

From Mao to Memphis: Chinese Immigrant Fathers' Involvement with Their Children's Education

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Abstract

How do adults adapt when they have been inculcated into a particular philosophy of parenting and education and are then expected to adjust to a cultural framework possibly at odds with their worldview? Mainland Chinese fathers represent one immigrant group that has had to successfully learn to navigate various challenges while interacting with their children and the American K-12 educational system. This case study explores the issue of fathers and their children through interviews with five men from Mainland China. The article first highlights the most common concerns expressed by Chinese families toward American schools and details how the fathers in this study developed specific strategies to address similar worries. The findings then focus on the concept of parental involvement in children's education through the fathers' perspective and how it might diverge from a more traditional view of involvement held by some educators. Implications for strengthening cross-cultural awareness between families and schools are discussed.

Key Words: Chinese immigrant parents, Asian, fathers, schools, cross-cultural awareness, home practices, intercultural competence, parental beliefs, involvement, school-home communication, relationships, worldview, education

Introduction

Recent research studying the cross-cultural aspects of parental involvement, such as the Bridging Cultures Project (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Greenfield, 2000; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003), has provided guidance as to how schools can better understand the diverse communities that they serve. The case studies documented in this article were initiated because of a dilemma that occurred concerning Mainland Chinese¹ immigrant parents and the schools their children attend in Memphis, Tennessee. Adults who seemed to be having few major problems adapting cross-culturally in their own academic or work lives appeared frustrated concerning their children's education in American schools (Klein, 2004).

In prescient work now almost two generations old, Gordon (1964) comments that public schools and the mass media exert "overwhelming acculturative powers" over immigrant children (pp. 244-245). How much stronger have these influences become in our digital era, and did the Chinese parents feel that they were "losing" their daughters and sons due to these acculturative pressures? Why did teachers also begin to express aggravation at the demands made by some of the Chinese parents? The cultural gap that seemed to exist between the parents and the schools was both intriguing and disheartening. The question then arose: What would it take for Chinese immigrant parents, and specifically fathers, to adapt, cross-culturally, to the new realities that they encountered when dealing with their children's education?

This study began with the premise that parents are rightfully protective of their children and feel that any dangers, including cultural variances, must be minimized. With that in mind, an inquiry ensued into how fathers learned to adjust to a new worldview concerning the parenting and education of their children.

The purpose of this article, then, is to explore the experiences of five immigrant fathers from Mainland China as they interact with their children as well as the American K-12 educational system. Through these various interactions, the fathers demonstrate concern for their children's education and display high levels of parental involvement with their children, even though this participation might not be what the educational system has traditionally viewed as parental engagement. This exploratory study also has the broader goal of opening up the discourse concerning a rarely discussed group, immigrant fathers, in their children's education. The findings from this research, which are based on an atypical cohort, are not to be taken as conclusive.

Theoretical Framework

Because the topic of parenting is so expansive, this analysis concentrates on the cross-cultural context of parenting behaviors that are highlighted in this study and the attendant changes that have occurred. However, before presenting those findings, an explanation is given concerning the meaning of the terms “intercultural competence” and “worldview,” and a brief overview of traditional parenting roles in China is offered. It is also essential to comment on the impact of the Cultural Revolution on Chinese society. The topic of Chinese immigrant parenting styles is then mentioned, and the section concludes with a general overview of Chinese immigrants' involvement in the schools.

It is important to clarify that Asians are not a monolithic cultural group. They are categorized in the literature into three major subgroups based on family origin: East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans), Southeast Asian, and South Asian. Although Japan and Korea have their own cultural identities, and the Chinese can be further divided into geographic subgroups from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore, East Asians do share common beliefs concerning the primary role of parenting in their children's educational achievement (Chao & Tseng, 2002).

Intercultural Competence

Research into cross-cultural relocations by sojourners, refugees, or immigrants has been explored using various terminologies: intercultural competence, cross-cultural adaptation, intercultural effectiveness, and intercultural communicative competence (Fantini, 2000; Hammer, Gudykunst, & Wiseman, 1978; Kim, 1995). Fantini clarifies that, regardless of label, three primary themes concerning intercultural competence have emerged from the literature highlighting the ability: (a) “to develop and maintain relationships,” (b) “to communicate effectively and appropriately with minimal loss or distortion,” and (c) “to attain compliance and obtain cooperation with others” (p. 27). The author comments that, although these abilities are equally appropriate in all interpersonal relationships, interacting across cultures complicates the communication and noticeably increases differences. These distinctions are created by disparities in language, culture, and worldview.

Worldview

Worldview is a fundamental concept succinctly defined by McKenzie (1991) as the “contemplation of the world” (p. 1). Within that statement, however, *world* is used in its most inclusive sense, comprising not only a physical realm, but also the views of others and one's own subjectivity. The author continues

that the world “takes on a definite texture and coloration in that I project upon it some features in my very act of viewing or interpreting” (p. 5). In other words, our personal worldviews are shaped by our interpretations, which we arrive at after reflecting upon our daily interactions.

Relevant to this study, the participants’ lives in China, their subsequent immigration and adjustment to life in the United States, and lastly, their experiences of making sense of school life and parenting practices have all combined to inform their worldviews. An important aspect of that worldview is what it means for them to be fathers in this society.

Traditional Parenting Roles for Fathers in China

Customary parenting roles in China have followed the traditional maxim, “strict father, kind mother,” creating an environment in which mothers indulge and fathers control their children (Berndt, Cheung, Lau, Hau, & Lew, 1993; Chao & Tseng, 2002). However, Solomon (1971) points out that in the past, even with a rigid division of parenting roles based on gender, many Chinese fathers felt strong emotions toward their children.

