

# What Do Parents Think? Middle-Class Chinese Immigrant Parents' Perspectives on Literacy Learning, Homework, and School-Home Communication

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## Abstract

This article reports on a sample of 26 middle-class Chinese immigrant parents' perspectives on their children's reading, writing, mathematics learning, and homework, and on the parents' involvement in and communication with mainstream American schools. Findings suggested both consistencies and discrepancies between their beliefs and practices. Areas of discrepancies include their reported involvement in their children's reading and their attitudes toward homework. However, the parents were more consistent in their beliefs and practices in writing and mathematics involvement. These consistencies and discrepancies may be influenced by the parents' familiarity with school instructions in the particular skill areas. These findings argue for more effort to enhance Chinese parents' knowledge base on how American school functions and to build stronger school-home communication and collaboration.

Key Words: Chinese immigrant parents, literacy beliefs, home practices, parental involvement, school-home communication

## Introduction

The idea of social and cultural contexts becomes important when it comes to the literacy instruction of students from diverse backgrounds. There is a

pressing need for schools to provide instruction that is meaningful and affirming to the cultural identities of students of diverse backgrounds. However, what literacy is, how it is learned, and what is practiced depends upon many socio-cultural factors of which schools are often not aware (Li, 2001, 2002, 2003). Across cultures, researchers (e.g., Au, 1998; Hartle-Shutte, 1993; Heath, 1983; Lopez, 1999; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) have pointed out that different homes engage in literacy on a regular daily basis, integrating it in socially and culturally significant ways via diverse languages and literacy traditions. Upon entering multicultural schools, learners of diverse backgrounds bring varied, rich experiences to the classroom; however, these experiences are often unrecognized or devalued, as the culture and language from home are deemed to have little to contribute to the curriculum (Au, 1998; Moll, 1999; Valdés, 1996). This neglect is often the result of teachers' insufficient understanding of students' languages and cultural practices at home (McCarthy, 1997, 1999; Nieto, 2002). There is an urgent need to bridge this knowledge gap.

With regard to literacy education, parents are often considered as children's first teachers. However, there exists great diversity in what parents believe and how they practice literacy at home (Li, 2002, 2004; Taylor, 1983; Valdés, 1996). For immigrant parents, the values they hold and the messages about educational expectations and school success they transmit to their children may be different from those advocated in school. Research demonstrates that these different values and expectations often result in discontinuity between school and home literacy goals (International Reading Association & NAEYC, 1998; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986). This discontinuity has also been considered as one of the major barriers for English language learners in achieving academic success (McCarthy, 1999; Serpell, 1997). This study aims to bridge this discontinuity by exploring middle-class Chinese minority parents' beliefs and roles in their children's literacy development.

The reasons behind the decision to focus on Chinese immigrants are many. One is that Chinese immigrants have become one of the largest growing immigrant groups in the United States in recent years. The U.S. Census Bureau (2001) reports that the nation's Chinese population has reached 2.4 million, a 48% increase since the 1990 census. The second is that in recent years the U.S. has witnessed an increase of middle-class Chinese immigrants who often came with resources – financial capital, training, and education. Unlike Asian immigrants prior to the 1980s who settled in urban ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown, the majority of these new immigrants settled in concentrated suburban areas and established new middle-class ethnic communities. The changes in these communities have also transformed the landscapes of the classrooms in the public schools. Many mainstream teachers in these suburban schools are

now teaching students with limited English proficiency. Since language and literacy practices – their functions, meanings, and methods of transmission, shaped by different social and cultural norms – vary from one cultural group to another (Au, 1998; Langer, 1987), this change in classroom demographics has added unprecedented challenges to mainstream classroom teachers' pedagogical practices that may not be congruent with the new Chinese middle-class parents' beliefs and their roles in their children's academic development.

Although Asian Pacific children have become one of the fastest growing populations in North American schools, they have received relatively little attention in educational research due to their particular minority status (e.g., as honorary whites, seen as willing to assimilate into the mainstream; Lo & Reyes, 2004) and/or the widespread "model minority" stereotypes (e.g., Asian children as high achievers who can succeed on their own; Li, 2003, 2005a). Within the limited research on the Asian student population since the term "model minority" was coined in the 1960s, scholars as well as the media have devoted much research to the search for explanations of Asian high achievement by comparing the Chinese with other ethnic groups (e.g., Kim & Chun, 1994; Peng & Wright, 1994; Sue & Okazaki, 1991). These studies, although they did not focus only on middle-class parents, have shed light on Chinese parents' beliefs and involvement in education.

