy, J., & Nettelbeck, T. (2002a). Research note: A cross-cultural study of parents' academic standards and educational aspirations for their children. *Educational Psychology*, 22, 621–627.

- Dandy, J., & Nettelbeck, T. (2002b). The relationship between IQ, homework, aspirations and academic achievement for Chinese, Vietnamese and Anglo-Celtic Australian school children. *Educational Psychology, 22*, 267–275.
- Fan, X., & Chen, M. (2001). Parental involvement and students' academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review, 13*(1), 1–22.
- Feldman, D. (1999). *Nature's gambit: Child prodigies and the development of human potential* (J. Limei, Trans. to Chinese). Taipei, Taiwan: Guiguan Press. (Original work published 1991)
- Freeman, J. (2001). Giftedness, responsibility and schools. *Gifted Education International, 15*, 141–150.
- Gardner, H. (1995). Cracking open the IQ box. In S. Fraser (Ed.), *The bell curve war: Race, intelligence, and the future of America* (pp. 23–35). New York: Basic Books.
- Glasgow, K. L., Dornbusch, S. M., Troyer, L., Steinberg, L., & Ritter, P. L. (1997). Parenting styles, adolescents' attributions, and educational outcomes in nine heterogeneous high schools. *Child Development, 68*, 507–529.
- Gross, M. U. M. (2004). *Exceptionally gifted children* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Gross, M. U. M., & Vliet, H. E. (2005). Radical acceleration and early entry to college: A review of the research. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 49*, 154–171.
- He, S. M., & Chan, X. Z. (1996). Lun chaochang jiaoyu [About gifted education]. *Modern Special Education, 31*, 12–15.
- He, J., Shi, J., & Luo, B. (2006). Parenting and children's cognitive development. *Gifted Education International, 22*, 86–100.
- Hoepfl, M. C. (1997). Choosing qualitative research: A primer for technology education researcher. *Journal of Technology Education, 9*(1), 47–63. Retrieved May 4, 2007, from <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JTE/v9n1/pdf/index.html>
- Kitano, M. K., & DiJiosia, M. (2000). Are Asian-Americans overrepresented in programs for the gifted? *Roper Review, 24*, 76–80.
- Lai, Y., & Ishiyama, F. I. (2004). Involvement of immigrant Chinese Canadian mothers of children with disabilities. *Exceptional Children, 71*(1), 97–108.