In any case, both Chinese mothers and fathers regard child rearing as a responsibility of supreme importance in their lives (Xie & Hultgren, 1994). Xie, Seefeldt, and Tam (1996) state that a primary Confucian proverb concerning parenting is that “Bearing a child without training is the failure of his father” (p. 8). The authors remark that even with a modern interpretation of this statement emphasizing the role of both mothers and fathers, parents still bear total responsibility for their children’s failures. In contrast, the accomplishments of their children bring great honor to the whole family.

The Cultural Revolution

Traditional Chinese parenting roles were radically altered by the events taking place during the Cultural Revolution. Mainland Chinese adults who lived through this time experienced a remarkable period in human history, in both its intensity and ferocity. This episode has been vividly recorded in Chinese films, such as *The Blue Kite* (Tian, 1993) and *To Live* (Zhang, 1994). While watching these, it is impossible not to be swept up in the complexity of emotions, ranging from fascination to repulsion, that characterize Chinese history between 1966 and 1976.

While in 1968 Americans were shocked by the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy and students in this country were protesting the Vietnam War on college campuses, in China Mao Zedong was initiating another form of revolution: the “send-down” policy. Over a 12-year period, more than 17 million urban youth had their school careers interrupted

and were relocated to the countryside to partake in farm labor. Chairman Mao envisioned that rural peasants would reeducate the children of the cities about the true meaning of socialism (Zhou & Hou, 1999).

According to Zhou and Hou (1999), the send-down policy was part of a larger social experiment, formally known as The Great Cultural Revolution, which altered Chinese society at its core. Most educational and governmental agencies stopped operating, and the lack of industrial growth created serious concerns about unemployment. Against this backdrop, the five participants in the study were either beginning or well into their studies in Chinese public schools. The Cultural Revolution was clearly the external catalyst that most strongly affected these individuals and their subsequent life decisions.

Chinese Immigrant Parenting Styles

Some research has been conducted on studying parenting behaviors of Chinese immigrant families living in the United States. The work has been generally conducted as either focusing solely on mothers or comparative research of fathers' and mothers' parental attitudes. Much debate concerns the comparison of the Western notion of authoritarian parenting to two interwoven Chinese concepts of *guan* and *jiaoxun* [*chiao shun*]² (Chao, 1994; Li, 2006). *Guan* is an expectation that parents will conscientiously govern their children, and that without *guan*, parents would be viewed by others as derelict and uncaring in their parenting responsibilities (Li; Chao & Tseng, 2002). *Chiao shun* encompasses the idea of "training" children in acceptable behaviors. It does include some aspects of authoritarian parenting style, including the emphasis on compliance, which Chao (2000) points out as a reason Chinese Americans may score high on scales of authoritarian parenting. Ultimately, Chao (1994) concludes that both *guan* and *chiao shun* are "indigenous concepts" (p. 1113) that more adequately describe Chinese parenting and form part of a set of behaviors reinforced by both parents and the broader community. However, the rationale for these standards is not based on a Western model of authoritarian dominance but, instead, on a desire to strengthen the organizational structure of the family.

In another study of cross-cultural parenting, Gorman (1998) finds that, contrary to a popular belief regarding "authoritarian" aspects of Chinese parenting, Western constructs of parenting may not accurately "depict Chinese socialization" (p. 73). The immigrant mothers participating in the study expressed high expectations for their children to succeed and become "good people" but also articulated concerns "about the negative impact of American society" (pp. 73, 75). Additionally, many participants were anxious about their children's failure to respect Chinese traditions, such as valuing Chinese history and showing deference to parents and teachers.

While the studies mentioned are only a representative sample of the research being conducted on parenting, it is clear that little has been written exclusively concerning the role of immigrant fathers, specifically those from China, in the lives of their children. However, the immigrant Chinese fathers in this study demonstrated strong parental involvement, which made their interactions with their children noteworthy.

Chinese Immigrant Parental Involvement in American Schools

A comment must be made concerning the cultural differences inherent in parental involvement in the schools. Educational researchers have identified parent involvement as a key ingredient in the effectiveness of schools, and it has been clearly established that children do better academically when parents support their school's activities (Epstein, 1987). In spite of this widespread agreement, Lee (1995) comments that, in general, Asian immigrant parents do not know how to participate actively in their children's school pursuits. Additionally, the author points out that many teachers also do not understand how to involve Asian parents as educational partners.

However, Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) define parent involvement in a more textured and multidimensional fashion than that normally perceived by educators. They discuss three domains for the involvement of parents in their children's education: (a) parent behavior – participating in school activities; (b) personal involvement – supporting a child's affective environment; and (c) intellectual involvement – exposing the child to cognitively stimulating activities. Using this expanded set of criteria, Huntsinger, Krieg, and Jose (1998) found in their comparative study of Chinese and European American parents and their children that 37% of the variance in Chinese American children's school performance was predicted by variables of their parents' involvement. The strongest correlation was in the area of cognitive and intellectual commitment.

Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) found that the more time the child spends on homework, either assigned by the school or parent, the higher the teachers rate the child's academic performance. Likewise, Henderson and Mapp (2002), in a meta-analysis of the literature on parental involvement, found that academically based parent involvement *at home* is the strongest predictor for a student's math and reading success.

Chao (1996) details cultural differences between immigrant Chinese and European American mothers concerning their roles in promoting school success for their children. Fundamentally, the European American mothers' attitudes in the author's study reflected the prevailing feelings about best practices in American primary education. These included emphasizing both the cognitive and affective domains of human development within the classroom (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998).

It was evident from Chao's (1996) research that Chinese mothers, who generally start teaching their children before they enter school, placed a much higher priority on rigorous academics than the European American participants. When I presented these findings to parents at a workshop at a Chinese language school in Memphis, two reactions were evident: (a) parents were both surprised at the cultural distance in parental values about education between themselves and American families, and (b) they felt at least some frustration with the education their children were receiving.