Previous research on Chinese immigrants and their children's education has concluded that regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds and proficiency in English, Chinese immigrant parents place an exceptionally high value on education and are actively engaged in their children's education at home (Li, 2001, 2002, 2005b; Louie, 2001; Peng & Wright, 1994; Siu, 1994; Zhang & Carrasquillo, 1995). These two factors, values on education and parental involvement at home, are believed to be major factors that contribute to Chinese students' success in school (Hidalgo, Siu, & Epstein, 2004; Siu, 1998).

Several comparative studies have found that Chinese immigrant parents' cultural beliefs are fundamentally different from their mainstream counterparts. For example, Chinese parents are more likely than Anglo-American parents to engage their children in varying literacy activities every day or at least provide a nurturing literacy environment, and to provide structured and formal educational experiences for their children after school and on weekends (Chao, 1996; Siu, 1998; Xu, 1999). Research also concludes that Chinese immigrant parents (i.e., mothers) have different beliefs from Caucasian parents about their specific roles in their children's education. They not only place greater values on education and are willing to invest more in their children's education, but also use a more direct intervention approach to their children's schooling and learning (e.g., through teaching and tutoring at home) and convey a much stronger

belief that they can play a significant role in their children's school success (Chao, 1996). Furthermore, different from other ethnic parents, Chinese parents are more likely to take an active part in remedying the shortcomings of the school at home if they lack confidence in the school (Pang, 1990).

Studies have found that Chinese immigrant parents also hold different beliefs from mainstream parents about specific teaching practices. Chinese parents are reported to favor traditional, skill-based approaches over holistic principles of literacy learning (Anderson, 1995; Li, 2004, 2005). They are more concerned with basic literacy skills, monitoring, and correcting performance. They believe that teaching a child to print and write properly, checking for understanding of what a child has read, teaching a child how to spell correctly, and having a child recite a story s/he has read are the most important things they can do to help with their child's literacy learning. In terms of mathematics education, Chinese parents prefer more didactic methods and ask their children to spend more time practicing skills than do middle-class American parents (Huntsinger, Jose, & Larson, 1998). In addition, Chinese parents also appear not to recognize the effects sociocultural dimensions of literacy (such as providing role models and encouragement) may have on their child's literacy development.

Comparative research also discovered that Chinese parents have different parenting styles and socialization patterns. Chao (1994), in her comparative study of Chinese and European American parenting styles, suggests Chinese immigrant parents seem to ascribe to the Chinese child-rearing ideologies of "training" which means "a more stricter (sic) or more rigorous teaching, educating, or inculcating" (p. 1117). The concept of training involves two central aspects of parental involvement: the concept of "chiao shun" [教训] which accords parents with an authority to stress a set standard of conduct or appropriate behavior; and the concept of "guan" [管] which enables the parents to responsibly teach, discipline, or govern. This authoritative parenting style is also believed to help Chinese children develop self-regulated learning and encourage them to exert control over their own learning, and it is often transmitted to their children through family socializations (Huang & Prochner, 2004). As Hidalgo, Siu, & Epstein (2004) conclude from their review of literature, when compared with European American parents, Chinese parents show distinctly different parenting styles:

Chinese parents tend to monitor their children more closely, moralize more often, emphasize greater sense of family obligation, value grades more than general cognitive achievement, evaluate more realistically a child's academic and personality characteristics, be less satisfied with a child's accomplishments, and believe more in effort and less in innate ability as a factor in school success. (p. 640)

Since culture shapes what parents believe and what practices they socialize their children into for academic achievement (Oches & Schieffelin, 2001), Chinese parents' distinct cultural beliefs and their more directive and controlling parenting styles will no doubt influence how Chinese children are socialized into literacy practices at home. Although we have gained some general knowledge of Chinese parents' involvement in their children's education at home, it is not clear how their cultural beliefs and parenting styles influence specific literacy tasks and behaviors (e.g., reading, writing, mathematics, and homework) with their children and how they perceive their relationships with mainstream schools. This survey study aims to address this gap in research on understanding Chinese immigrant parents' influence on and involvement in their children's education. The report is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are Chinese immigrant parents' beliefs about how children learn (English) reading, writing, and mathematics?
2. How are they involved in their children's literacy practices at home?
3. What are the parental perceptions of their communication with mainstream schools? How well are the parents informed of school literacy instruction and practices?