- Lee, W. O. (1996). The cultural context for Chinese learners: Conceptions of learning in the Confucian tradition. In D. Watkins & J. Biggs (Eds.), *The Chinese learners: Cultural, psychological, and contextual influences* (pp. 25–41). Hong Kong, China: Comparative Education Research Centre.
- Leung, C.-H. (2005). Modelling of parenting style—A cross-cultural study of Hong Kong Chinese and Anglo-Australian. *Journal of Basic Education*, 14, 23–47.
- Leung, K., Lau, S., & Lam, W. (1998). Parenting styles and academic achievement: A cross-cultural study. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 44, 157–172.
- Li, J. (2003). U.S. and Chinese cultural beliefs about learning. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 95, 258–267.
- Liu, Y., & Yussen, S. R. (2005). A comparison of perceived control beliefs between American and Chinese students about academic achievement. *The International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 29, 14–23.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Moon, S. M. (2003). Counseling families. In N. Colangelo & G. A. Davis (Eds.), *Handbook of gifted education* (3rd ed., pp. 388–402). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Moon, S. M., Jurich, J. A., & Feldhusen, J. F. (1998). Families of gifted children: Cradles of development. In R. C. Friedman & K. B. Rogers (Eds.), *Talent in context: Historical and social perspectives on giftedness* (pp. 81–99). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Nugent, S. (2005). Affective education: Addressing the social and emotional needs of gifted students in the classroom. In F. Karnes & S. Bean (Eds.), *Methods and materials for teaching the gifted* (2nd ed., pp. 409–435). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- Olszewski-Kubilius, P. (2002). Parenting practices that promote talent development, creativity, and optimal adjustment. In M. Neihart, S. M. Reis, N. M. Robinson, & S. M. Moon (Eds.), *The social and emotional development of gifted children* (pp. 205–212). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Phillipson, S. (2006). Cultural variability in parent and child achievement attributions: A study from Hong Kong. *Educational Psychology, 26*, 625–642.
- Plucker, J. A. (1996). Gifted Asian American students: Identification, curricular, and counseling concerns. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 19*, 315–343.
- Rubin, K. H., & Chung, O. B. (Eds.). (2006). *Parenting beliefs, behaviors, and parent-child relations: A cross-cultural perspective*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Silverstein, J. (2000). Parents of gifted culturally diverse youngsters. In G. B. Esquivel & J. C. Houtz (Eds.), *Creativity and giftedness in culturally diverse students* (pp. 193–214). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Smith, D. H. (1973). *Confucius*. London: Temple Smith.
- Stevenson, H. W., Lee, S.-Y., & Stigler, J. W. (1986). Mathematics achievement of Chinese, Japanese, and American children. *Science, 231*, 693–699.
- Stewart, S., Bond, M. H., Abdullah, A. S., & Ma, S. S. (2000). Gender, parenting, and adolescent functioning in Bangladesh. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 46*, 540–564.
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Subotnik, R. F., Olszewski-Kubilius, P., & Arnold, K. D. (n.d.). *Beyond Bloom: Revisiting environmental factors that enhance or impede talent development*. Retrieved August 28, 2007, from <http://www.apa.org/ed/cgepprint.html>
- Tse, T. (2005). *Expectation on academic excellence*. Retrieved in March 26, 2005, from http://www.parracity.nsw.gov.au/library/chinese_lecture
- Tweed, R. G., & Lehman, D. R. (2002). Learning considered within a cultural context: Confucian and Socratic approaches. *American Psychologist, 57*(2), 89–99.
- VanTassel-Baska, J., & Olszewski-Kubilius, P. (1989). *Patterns of influence: The home, the self, and the school*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Watkins, D. (1996). Hong Kong secondary school learners: A development perspective. In D. Watkins & J. Biggs (Eds.), *The*

-
- Chinese learners: Cultural, psychological, and contextual influences* (pp. 107–119). Hong Kong, China: Hong Kong University, Comparative Education Research Center.
- Wu, E. H. (2005). Factors that contribute to talented performance: A theoretical model from a Chinese perspective. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 49*, 231–246.
- Wu, E. H. (2006). Nurture over nature: A reflective review of Confucian philosophy on learning and talented performance. *Gifted Education International, 21*, 181–189.
- Wu, P., Robinson, C. C., Yang, C., Hart, C. H., Olsen, S. F., Porter, C. L., et al. (2002). Similarities and differences in mothers' parenting of preschoolers in China and the United States. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 26*, 481–491.
- Zhou, M., & Kim, S. S. (2006). Community forces, social capital, and educational achievement: The case of supplementary education in the Chinese and Korean immigrant communities. *Harvard Educational Review, 76*(1), 1–29.

**Appendix A
Parent Survey**

I. Please check the appropriate box or write down your answers:

(1) Gender: Male Female

(2) Age: _____

(3) Educational qualification: _____

II. Please answer the following questions:

(4) My child is gifted in the following area(s)

_____, _____, _____

More: _____, _____, _____

(5) I believe that parenting influence is:

not important moderately important

quite important

very important to my child's high achievements

(6) I believe in order to nurture children's talents, parents should:

_____, _____

_____, _____

_____, _____

_____, _____

_____, _____

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Interview Questions for Parents:

- (1) How do you understand the concepts of giftedness and talented performance?
- (2) What do you normally do in daily parenting practices?
- (3) How do you support and encourage your child's academic and nonacademic achievements, as well as his/her social-emotional development?
- (4) What are your beliefs and attitudes towards your child's learning and achieving?
- (5) How important do you think your parental and familial influence is to your child's talent performance?
- (6) How do you think parents in general can be more effective in fostering their children's giftedness and nurturing their talented performance?