In essence, while European American parents are more likely to be involved in school activities, Chinese families are highly involved in their children's education in a fashion that might not be recognized by the schools. The topic of the parental involvement of the Chinese fathers with their children will be discussed in more depth later in this article.

Methodology

Context of the Study

The Chinese community has become a permanent part of Memphis' cultural mosaic, which has expanded in recent years beyond the traditional boundaries of African and European Americans. Even though the Chinese/Taiwanese population in the greater Memphis area is growing, it is still quite small, estimated at 5,500³ people, or approximately .0055% of all residents. In comparison, a similar demographic in San Francisco represents 20% of the city's total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

As their community continues to grow, more middle-class Chinese immigrant parents are now having contact with the public schools in the Memphis metropolitan region. This coincides with a national trend in which these families are coming to the United States bringing "resources – financial capital, training, and education" (Li, 2006, p. 28). While earlier generations of Chinese immigrants would settle in "urban ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown" (Li, p. 28), newer middle-class immigrants are moving to the suburbs and interacting with their neighborhood schools. This brings new opportunities and challenges for teachers working in suburban settings who are expected to respond appropriately to culturally and linguistically diverse families living within their communities.

The Researcher

At first, I might seem like an unlikely candidate for doing research about the experiences of Chinese fathers. I am a European American, non-Chinese speaker, who is not a father. Additionally, although I had been to China on

two separate occasions, I was by no means an expert on either Chinese history or culture. However, in my 25 years as an educator and researcher, what has motivated me are two ideals that I believe in passionately: supporting equity education, and strengthening my own intercultural competence.

The issue of the relationship between researcher and participants, especially in cross-cultural situations, must be addressed directly. Banks (1998) discusses the question of “positionality” when referring to the insider versus outsider status of a researcher, and Merriam et al. (2001) comment that positionality is determined “by where one stands in relation to the ‘other’” (p. 411). An external-outsider is an individual who is “socialized within a community different from the one in which he or she is doing research” (Banks, p. 8). Because I had an external-outsider relationship to the members of the Memphis Chinese community, which was reinforced by my inability to speak Chinese, the best opportunity I had in attempting to bridge the cultural divide was to become a participant observer, a traditional method used in ethnography. This entailed spending large amounts of time and taking part in activities at the local Chinese language school where I presented Chao’s (1996) findings and would eventually conduct the research. Rubin and Rubin (1995) remark, “To learn a culture, an interviewer doesn’t necessarily need to become an insider but must be allowed to cross the boundary and become accepted as one who can be taught” (p. 171).

In order to attain that acceptance, I visited the school on numerous occasions over a period of nine months. My goal was to build beginning relationships with parents based on trust and mutual interests, especially the academic well-being of their children. There were few non-Chinese members of the school community, so at first my presence as a European American male was novel. However, it was important to me to go beyond the stage of being a “guest,” so I attempted to become less of an “outsider.” Approximately 120 students and 50 parents attended the school every Sunday afternoon. While the children were with their teachers, the parents had options for interacting with other adults, such as weekly organized basketball, badminton, and ping-pong games. Occasionally, small groups of parents would also talk informally in the hallways. However, the conversations often took place in Chinese, which precluded me from attempting to socialize. I became concerned that I would not, ultimately, build the level of confidence and rapport needed when I eventually asked parents to participate in my study.

In spring 2002, the school introduced a weekly adult-level class in Tai Chi. I enrolled and became the only non-Chinese participant in the group, where, because several of the older students did not speak English, all instruction was in Chinese. While at first this was daunting, soon other participants offered to

translate when I had a question. I attended the class not only because I enjoyed both the physical and mental exercise but also as a mechanism to interact with others. I wanted the parents who had attended my workshop earlier in the school year not only to see me as the "expert" in education but also as a novice in other areas of adult learning. Happily, my interactions with parents in the hallways after the Tai Chi class increased and became more informal.

Participants

Possible participants for this study were identified among the adults who had children attending the Chinese language school. I chose to concentrate my research on the fathers' perspectives about parenting and education because of their high level of involvement in the school. An observation made while I was a participant observer was that approximately 40% of the adults who came weekly to spend time at the Chinese school were fathers, and 5 of the 12 PTA members from the school were male. This appeared to be a much higher level of participation by fathers in a weekend program than would normally occur with their American counterparts. Informally, I asked several men who attended regularly their reasons for doing so and received a variation of the same answer: "Because it's my duty." This consistent response seemed positive and worth exploring further.

Five fathers were selected who met the following major criteria: (a) they had resided in the United States for at least 4 years; (b) they had children attending American schools, regardless of grade, for a minimum of 4 years; and (c) they could communicate proficiently in English about deeply held beliefs concerning parenting and education.

The five fathers participating in the study represented a purposeful sample, which Patton (2002) refers to as those individuals having knowledge critical to the intention of the research. The men, Albert, Bob, David, Dewey, and Frank,⁴ provided information-rich cases to draw upon. Because the focus was on the adults' perspective, no children were interviewed. It also must be noted that the goal of this article was not to compare life in Chinese schools in the 1970s, which was greatly impacted by the Cultural Revolution, to the education system in China today. The scope of research was limited to comparing the fathers' experiences as students in China to their children's current education in American schools.

Each father was born in China and finished his public secondary school and university undergraduate education there. Two of the men were from Beijing; one came from a medium-sized city in the far north, Harbin; and 2 were from villages south of Shanghai. The men's ages ranged from 38 to 45, and their length of residence in the United States varied from 4 to 16 years. Two of the

fathers completed degrees at the master’s level and 3 had doctoral degrees. In addition, 2 men came to the United States for work-related reasons, while 3 arrived to pursue advanced degrees. All the men were working in Memphis, either as medical researchers or as computer professionals (see Table 1).