## Methods

### Survey Instrument

The data for this research was collected through a survey. A comprehensive questionnaire (HRWQ)<sup>1</sup> on Chinese parents' beliefs on and their involvement in reading, writing, mathematics, and homework and parents' perceptions of communication with school was developed and translated into the subjects' native language, Chinese. The bilingual questionnaire consists of six parts:

- Part 1: General Information is comprised of 20 questions regarding the families' general demographic information such as length of stay in America, languages spoken and used at home, and their educational and occupational backgrounds.
- Part 2: Perceptions of Child's Reading consists of 7 questions on parents' beliefs on the reading process, 10 questions on children's reading practices at home, and 7 questions on their involvement in their children's reading. In this section, the parents are also asked to provide short answers to 4 questions on other reading activities that are encouraged at home.
- Part 3: Perceptions of Child's Writing has 6 questions on parents' views of the process of writing, 20 questions on their children's writing practices and parents' involvement in their writing at home, and 3 short answer questions on the children's writing in their native language.

Part 4: Perception of Child’s Math includes 12 questions regarding the parents’ perceptions of differences in math instruction between China and the U.S., their understanding of best approaches to math instruction, and their involvement in their children’s math education at home.

Part 5: Perception of Child’s Homework consists of 9 questions on the quantity and quality of homework; and

Part 6: Communication with School contains 9 questions on parents’ interaction with teachers and schools.

### Samples and Procedures

The questionnaires (one copy per family), together with a bilingual cover letter (in English and Chinese) explaining the purpose, risks, and benefits of this research were distributed to 60 Mandarin-speaking, Chinese immigrant families whose children attended a local Chinese Language School in a suburban city in western New York state. For the first round of distribution, about 23 copies were completed and returned. To ensure more returns, 37 copies were distributed a second time to parents who did not return their first questionnaires; subsequently, another 11 copies were returned. Altogether, 34 (56.7%) questionnaires were completed and returned. To ensure accuracy, 8 questionnaires completed by students or non-Chinese parents were excluded from this analysis. That is, this analysis was based on the 26 (43.3%) questionnaires completed by parents from mainland China.

The Chinese parents’ average length of stay in the U.S. was 10 years. About 68% reported having two children, while 32% had only one child. The mean age of the first child was 11.94, while the mean age for the second child was 6.69. All 26 families were dual-parent families and among those, 4 families reported living with grandparents, and 1 family lived with an aunt. Out of the 26 families, 30.8% reported speaking Chinese only; 69.2% reported speaking both Chinese and English at home. Most of the parents came from highly educated backgrounds (Table 1): 88% reported having a college or post-graduate education (masters or Ph.D.), while only 12% had high school education only; 96% of their spouses also reported having college or post-graduate education. The parents came from a variety of occupations: More than 70% of the respondents and their spouses were in white-collar professional jobs (see Table 2).

Table 1. Parental Educational Levels

Education	Respondents (%)	Spouses (%)
Elementary	0	4.0
High school drop-out	4.0	0
High school graduate	8.0	0
College graduate	32.0	24.0
Master	40.0	28.0
Ph. D.	16.0	44.0

Table 2. Respondents' and Their Spouses' Present Occupations

Occupation	Respondents (%)	Spouses (%)
Engineer/Company Employee	20.0	32.0
Medical	20.0	16.0
Cook	12.0	0
Programmer/Database Manager	12.0	4.0
Homemaker	8.0	4.0
Teacher/Professor	0	8.0
Finance	8.0	0
Researcher	4.0	8.0
Sewing	4.0	0
Statistician	4.0	0
Scientist	4.0	0
Attorney	0	4.0
Student	0	4.0
Waiter/Waitress	0	12.0
None	4.0	8.0

## Data Analysis

The 26 valid surveys were entered into the SPSS (Statistical Program for Social Sciences) 12.0.1 database. In order to enter survey data into the SPSS, a numerical code for each close-ended answer was assigned. For the open-ended question items, categories were first developed based on the range of responses, and then a numerical code was assigned for each category.

After data entry, survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics in the SPSS. As a result, frequency tables showing frequency and valid percent<sup>2</sup> of answers for each question item were generated. In addition, in the case of the questions that ask the numerical values (e.g., child age and length of stay in U.S.), mean, maximum, and minimum of the responses were calculated.

## Results

A chief purpose of this study was to examine the Chinese immigrant parents' beliefs about how their children learn reading, writing, and mathematics, what literacy practices are like at their homes, and how they are involved in their children's learning. In this section, the parents' responses in each of the areas (reading, writing, mathematics, homework, and communication with schools) are examined to illuminate understandings in the above three aspects.

### Parents' Perception of Reading and Their Involvement in Their Children's Reading

The analysis revealed that the Chinese parents placed very high importance on their children's reading development. All parents believed that it was extremely important for their children to read outside school. Of the parents



reporting, 88.5% said that their children read everyday at home, and 65.4% of them read books for enjoyment; 84.6% of families used public libraries as resources for out-of-school readings. The children’s most favorite readings included the Harry Potter Series (24.0%), fairy tales (13.8%), science fiction (10.3%), funny stories (10.3%), and historical fiction (6.8%).

The analysis also revealed that parents’ perceptions of the reading process were consistent with a phonics-based, bottom-up approach to reading instruction (see Table 3). About 81% of the parents believed that a child should learn the sounds of the letters of the alphabet before starting reading. Close to 58% believed that learning to read involved learning skills in a particular order. About 62% of parents believed that children should be taught to sound out individual letters to learn a new word; in fact, 67% of them reported using this strategy to help their children sound out new words. In terms of errors in reading, 62% believed that students needed to be corrected immediately when errors were made. However, contrary to findings on Chinese parents’ supervision of child reading using rereading and recitation strategies (Anderson, 1995; Huntsinger et al., 1998; Li, 2002), only 30.8% of the parents reported asking their children to practice reading by rereading the same story.

Table 3. Parents’ Perception of Child’s Reading

	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Depends (%)	Don't Know (%)
A child should learn the sounds of the letters of the alphabet before starting to read.	80.7	15.5	0.0	3.8
Learning to read involves learning skills in a particular order.	57.7	19.2	0.0	23.1
Reading aloud to children improves their ability to read on their own.	77.0	19.2	0.0	3.8
Children can use words and sentences they know to figure out new and difficult words.	92.4	3.8	0.0	3.8
When children do not know a word, they should be taught first to sound out the letters.	61.6	34.6	0.0	3.8
When children are reading aloud, it's important to correct them as soon as they make a mistake.	61.6	34.6	0.0	3.8
It's important for children to read outside of school.	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

How were the Chinese parents involved in their children’s reading development at home? The data suggested that the majority of the parents were involved in a variety of reading events, such as reading aloud to the child, reading with the child, helping with comprehension, teaching the children reading strategies, and reading in their native language, Chinese (see Table 4). When asked about activities that the parents suggested for their children when they were bored, 41.5% of them suggested reading books.



Table 4. Parental Involvement in Child Reading

	Never or Hardly Ever (%)	Once or Twice a Month (%)	Once or Twice a Week (%)	Almost Everyday (%)
I read aloud to my child at home.	28.0	20.0	28.0	24.0
I listen to my child read.	16.0	20.0	24.0	40.0
I read together with my child.	28.0	20.0	12.0	40.0
I talk to my child about what he or she has read.	15.4	38.5	26.9	19.2
I help my child to understand what he or she has read.	16.0	36.0	28.0	20.0
I encourage my child to read materials that are not part of his or her work for school (e.g., books, newspaper, magazine).	12.5	25.0	29.2	33.3
My child reads books/ materials in our native language.	19.2	46.2	23.1	11.5
I read to my child in our native language.	20.0	44.0	20.0	16.0

### Parental Perception of Writing and Their Involvement in Child Writing

All the Chinese parents believed that it was important for their children to write outside of school. Besides school work, 75% of the Chinese children were involved in a variety of English writing activities at home, such as writing stories (25%), reflections on reading/movies (20%), letters, cards, or notes (15%), poems (10%), or diaries (5%). Many (65.4%) of the children also used a computer for writing. Only 25% of them reported they did not engage in any kind of writing or write regularly. The parents also reported that 30.9% of the children engaged in different kinds of Chinese writing on a regular basis. The children often wrote homework from Chinese school (55%), letters or cards to family and friends (10%), a diary (5%), or made sentences with new vocabulary (5%). About 60% of the children did not write in Chinese at home.