Table 1: Fathers’ Information

Name	Age	Participant’s Birthplace in China	Married in U.S. or China	Educational Attainment	Year of Arrival in U.S.	Reason for Coming to U.S.
Albert	40	Harbin	China	M.D. & Ph.D. Child Nutrition	1992	Work
Bob	44	Beijing	China	Ph.D. Electrical Engineering	1991	Graduate School
David	45	Hunan Province	China	M.S. Exercise Science & M.S. Computers	1993	Graduate School
Dewey	38	Beijing	U.S.	M.S. Computer Science	1986	Graduate School
Frank	38	Jiangxi Province	China	M.D. & Ph.D. Pharmacology	1998	Work

The five fathers had a total of 10 children, 7 girls and 3 boys. Four of the five fathers had at least two children; one participant had only one child, while another had three. The ages of the children ranged from infancy to age 14, with most between 6 and 12. A majority of the children were still in elementary or middle school, although one father had a daughter attending high school. Table 2 shows the children’s information.

Table 2: Children’s Information

Father	Gender & Ages of Children	Children’s Place of Birth	School Child Attended in China	Current Grade in School in Memphis
Albert	Boy 12 Girl 6	China U.S.	None None	6 th 1 st
Bob	Girl 13	China	Preschool	8 th
David	Girl 14 Boy 7 Girl 4	China U.S. U.S.	Preschool None None	9 th 2 nd Preschool
Dewey	Girl 9 Girl 7	U.S. U.S.	None None	4 th 2 nd
Frank	Girl 11 Boy Infant	China U.S.	Preschool	5 th

Data Collection and Analysis

In addition to participant observations, semi-structured, audiotaped, individual interviews with the fathers were conducted over the course of the 2002-2003 school year. The interviews with the men were held on the school site while the children were attending classes. Each participant was interviewed over a period of 4 to 5 hours, in at least 3 sessions. These interviews generated approximately 25 hours of audiotapes. In completing the research, it was important to follow a standard qualitative format as outlined by Patton (2002). This included first creating an interview framework to map the phenomenon and then developing an interview guide consisting of a series of standardized, open-ended questions (the interview guide is available from the author upon request).

The process of content analysis, which includes the coding and categorizing of data from the interviews, is part of the analytic procedures of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Strauss (1987) refers to coding as an activity to "fracture" the data to make possible the comparison of the information within and between meaning-based categories (p. 29). To facilitate the management and analysis of the data, which was embedded in 350 pages of transcripts, the software program, The Ethnograph, Version 5.0, was used (Seidel, 1998).

The next step in the analytical process, categorizing, captures the recurring patterns inherent in the data (Merriam, 1998). Building categories indigenous to the data collected in the interviews allowed for an understanding of the experience of the fathers without reference to any preconceived theory. This made it easier to concentrate on the participants' knowledge of their parenting skills and the meanings they attached to these phenomena.

The Fathers and Their Children

Early in the interview with Frank, he was asked to explain the beliefs that he held about parenting when he was still living in China. He mentioned that, because he was a new father, he learned much from both his parents and his in-laws. However, the following quotation leads one to believe that strong cultural traditions also guided him in prioritizing his parental responsibilities:

Chinese parents, they usually are very responsible for their kids, but for their children's future, including education, career, what kind of a job they will get. So, Chinese parents consider more about that...even consider their children more than themselves sometimes.⁵

Frank's comments appeared to represent a widespread feeling among the participants concerning their role as fathers. These beliefs had been carried over

as part of their immigrant experience and strongly influenced the challenges for them of adapting to an educational system that was possibly at odds with their native values.

Siu (1996, p. 8) states in her research that the four most frequent concerns that Chinese immigrant families express about their schools are: (a) lax discipline, (b) insufficient homework, (c) lack of moral education, and (d) poor mathematics training. In the course of this study, the first three issues commented upon by Siu created anxiety for the five fathers. The topic of poor mathematics training was not discussed at any length by the participants during the interviews. The question that arises then is, "How did these fathers develop strategies to overcome their concerns?" To respond to this query, a focus on the general methods that the fathers used to build a better understanding of the American educational system will be presented. Siu's specific areas of concern will be addressed in the second part of this section.

Fathers Gather Information About the Schools

Information about American education that would come naturally to a parent who was native-born and attended schools in the U.S. has to be consciously acquired by immigrants. The fathers in this study referred to different methods they used to gain the knowledge necessary to make informed decisions. Both Dewey and David specifically commented on the valuable data they received from their children. Dewey occasionally checked in with his daughters to find out how their teachers organized the classrooms and also gathered information from other parents and teachers when his children got a new instructor. David mentioned that there was a variety of ways that he found out about the schools. He sometimes had informal discussions about education issues with American families at his church and also enjoyed attending parenting seminars. Incidentally, David was the only participant to discuss the importance of religion in his daily life. While some fathers found it helpful talking to other Chinese families, Bob expressed a sentiment felt by other participants.

Yeah, things that we learned, I think a lot is from American parents. Pretty much Chinese parents, you know, I think they're in the same situation as us. We want to learn how [you] can adjust to the American system. So the Chinese parents may just [be] in the same situation as I.

To highlight this point, Bob relayed a story about the precise information he learned from Americans who were parents of his daughter's friends. In one case, they told him that he could request a particular teacher for his child.

At the beginning we don't know, but when we've talked to other parents then they tell us you can do this. If you like some teachers [that] you

believe will be better for your kid, you can write a letter suggest your child in that class. If [the] school takes this [into] consideration, if nobody other cares, then you can get it. So, that things we learned.