The Chinese parents' perspectives on writing were in alignment with their bottom-up approach to literacy learning, reflecting a product-oriented writing approach that emphasizes well-formed, grammatically correct sentences (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). The Chinese parents in this study placed great importance on accuracy of spelling and proper grammar training (see Table 5). Most (84.6%) of the parents believed that in order to write well, students needed to know the basic rules of English grammar and syntax, and 84.7% of them believed that "writing neatly is important." Consistent with research findings on Chinese parents' preference for copying books as a strategy of improving writing (Li, 2002), 65.5% of them agreed that "practicing copying words and sentences improves children's ability to write." Although many believed in accuracy, only 40.0% of them agreed that "good spellers are good writers."

Table 5. Parental Perspectives on Writing

	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Don't Know (%)
In order to write well, students need to know the basic rules of English grammar and syntax.	84.6	15.4	0.0
Practicing copying words and sentences improves children's ability to write.	65.5	30.7	3.8
Writing neatly is important.	84.7	11.5	3.8
Children who are good at spelling are good writers.	40.0	56.0	4.0
It is important for children to write outside of school.	100.0	0.0	0.0
It is important for my child to know how to write and be an effective writer.	76.9	15.4	7.7
Writing is very important in my child's life.	76.9	15.4	7.7

Since there was very little literature on Chinese children's writing, the questionnaire focused several questions on writing behavior and development. As shown in Table 6, the parents perceived that their children were good in basic aspects of writing such as grammar, vocabulary, spelling, sentence structure, and organization of ideas, but were relatively weak in coming up with ideas to write (54.5%) or in printing neatly (43.5%). Only 42.3% of the children re-read what they wrote and were willing to revise. Although the children liked to draw, the majority of them did not seem to use drawings to go with writing.

Table 6. Parental Perception of Child Writing Behavior and Development

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Don't Know (%)
When my child comes to a word he or she doesn't know how to write, he or she sounds it out.	69.2	19.3	11.5
When my child comes to a word he/she doesn't know how to write, he or she leaves it blank/writes the word the best they can.	69.2	19.3	11.5
My child reads over what he or she writes before finishing, and he or she is willing to revise and rewrite.	42.3	46.2	11.5
My child likes to draw at home.	73.1	26.9	0.0
My child likes to use drawings or pictures to go with writing.	42.3	46.2	11.5
My child is good at grammar.	76.2	0.0	23.8
My child is good at vocabulary.	68.2	18.2	13.6
My child is good at spelling.	63.6	27.3	9.1
My child is good at thinking of ideas to write.	54.5	31.8	13.7
My child is good at sentence and/or paragraph structure.	65.3	13.0	21.7
My child is good at organizing thoughts.	63.6	22.7	13.7
My child is good at handwriting.	68.2	13.6	18.2
My child is good at tidiness.	43.5	47.8	8.7
My child is good at combining information from different thoughts.	59.1	22.7	18.2

The Chinese parents' perception of their children's writing behavior seemed consistent with how they were involved in their children's writing at home. For example, 69.2% provided feedback by giving ideas about which to write; 77% were available to help the children with spelling unknown words. Maybe because they regarded the children as having mastered the basic skills of writing, only 38.5% actually asked their children to copy books, even though 65.5% of the parents believed that copying was an effective way to improve writing.

## Parental Perceptions of Child Mathematics Instruction and Development

Previous research on Chinese immigrant parents' perspectives on their children's math education had suggested two conclusions: (1) Most Chinese children excel in math, and (2) most Chinese parents are unsatisfied with math education in mainstream schools (Huntsinger et al., 1998; Huntsinger, Jose, Larson, Krieg, & Shaligram, 2000; Li, 2002, 2005). How did the Chinese parents in this study perceive math education in mainstream schools? Their responses show that only 26.9% gave a high approval rating to math instruction; 50% said they did not like the way math was taught in American schools, while 23.1% said they did not know. Consistent to previous research findings (Huntsinger et al., 2000; Huntsinger et al., 2001; Li, 2002), when asked in what ways they thought math instruction was different from that in China, many believed math instruction in American schools was "easier" and "insufficient" in content and depth, but believed that U.S. schools were better at focusing on student interests and motivation and on encouraging creativity (see Tables 7 & 8).