David also explained that he gained understanding about the American educational system by reading books and by looking at the materials sent by the teachers. He especially focused on and found helpful the class rules sent home, which detailed the behaviors expected of his children, the consequences for infractions, as well as his parental responsibilities. For example, David learned about the discipline process of “time out” when his young son demonstrated it for him at home. However, when asked if he turned to any other Chinese parents to answer education-related questions, he said, “No, I ask my daughter [in high school]...If I have any questions, I just ask my daughter. My daughter give me every answer.”

Adelman, Parks, and Albrecht (1987) refer to the concept of “weak ties” in relation to the network of “informal sources of support found within the community” (p. 127). These relationships serve a valuable role when stronger ties to family and friends are not available. Additionally, when stronger ties are not the most appropriate sources from which to gather information, weaker ties, such as teachers, landlords, and acquaintances, are the people to whom immigrants will turn for advice.

An example of one of the participants utilizing weak ties is Frank’s decision, shortly after his arrival in the United States, to seek input on parenting from some American colleagues: “One of them is a doctor...He has two sons who are in the colleges. They have a very good relationship. Not the Hollywood movie shows that the parent and kids have intense [conflictive] relationships.” I asked Frank if he had any actual conversations with his friend about raising children. He replied that he did not but that he respected his friend’s style of parenting and learned from him by watching his actions.

What became clear during discussions of information gathering was that, regardless of the method used, the fathers found it important to actively learn about the educational system. By so doing they felt they could become more knowledgeable and effective in helping their children succeed.

Interactions with Teachers

Parental interactions with teachers mainly centered on the yearly conferences that the parents attended. And while all the fathers were happy to have a chance to meet with their children’s teachers, Dewey expressed a common sentiment that during their 15-minute slots they generally only heard that their children were “great students.” What he hoped for was to find out “what subject she’s not doing so great...where to continue to excel, or be challenged

more.” He added, “I guess to look for the next level. I don’t see, I don’t hear a lot of that.” In fact, Dewey laughed when he talked about a conference he had previously experienced with his younger daughter’s teacher:

I usually pay a great deal of attention to her [daughter] because I know she’s not as conscientious as the other girl. But when I was at school, I was, you know, get all positive feedback. I sometimes don’t recognize my own child.

Dewey’s comments coincide with Siu’s (1996) findings that Chinese American parents “prefer more frequent, direct, specific feedback rather than the general, ‘She is doing okay’ or ‘Everything is fine with him’” (p. 8).

Frank’s recollections were of conferences in China in which many parents would come to the class and the teacher would talk to all of them at one time. However, he enjoyed the one-on-one conferences that he had attended in the U.S. because the teachers focused on the positive aspects of their children’s behavior. “The teachers seldom talk about the bad things with the kids’ parents.” He saw this as positive behavior by the teachers, not as an isolated event but as a pattern of how “the teachers take care of the students in the schools.”

Finally, David expressed a concern about his own level of English as a barrier in communicating with the teachers. That appeared to be an honest assessment, because, of the five participants, David had the weakest ability to communicate fully in English. This appeared to create a lack of linguistic confidence for David. Nevertheless, what was important to him at a conference was to hear from the teacher how he, as a parent, could be most effective at home, both academically and socially, in helping his children succeed.

Interactions with Other Parents

As commented on in the previous section about gathering information, fathers did interact with other families, especially Americans, although possibly in a perfunctory manner. However, stories from two fathers – the first concerning interacting with Americans, the second about cooperating with other immigrants – highlight the powerful influence of parents collaborating.

Bob’s contact with other families often concerned his daughter’s involvement in academic competitions. A major event occurred when she was chosen as a Tennessee representative in a national history fair, and the family traveled to Washington, D.C. with another couple whose daughter was also competing. He confirmed that his wife had previously had more contact with American families and that this was his first experience having in-depth involvement with other parents from the school. He mentioned that this collaboration started before the trip by talking and sharing ideas on how to help their children study history. Then, during the visit, the families went sightseeing together.

After discussing the trip with Bob, he commented that he might have learned as much from this experience as his daughter. He said, "Yeah, during that week we traveled a lot, so we have lot of opportunity to talk. You know, you don't have a lot of opportunities here to meet a lot of parents during the school hours."

When asked the same question about involvement with other parents, Frank responded that his contact had mainly been with immigrant parents, primarily from India, who also sent their children to the elementary school his daughter attended. He believed that in comparison to American households, Chinese and Indian families shared comparable values about the importance of education. I asked Frank if that connection surprised him.

Frank: No, not really. I was surprised because Indian people, they speak English. They don't have language problem like we have here. So, theoretically, they don't have any barrier to communicate with American people. But, as I know, they also feel like they have some distance from American people, and I don't know why. And they feel it's more, it's easier to communicate with Chinese people, or people from Cambodia, even though their English is not good.

Alan: So it's not the language that is a barrier?

Frank: Yeah, I think it's the culture, the culture.

Although Frank said that, in general, American families wanted their children to attend good colleges, he believed that fundamentally, "If their children don't want to, that's okay, maybe. Some American parents don't quite care about the grade, their children's grades in schools." However, the fact that Chinese and Indian families place a premium on their children's academic success is a critical value that deeply connects these two distinct cultures.

School Discipline

School discipline, the first of the specific concerns commented upon by Siu (1996), is an area in which the participants' responses challenged the prevailing assumptions of Chinese fathers taking a "hard line" on discipline. The participants did express a standard expectation that all children, including theirs, should behave well at school. Albert noted that the principal of a school establishes the tone for students' observing the rules, and that he wanted the educational leader to create the safest possible environment for his children. He commented favorably on one of his son's previous principals: "He is just very strong, very strong. I think he just showed power, he can control the students....The students can, will control themselves by the influence of the principal."

However, the fathers' concept of discipline was also broader and less intrusive and more often led to the goal of self-discipline. Frank expressed a common view of the group when he stated:

Yeah, I really hope school can discipline the kids, including my daughter, to help them build up better behavior, good behavior; teach them to be polite, to be respectful to other people, and to put things organized in good order. That's good behavior, and that's good for the kids.

It appears that the idea of the participants taking a "softer approach" to school discipline developed over a period of time, mainly as a reaction to their experiences either in the United States or while as students in China. Dewey mentioned that he had attended a school in China with 40-50 students per class and that Chinese discipline was strict. The classroom structure provided little or no opportunity for interaction with others. David concurred, "In China, you cannot chat, talk in class. You cannot move from here to there." Bob demonstrated how he and his classmates were not allowed to sit freely in class but were expected to sit with their hands behind their backs when not working. Both Bob and Frank remembered teachers shouting at or criticizing individual students as a form of punishment.

Ultimately, based on positive comments they had received from their children's teachers, none of the fathers felt any reason to be concerned about issues of classroom behavior. For them, ensuring that their children learned to become self-disciplined was a more critical matter. Dewey expressed an opinion about discipline that also represented the feelings of the other participants.

My definition of discipline would be like every day do they do their homework...? I guess, do they fulfill their responsibility as expected... that's what I see as not just in addition to being a good student, not making trouble, but also discipline-wise, do things right the first time.

Homework

The fathers expressed strong and nearly unanimous feelings about the quantity and quality of homework that their children were bringing home. Almost all believed that there was not enough homework given, especially in comparison to their recollections of the amount of work they were assigned as high school students in China. However, they talked about differences in their children's homework depending on the age of the child and the philosophy and training of the teacher.

Dewey was surprised and disappointed that it took only 10 or 15 minutes for his elementary-aged children to complete their assignments. Additionally, he was concerned that "it's very multiple question kind of thing. It doesn't really encourage learning more about a particular subject."

Along with complaints about the quantity of homework assigned, Albert also raised a concern about homework emphasizing short-term memorization. He believed that the homework that his 6th-grade son was doing should “teach the students to understand and use the concept to solve other problems. I think it should be part of their logical thinking.”

Although the fathers criticized aspects of the assignments that were brought home and supplemented the work when they felt it was inadequate, there were also several compliments concerning their children's involvement with project-based homework. Frank gave an example of a project that his elementary-aged daughter created on New York (before September 11, 2001) in which she built a three-dimensional representation of the World Trade Center and the Statue of Liberty. He was impressed with the work that she did, including the written description of the material and her presentation to the class. When Frank was asked what he thought was the greatest benefit of this type of work, he commented, “She learns things through using, through application.” He also mentioned that this type of learning was new for him, something that he had never seen in China.

Other participants echoed Frank's enthusiasm for project-based learning and remarked on the life skills their children were acquiring. Bob remarked on how projects that his 13-year-old daughter was doing resembled his work situation.

The benefit of the project is that in the real world you face the same way; you need to do a project. Trying to just accomplish the things, not just follow one rule. You have to gather data, gather information, then you can organize those things, then you have [to] write things.

While the fathers expressed concerns about their children wasting too much time watching television instead of doing homework, they acknowledged that some American parents may have different views about homework. Dewey remarked, “Every parent has a different situation, a different availability of time. Personally, I want to spend some more time with the kids helping them if they need help.”

In addition, Dewey commented that he was often amazed at the content of the work that his elementary-aged children brought home. For instance, during the Thanksgiving season, he thought to himself, “This is what I would have learned if I were born here.” This information gave him valuable cultural insights which, in turn, strengthened his intercultural competence.

The following comments made by the fathers demonstrate an appreciation and integration of both Chinese and American values toward education. During the conversation about homework, Bob remarked that he believed that it was necessary to find a balance, a “proper way” between the lack of mastery of

fundamental knowledge prevalent in the American education system and the emphasis on repetition inherent in Chinese schools. Albert concurred that the Chinese system is strong in stressing the acquisition of basic skills, as evidenced by results of international math competitions. Nevertheless, he stated that the Chinese students' high test scores are derived from long hours in the classroom and homework that lasts late into the night. He saw Chinese society on the whole as producing good students, but at the expense of focusing solely on information derived from textbooks. Additionally, the lack of free time to pursue other interests inhibits children from developing other talents. "You may miss something, because the genius is not generated from the textbook." However, Albert did see American schools as being more balanced. "The system here, it just give you every chance you want. You may not have a very good score [in] the school, but you have other talent. So you can contribute to the society."

Moral Education

The third concern of Chinese parents discussed by Siu (1996) is that of the lack of moral education taught in the schools. Two prominent aspects of Confucianism, *zuoren* and *zhi*, will be discussed within in this section. Pratt (1991) remarks that a person's identity in China has traditionally been intimately associated with Confucian cultural values concerning family relationships. Hsu (1985) describes the Confucian concept of *jen* [ren] as an "individual's transactions with his [sic] fellow human beings" (p. 33).

Ren is a major cornerstone of Confucian thought because it refers to the idea of "human-heartedness" (Thompson, 1996, p. 13). Wu (1996) comments, "A person by nature does not become an acceptable human being unless educated through deliberate efforts. The emphasis is placed both on parental responsibility for instruction and the child's responsibility for learning about the way of becoming human, or *zuoren*" (p. 144). Thompson remarks that the teachings of Confucius stressed, along with *ren*, and its derivative, *zuoren*, virtues shared by Western morality: righteousness, loyalty, modesty, and frugality.