Table 7. Parental Perception of U.S. Math Instruction Compared with China

	Percent (%)
Easier, inefficient, weaker foundational skills	45.4
Insufficient drills/practices/homework	18.2
More focus on students' motivation	13.6
Encouraging students to think	13.6
Using the calculator	4.5
More practical	4.5

Table 8. Parental Perception of the Strengths of U.S. Math Instruction

	Percent (%)
More focus on students' motivation, interests, and creativity	31.6
More practical information, hands-on and problem-solving activities	37.0
Students have more freedom and don't have pressure	10.6
Variety of teaching strategies	5.3
Teachers are more friendly	5.3
Encouraging students to think	5.3
Eliciting students' participation	5.3
Support for weak students	5.3
Nothing	5.3

The parents' perceptions of math education in the U.S. schools were also related to their beliefs about the best way to learn or teach math. Their responses show that 37.5% believed the best way of learning was through drills and practice, 18.8% suggested teaching through an emphasis on both fundamental concepts and flexible thinking, 2.5% recommended combining Asian and American ways of instruction, 6.2% believed in fun and exciting instruction,

and 6.2% in instruction at school. The parents' perceptions of the best ways to teach math were also reflected in their recommendations for U.S. schools to improve in math instruction, which included more drills and practice, higher difficulty level of content, and teaching more fundamental concepts.

If the Chinese parents were not satisfied with math education in American schools, what measures did they take at home to support their children's math development? Their responses show that a majority of them bought workbooks and assigned additional homework to strengthen their children's math learning. Many (64%) reported using extra workbooks for their children to practice math, and even more (76%) assigned extra math homework. Different from findings in several ethnographic studies (e.g., Li, 2002; 2005), only 23.1% of them used Chinese math textbooks to help their children learn.

Another interesting finding is that while 84.6% of the parents believed that their children's reading ability was important in solving math problems, only 12% of them believed that their children's difficulty in solving math problems had to do with reading ability. The majority of them (60%) believed such difficulties were more related to understanding math concepts; 20% reported both to be factors.

## **Parental Perceptions of Homework, TV Watching, and Communication with Schools**

### *Homework and TV Watching*

Different from previous research findings that Chinese parents were unsatisfied with the amount of homework (Chen & Stevenson, 1989; Li, 2002; 2006), the parents in this study seemed to be split on their perceptions of homework. About 42% of them thought that homework from school was just enough, and 46.2% thought it was too little; none of them believed there was too much homework. When asked specifically about math homework, 48% of them thought it was not enough; 44% thought it was just enough; none of them thought it was too much. In terms of helping their children with homework, 61.5% of the parents reported helping their children with homework. Interestingly, 25% also reported that, besides parents, siblings helped each other with homework.

To understand more about the children's home literacy practices, the parents were asked about their children's TV watching habits. Of the parents reporting, 59.2% said that their children watched 1-3 hours of TV every day; 18.2% reported more than 3 hours; and 22.6% reported less than an hour every day. Their children's favorite shows included cartoons and children's programs (56.6%), regular programs and movies (16.8%), and Animal Planet (8.3%).

*Communication with Schools*

Previous research indicates that Chinese immigrant parents seem to lack familiarity with mainstream schools and are less likely to become involved in the school context (Hidalgo, Siu, & Epstein, 2004; Li, 2004; Siu, 1992). To facilitate our understanding of the Chinese parents' perspectives, they were asked about their familiarity with school instruction in terms of reading, writing, and mathematics and about their overall communication with the school. The results show that the majority of the parents felt that they were familiar with school reading instruction (60%), but they were less familiar with school writing instruction (34.6%) and math instruction (34.6%). Many parents (76%) expressed that they would like to know more about reading instruction and materials at school, and 92% of them wanted to know more about writing instruction in school (see Table 9).

Table 9. Parental Perception of their Familiarity with School Instruction

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Don't Know (%)
I would like to know how to help my child more with his/her reading.	69.2	19.2	11.6
My child's teacher suggests reading activities to complete at home.	83.4	8.3	8.3
I'm familiar with the reading instruction and materials my child receives.	60.0	32.0	8.0
I'm pleased with the type of reading instruction and materials my child receives.	62.6	15.6	18.8
I would like to know more about reading instruction and materials in school.	76.0	16.0	8.0
I am aware of the types of things my child likes to write.	46.1	15.4	38.5
I am familiar with the writing instruction my child receives at school.	34.6	38.5	26.9
My child likes when his or her teacher suggests writing activities to complete at home.	53.8	23.0	23.2
I would like to know more about writing instruction at school.	92.0	8.0	0.0
I understand very well how math is taught in American schools.	34.6	23.1	42.3

When asked about their involvement in school settings, the parents' responses were consistent with previous research findings (Constantino, Cui, & Faltis, 1991; Dyson, 2001; Li, 2006). Although the majority of the parents attended parent-teacher conferences and felt comfortable talking with teachers, they were relatively inactive in attending PTO meetings, communicating with teachers, or volunteering at the school (see Table 10).