The fathers explained during the interviews what *zuoren* meant to them. All the participants responded to the concept of *zuoren* with favorable regard. Frank was asked what he thought was the single best thing he could do to help his daughter succeed in school, besides assisting with homework. He replied, "I think it's teach her to *zuoren*; teach her how to become a good human being." When Dewey was asked what he thought American educators could learn from the Chinese system, he responded that it is the values inherent in *zuoren* that are instilled in Chinese teaching. He added that it is possible to find these precepts woven into the language and literature of the society, which "teaches the value of the culture."

The fathers also maintained *chih* [zhi], another cornerstone of Confucian thought, which represents a traditional Chinese cultural regard toward education (Yum, 1988). Confucius' view of human nature leaned heavily toward the primary role of environmental influences in shaping human development, which inclined him "to take the nurture side in the nature-nurture debate" (Lee, 1996, p. 29). The Confucian philosopher Mencius, c. 390-305 BCE, felt even more strongly about the influence of the environment, arguing that all humans were capable of being educated. From that notion came the Chinese premise that "everyone can become a sage" (Lee, p. 29).

David relayed a story about an interaction he had with his daughter that highlights the Chinese emphasis on *zhi* and his role as a parent to *zuoren* his daughter. David's daughter was an excellent math student in high school who received high scores on her tests. However, during one assignment she misunderstood the teacher's directions and was given a grade of zero. Other students also found the assignment confusing and were given the same low mark, but the teacher would not alter the scores. David's daughter felt there had been an injustice done and went to her father to intervene. He told her that it would be okay to let this pass because she could catch up and still do well in class:

Even teacher didn't do well...but as a student, you should follow your professor. Follow her standard. I said, "From here, you know you will meet tough teacher, tough professor in the future. You should learn something; you should show defeat in this case."

David was asked to explain what he meant by showing defeat, and he clarified that regardless of the difficulty of the class or the teacher, he wanted his daughter to understand that she could still succeed. "The test is not based on you. It's based on your teacher's standard." She acted on his advice, and by the end of the course, with his assistance, she had improved her final score to what she had originally hoped it would be. David's message to his daughter exemplified Hsu's (1955) critique of the difference between American and Chinese socialization practices. While American children soon realize that their environment caters to them, Chinese children are taught to become sensitive to their surroundings. It appears to be a fundamental difference in worldview.

Becoming Less of a "Stranger"

It is important to discuss the notion of the immigrant fathers' ability to integrate into a new society. The impression given is that the fathers started out feeling like "strangers" when first dealing with the American educational system. Simmel (1908/1950) equates the term stranger with an individual who is simultaneously and contrastingly near and far; it "involves both being outside it [a culture] and confronting it" (pp. 402-403). Schuetz (1960) elaborates on

the concept of living as a stranger by commenting that the historical perspective of the host culture toward the newcomer is limited, at best. There may be a willingness on the part of the host group to share with the immigrant immediate and future encounters, but the individual “remains excluded from such experiences of its [the host culture’s] past. Seen from the point of the view of the approached group, he is a man [sic] without a history” (p. 103).

It appears that the fathers in this study used the coping strategies mentioned earlier in this section to feel less like strangers when dealing with their children’s education. In a final commentary, Dewey had a remarkable insight into how his children’s educational experiences helped him feel more comfortable in his own work environment. He explained that the opportunity to follow his daughters’ education gave him a window of understanding into the motivations of his work colleagues. Dewey commented that his co-workers had educational experiences far more similar to his daughters’ than to his own K-12 experiences in Beijing:

Right, I see them as adults...Okay, but through [my children’s] education, I started seeing, “Wow, I can see them when they’re young. I can see what they have to go through to become what they are today.” Which is quite enhances [my] understanding of my colleagues.

Dewey described that while he was in university in the United States, before having children, he had a limited perspective about how his classmates were raised. “I don’t see their childhood.” On the other hand, the experience of having children in American schools allowed him to watch how his daughters’ teachers interacted with the girls. He saw a general school environment that encouraged children to be creative without placing too much pressure on them. Dewey remarked that his school experiences were the opposite of his daughters’ and that he did not have “a lot of options to explore my own ways of solving problems.”

In effect, his daughters’ education provided him with insights into how children in this culture are socialized to investigate new avenues of learning. He incorporated this information into his own work life, which allowed him to more easily encourage and support his co-workers’ attempts to increase their problem-solving strategies. In addition, Dewey could understand his co-workers’ past, which helped him feel less like a “stranger” in a new culture. He commented that he developed a good reputation as a supervisor who was straightforward with his opinions but considerate of his colleagues’ positions. “[I] Give them space, I guess.”

The Meaning of Parent Involvement

Direct parent involvement, as manifested by the fathers, often included spending time helping their children complete their homework, providing extra assistance in subjects like math and science, and taking them to Chinese language school. Except for parent conferences, the fathers had little actual involvement with the activities occurring at their public schools. This was apparently due to the men's constraints on time and on their perceived language barriers. However, a cultural factor was mentioned that also needs to be considered. Dewey talked about being invited to one of his daughter's classes to discuss the "immigrant experience." No matter how much he enjoyed talking to the children, he did not believe that this was "really getting involved a lot," so he was asked to give his definition of parental involvement. Dewey's reply exemplified the beliefs of all the participants about what they felt their role was in guaranteeing their children's success in school:

I think that parent involvement could be as much as every day ask them how they're doing at school, look at their homework, and ask them if they have any problems or any questions. Make sure that they understand that you do want to hear their problems if they have one. Or you want to share their happiness if they're very successful.

Discussion and Implications

Recent work on parental involvement highlights differences between school and home definitions on what it means to be "involved." There might be a disconnect between immigrant families and the schools' definition of "good" parental involvement. Barton et al. (2004) state that the role parents play in their children's education has largely been defined by "what they do" and how well that fits into the school's objectives (p. 4). The authors prefer to discuss the "ecologies of engagement" (p. 4), which offers a broader picture of parents being engaged with their children. This might not always include active parental participation at the school site. Additionally, the word engagement is used "to expand our understanding of involvement to also include parents' orientations to the world and how those orientations frame the things they do" (p. 4).

Jackson and Remillard (2005) propose an alternative model for parent involvement that is less "schoolcentric" (p. 67). The authors offer a clear differentiation between parental engagement in children's learning and schooling, which is fundamentally parent-based, in comparison to parental involvement in the classroom. Being able to recognize and fully accept the difference between these two perspectives is "critical to understanding parents' potential as intellectual resources for their children" (p. 69).

As mentioned previously, the fathers in this study, on average, did not visit the schools very often, but they all considered themselves highly “engaged” in their children’s education. The men saw themselves as being greatly involved in helping their children maintain daily schedules to build self-discipline. That was how they believed they could best be engaged in their children’s learning and schooling. It would be beneficial for the whole community to have teachers and administrators encourage this type of parental involvement for all families in their schools.

In the interviews with David he commented upon the importance of the notes, class rules, and newsletters sent home by his children’s teachers. He read them carefully and gained knowledge concerning the norms and regulations of American education. David’s interest in these various messages appears to have roots in Chinese traditional values toward learning. Pratt, Kelly, and Wong (1999) remark in a study of Chinese teachers and learners that the written word has a foundational importance in Chinese education. For students in China, the text and the teacher combine to become the most authoritative source of knowledge.

Based on this cultural information, it is not surprising that Chinese parents might place a high value on the written words sent home by teachers. A common complaint heard among K-12 educators is that teachers spend time writing notes and newsletters, but no one seems to be paying attention to them. Although that might be the case in many circumstances, it appears that information in writing is an excellent method of communicating with Chinese families and of informing them about the American educational system.

This information coincides with a recommendation made by Henderson and Mapp (2002) concerning parents’ involvement in their children’s academic success. The authors ask a fundamental question that schools need to address about their current parent engagement program: “How is it linked to learning?” (p. 74). They suggest that all activities and communication with parents have a learning component.

A final comment about parental involvement is in order. Some of the fathers remarked that they had an interest in meeting and talking with American families. However, it may be problematic for some immigrant families to feel comfortable enough to talk about education issues with non-Chinese families. This involves engaging in discourse with others, which is sometimes easier said than done. Nevertheless, Kim (2001) comments, “We cannot truly learn to communicate without communicating, just as we cannot learn to swim without actually plunging into the water” (p. 229). Encouraging discourse will strengthen an immigrant’s circle of “weak ties,” people to turn to for advice and support.

While schools make every effort to facilitate communication among adults by offering occasional parent nights, it appears that a more concerted and longer term effort might be necessary to assist immigrant families in interacting with Americans. This endeavor might include instituting an ongoing program of cultural exchanges between families within a school. Cross-cultural adaptation should be a two-way exchange of ideas and information. Family exchanges that are based on facilitating intercultural communication can truly expand the idea of parental involvement in the schools. An example is Bob's educational trip to Washington, D.C., an extraordinary event that cannot be duplicated by many parents. However, the trip allowed him to fulfill a desire that he had to communicate with non-Chinese parents.

As a final point, it is necessary to remark upon the cultural abilities of one of the parents, Dewey. Of the five participants, he demonstrated the strongest capability to reflect in English and to understand the American education system. This might be due to his length of time in the United States, 16 years, his strong English language skills, and his reflective nature. Within the Chinese language school, he was a leader and acted as a natural cultural informant. Immigrants such as Dewey have a pivotal role to play in helping other fathers acculturate more quickly.

Conclusion

Although the participants had a diversity of opinions, they shared a deep respect for the value of educating young people. Frank expressed that commitment succinctly when he stated:

Okay, education it's very important for the development of the country, for people, for the society. The kids are the next generation. They're going to build up the country, contribute to the country, contribute to society. So, the kids can get a lot from education. So a good education is important to the people of this country.

The preceding paragraph might contain a sentiment that is commonly shared and expressed by many others. However, after following the lives of these five fathers, it is hard not to believe that there is real power to these words, along with an obligation to fulfill the promise to educate their children well.

Endnotes

¹A clarification is necessary concerning the term "Chinese" in this study, both in reference to the country and the language. The participants are referred to as coming from Mainland China, which is formally called the People's Republic of China. There are no participants in this study from Taiwan. In addition, the participants speak Mandarin Chinese, which is the

default language used in both the People's Republic of China and Taiwan. However, Cantonese Chinese is the main language in Hong Kong and areas of Southern China.

²There are romanized spellings of Chinese words in the study. These are included because the participants made reference to them during the interviews. At times, Chinese words such as *zuoren* have an emotional impact that is absent in English. Two major systems for transliterating Chinese to a romanized alphabet exist, Wade-Giles and Pinyin. Wade-Giles is an older system that is still used in Taiwan, while Pinyin is the romanization currently in use in Mainland China (Killingley, 1998). The following is an example of spelling in the two systems: The romanized word for "humanism" in Wade-Giles is *jen*, while in Pinyin it is *ren*.

³"Chinese Education Forum" (Lecture, The University of Memphis, June 15, 2003).

⁴The names of the participants are pseudonyms. English names were mutually agreed upon by both the participants and the researcher (some of the men were already using English names in the workplace).

⁵The accounts offered represent a sincere attempt to portray the views and the language of the fathers as they were presented during the interviews. Although the participants used English on a daily basis at work, they were all non-native speakers and had varying degrees of English-language proficiency. To respect the linguistic abilities of the participants, grammar, syntax, and vocabulary from the transcripts were kept intact in the following narratives unless mistakes created problems in comprehension. Any changes that were made in the language are identified by brackets.

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