Table 10. Parents' Perception of Communication with School

	Always (%)	Sometimes (%)	Never (%)
I attend teacher-parent conferences.	76.0	20.0	4.0
I communicate with my child's teacher or principal regularly.	24.0	72.0	4.0
I read school newsletters or brochures.	76.0	20.0	4.0
I receive information about assessment results.	66.7	20.8	12.5
I review my child's school report card.	96.0	4.0	0.0
I volunteer at my child's school.	16.0	40.0	44.0
I attend PTO meetings.	13.0	43.5	43.5
My child's teacher communicates with me regularly.	24.0	68.0	8.0
I feel comfortable talking to my child's teachers at school to ask about my child's progress in school.	52.0	48.0	0.0

## Discussion

This study supports some findings of previous research on Chinese immigrant parents and their beliefs about education. Similar to other studies (Anderson, 1995; Chao, 1996; Li, 2002, 2005; Zhang, Ollila, & Harvey, 1998), this study revealed that Chinese parents held high values on education and preferred traditional, skill-based approaches to literacy teaching and learning. The parents believed that language was best learned from a part-to-whole approach and systematic instruction of letter-sound correspondence, and that grammar and skills were not only necessary, but essential for more effective literacy learning. That is, they viewed learning to read and write as a set of linear and hierarchical skills that need to be taught prior to students' attempting to read and write (Chall, 2000; Stahl, 1992). In their opinion, learning words was often considered "a prerequisite to reading, as spelling is to writing" (Turner, 1995, p. 414). In both reading and writing, they paid more attention to accuracy, printing, and grammar than other aspects of literacy such as fluency.

Although the Chinese parents in this study held more traditional values and beliefs on literacy learning, their reported involvement in their children's literacy learning demonstrated a departure from what was reported in the literature (e.g., Anderson, 1995; Chao, 1996). For example, contrary to previous studies that reported Chinese parents' preference to child independent reading (rather than parent-child reading) and copying books and rewriting words, the parents in this study actually read a lot to and with their children and listened to their children read. In writing, although they believed that copying could improve children's writing, only a small number of them actually enforced this belief in practice. A close examination of their reported practice suggests that many of their literacy practices at home were very similar to those of European American families: They engaged their children in a variety of reading activities,

provided their children with a variety of reading and writing resources and opportunities, and the children read widely for pleasure. They valued drawing as a legitimate form of writing, and they paid attention not only to form, but also to content; for example, they provided ideas for the children to write about. They also engaged their children in a variety of writing activities.

The finding on the Chinese parents' attitudes toward homework is another departure from the literature. Previous research has reported that Chinese parents expected their children to do much more homework than European American or Canadian parents (Chen & Stevenson, 1989; Huntsinger et al., 2000; Li, 2005; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). My hypothesis of the parents' responses for this study was that the majority of the parents wanted more homework from the schools. However, the data indicated that less than half of the parents thought that the homework was not enough, even in the area of math homework. There are several possible reasons for this result. One reason might be that the parents had been influenced by educational reforms in China where the educational system was trying to reduce the burden on students by cutting down homework assignments. Another explanation would be the influence of mainstream American educational values, since they had been living in the U.S. and might have modified their beliefs and practices under their new cultural environment. The third explanation is that the parents themselves had achieved middle-class status in the U.S. and most of their children were successful in school, therefore their own stability might have made them more relaxed about pressuring their children with more homework. Lastly, it might be possible that American schools had increased their homework assignments due to the recent push for standardized testing.

The Chinese parents, however, were more consistent in their beliefs and practices in math education. They held the belief that math was best learned through drills and practice and through building strong foundations in basic skills and concepts. In their practice, they enforced more formal ways of teaching such as using Chinese textbooks, providing workbooks, and assigning extra homework in order for their children to practice at home. Such formal ways of involvement, as Huntsinger et al. (2000) point out, may have significantly contributed to Chinese American students' academic success in math.

The consistencies and discrepancies between Chinese parents' beliefs and practices suggest that the middle-class Chinese parents might have accommodated or adopted some mainstream American literacy practices, as did many other minority groups. Like the Punjabi immigrants in Gibson's (1988) study, to help their children achieve academic success and at the same time keep their traditional cultural values, they might have adopted the "accommodation without assimilation" strategy in which they incorporated certain mainstream practices that could benefit their children's learning.



The Chinese parents' home literacy practices also suggested many continuities, rather than discontinuities, between the Chinese homes and the mainstream schools. The Chinese home literacy practices (e.g., reading books and ample writing opportunities) seemed to reinforce and support (rather than disconnect from) typical school literacy activities. Such alignment between the primary and secondary discourses may have facilitated the Chinese children and families' activation of family cultural capital for academic learning at school, and hence contributed to their reported academic success (Gee, 1996).

From the parents' responses, the school-home alignments seemed to correlate with their familiarity with school instruction. For example, they reported more knowledge of school reading instruction, and their involvement in children's reading practices was also more closely aligned with school practices. They also reported less familiarity with school writing and math instruction, and their involvement in these aspects at home demonstrated more discontinuities from school practices. In all cases, the majority of the parents expressed their desire to know more about school instructional practices and materials. This finding suggests it is necessary for schools to better inform parents of school instructional practices. Given the fact that the parents were highly involved in their children's learning at home, but demonstrated much less participation in school settings, it may be worthwhile for educators to work on involving parents in school settings so that they have first-hand experiences in getting to know school instruction and practices.

## **Conclusion**

It should be noted that this study has several methodological limitations. First, the sample size was small and included mostly well-educated, middle-class Chinese immigrants; therefore, the results should not be generalized to other populations without being replicated with larger samples. Second, the study was based on the survey data only. Some other sources of data such as follow-up interviews would have strengthened the design of the study. Thirdly, the study did not investigate the children's school performance in reading, writing, and mathematics. Future studies need to be conducted to examine the relationships between the children's literacy performance and parental beliefs and practices at home.

This survey study does add to our currently limited knowledge of the newly emerging middle-class Chinese parents and their literacy beliefs and ways of involvement in education at home. The purpose of this study was not to seek explanations for Chinese students' academic success; rather it set out to understand what really went on in their homes. The findings suggest that Chinese

parents still hold very strong traditional Chinese cultural values on how literacy should be learned and transmitted, but they are making accommodations and adaptations in ways of socializing their children into their cultural ways of learning as they become more oriented with mainstream American schooling practices. These findings argue for more effort in enhancing Chinese parents' knowledge base on how American schools function (i.e., in terms of instructional practices, policies, curriculum, and philosophies), as well as in building stronger school-home communication and collaboration.

What can mainstream schools and teachers do to facilitate such efforts? Since the majority of the Chinese parents attend parent-teacher conferences, the schools and teachers can use the conferences as a venue to communicate their instructional practices, policies, curriculum, and philosophies to the parents. This requires the schools and teachers to change the traditional parent-teacher conference format to create more small group activities where parents and teachers can exchange ideas and beliefs in a relaxed setting. These activities can be mini-workshops, show and tell, and demonstration sessions in which both parents and teachers show each other how literacy is taught in their own cultures. Since many parents are concerned with mathematics instruction, one such session could be devoted to a discussion on mathematics education. The schools can also employ a bilingual Chinese/English person (or seek parent volunteers) to be a parent-school liaison to increase parental involvement. Since most minority parents are more willing to share information or seek help within their ethnic networks, such an insider liaison person will be more effective in communicating school information regarding instruction and policies to the parents and in encouraging the parents to be more involved in the school setting. Finally, schools can engage the parents in the decision-making processes so that the parents have a sense of empowerment and belonging to the school community. For example, the schools can make some Chinese parents take charge of the PTO and organize activities that they think will attract more parent participation. Schools and teachers can also use parents' bilingual and bicultural resources to translate school letters, report cards, or other related materials in Chinese or publish bilingual Chinese-English newsletters to better communicate with the Chinese parents about the school and how it works.

In conclusion, this study examined middle-class Chinese immigrant parents' beliefs in and their influence on their children's reading, writing, mathematics and homework and their interactions with mainstream schools. The results of this study shed new light and understanding on how recent Chinese immigrant parents influence their children's education in a new sociocultural context and imply new means of enhancing their involvement.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Some items in the questionnaire were adapted from those used in Anderson (1995), Perry, Nordby, & VandeKamp (2003), the home questionnaire by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), and the parent survey by the Collaborative Centre for Literacy Development.

<sup>2</sup>Valid percent represents the percentage of only the non-missing cases falling into each category. The valid percent was chosen in this study since the valid percent provides a more accurate distribution of the valid cases, and the missing values are of little interest in this study.

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